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THE EVOLUTION OF A CONCEPT:

GENTILESSE IN CHAUCER'S POETRY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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in

The Department of English

by

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ABSTRACT

Chaucer drew primarily from three sources for the discussions of gentilesse in the ballade and in the Wife of Bath's sermon: the works of Boethius, of Dante, and of Jean de Meun. These works explain that true nobility, independent of wealth or lineage, transcends social distinctions and, as a gift of God, manifests itself in virtue. These ideas, which have been amply explored in their historical backgrounds by Alan T. Gaylord ("Seed of Felicity. . . .," Unpublished dissertation, Princeton, 1958), were widespread during the Middle Ages.

Although the sources of the concept have been agreed upon, there is no consensus about the function of the word gentilesse in Chaucer's poetry. Examination of the works in which it figures most prominently, however, reveals that, after the early period in which gentilesse is a noun designating any kind of virtue and gentil an adjective describing anything pleasing, Chaucer uses both words chiefly in relationship to his private secular standard of conduct—a standard governing man's relationship to man, operative in
all phases of life, and divorced from its sources. It is a humanistic concept which is by nature inadequate in Christian terms. The tension between gentilesse and hoolynesse contributes most to a misreading of Chaucer's treatment of gentilesse.

To perceive the distinctiveness of Chaucer's use of the concept, it is valuable to explore related themes in the works of his contemporaries. Langland writes of the spiritual equality of all men, but the principle as he uses it has little application to social conduct. The Gawain-poet, with his aristocratic tendencies, is concerned with conduct, but although he implies a secular ideal, he defines it within the established frameworks of chivalry, courtly love, and Christianity. And the common people are outside the realm of his poetry.

But Chaucer fully defines a private ideal and dramatizes it in the lives both of gentils and of peasants. Its principles and authority are derived from Christian morality and from the courtly love and chivalric codes, but none of them exclusively embodies gentilesse. In the secular world of ancient Troy, Troilus is gentil and Criseyde is not, but both are accountable to the ideal of gentilesse. In the Canterbury Tales, gentilesse is the standard embodied and expounded by the Knight, ironically aspired to by the Prioress, discussed by the Wife of Bath,
and, finally, eloquently defined by the Franklin. It is a secular term denoting a secular virtue, the Christian inadequacy of which Chaucer acknowledges, not in the Troilus or the Tales themselves, but in the Epilogue and in the Retraction.

The debate at the heart of the Canterbury Tales—which has been called the "Marriage Group"—can more accurately be called the "Gentilesse Group." It is the gentilesse sermon for which the Clerk takes Alisoun to task; his story as a rebuttal of her ideas of marriage is self-defeating, but as an elaboration of her definition of gentilesse it is exquisitely successful. The Merchant is a discordant element in the dispute, for in his churlishly cynical tale he negates all values. Balance is restored by the Squire, who in nervous distress with the Merchant's denial of human dignity—the essence of gentilesse—begins a long and luxuriant narrative of nobility. The Franklin praises his gentilesse. And the Franklin—mature, uninvolved with titular nobility and the forms of courtly behavior, fallible but admirable—brings the debate to a conclusion with a definition, not of perfection in marriage, but of gentilesse.
PART I.

BACKGROUNDS OF CHAUCER'S GENTILESSE
PART I: BACKGROUNDS OF CHAUCER'S GENTILESSE

CHAPTER I
CHAUCER'S SOURCES

When, to Fitzgerald's comment, "The very rich are different from you and me," Hemingway responded, "Yes, they have more money,"¹ the Lost Generation was asking and answering in its own unillusioned way a question that democracy had hoped to invalidate. But the twentieth century generally does not concern itself with the effects of hereditary status or wealth on character (except in the extremely practical matter of sociologists' studies in juvenile delinquency); although in its secret depths a modern mind may harbor a suspicion that ignorance, poverty, and moral depravity beget one another, it takes for granted that all men are created equally noble or ignoble, and there is an end of the matter.

The idea that each man can choose nobility, which Vogt adjudged neither new nor striking in Chaucer, once

¹William Goldhurst, F. Scott Fitzgerald and his Contemporaries (Cleveland, 1963), p. 170.
lent itself well and often to poetic treatment, whether or not it had "little to do with the actualities . . . of the poet's criticism of life or his practice." Today it is defunct almost entirely, relegated to the intellectual Limbo of the "accepted" theory or fact; one no longer argues even in poetry that the earth is round or that nobility of character is independent of wealth or birth, although, perhaps, the former idea figures more prominently in our "actualities" than does the latter. It is possibly because of this impatient, if only theoretical, acceptance that students of Chaucer have, until the last few years, neglected the implications of his careful attention to a possession of some human beings which he chose to call "gentilesse." Only very recently has the scholarship of Alan T. Gaylord begun to explore in depth the uses that Chaucer made of this concept.  

Recognition of *generositas virtus, non sanguis* was common during the Middle Ages, and had found expression in the Latin of Seneca and Juvenal before appearing in the French of Wace, the Italian of Dante, and the English of Robert of Brunne. The research of Vogt yields many lines

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2George M. Vogt, "*Generositas Virtus, Non Sanguis*," *JEGP*, XXIV (1925), 102.

like "Cil est vilains qui fait la vilonnie" or "Ne sont pas tuit chevalier, qui a cheval montent," which are identical in sentiment to "Vileyns synful dedes make a churle" in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*. The point is frequently argued at some length, with appeal made to common descent from Adam and Eve: it is not logical to say that a man is what his ancestors were, for the ancestors of all were Adam and Eve, yet discrepancies do exist. The currency of such reasoning is illustrated, according to Resnikov, by the widespread use of the proverb,

> Whan Adam dalf, and Eve span,  
> Who was thanne a gentilman?  

And the very frequency of the expression of such opinions implies dissent, which is apparent, for example, in Walter Map's distrust of villeins or in the story of the egg of low degree in the *Owl and the Nightingale*.  

There can be no doubt that the problem of the source and nature of gentilesse was a popular issue during the Middle Ages. Moreover, in at least one case a poetic treatment does reveal something about the poet's criticism of life. Chaucer makes it the subject of two poetic discourses, but its value as a critical tool lies more in his thematic applications than in his discussions of it.


5Vogt, p. 122.
Chaucer's most poignant statement about gentilesse falls within the dramatic framework of the story told by the Wife of Bath, a creature who decidedly lacks the quality which she allows an old hag so eloquently to analyze. The Loathly Lady learns that she herself is the cause of her young bridegroom's sorrow—

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)\textsuperscript{6}

but she is not abashed. She explains to him that his grief is based on false values:

... ye speken of swich gentilesse,  
As is descended out of old richesse,  
That therfore sholden ye be gentil men.  
Swich arrogance is nat worth an hen.

(1109-1112)

Actually, she explains, a man can receive gentilesse from Christ only. Although one's "eldres" can leave him titles and wealth,

Yet may they nat biquethe, for no thyng,  
To noon of us hir vertuous lyvyng,  
That made hem gentil men ycalled be,  
And bad us folwen hem in swich degree.

(1121-1124)

Reflecting Alisoun's own love for emphasizing "auctori-

\textsuperscript{6}Geoffrey Chaucer, Canterbury Tales. All quotations from the works of Chaucer will be from the standard one-volume text of Fred N. Robinson, 2d edition (Boston, 1957), unless otherwise noted. To prevent unwieldy references, fragment or group numbers will be cited in addition to line numbers only when there is a possibility of confusion.
God, of his goodnesse,
Wole that of hym we clayme oure gentilesse.  
(1129-1130)

She adds decisively,

For of our eldres may we no thyng clayme
But temporel thyng, that man may hurte and
maye.

(1131-1132)

Patiently, the hag continues her lesson with an analogy:
regardless of where fire is taken, it burns, because it
is the nature of fire to burn. And

Heere may ye se wel how that genterye
Is nat annexed to possessioun,
Sith folk ne doon hir operacioun
Alwey, as dooth the fyr, lo, in his kynde.  
(1146-1149)

Indeed, a lord's son may "do shame and vileynye," and he
who does not do "gentil dedis" "nys nat gentil, be he
duc or erl." In short, gentilesse "was no thyng biquethe
us with oure place."

Nor, continues the lady vigorously, is poverty an
ignoble condition:

The hye God, on whom that we bileeve,
In wilful poverte chees to lyve his lyf.  
(1178-1179)

Moreover,

Poverte ful ofte, whan a man is lowe,
Maketh his God and eek hymself to knowe.  
(1201-1202)

This enthusiastic lecture is based on ideas known to
have been common in Chaucer's time: virtue does not pro-
ceed from ancient wealth; it cannot be inherited; it is a
gift which comes from God alone; and poverty does not
prohibit a man's attaining "heigh noblesse." The ballade entitled "Gentilesse" is similar. The "gentil" person, explains Chaucer, is

Trewe of his word, sobre, piteous, and free,
Clene of his gost, and loveth besinesse,
Ayeinst the vyce of slouthe, in honestee.

Such ideas in themselves are certainly no testimonial to Chaucer's originality. It has long since been recognized that for them he draws heavily from three sources: Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy,* 7 Dante's *Convivio,* 8 and Jean de Meun's *Roman de la Rose.* 9 Admittedly, the making of such a statement is a gross over-simplification which ignores the complexities of the concept's history. But these are fully explored by Gaylord, who examines the concept in its philosophical, theological, and social contexts, and discusses its relationship to Seneca and Augustine and its existence as an ideal in Medieval England; and simplification serves the present purpose to limit the term to meaning and use in certain Middle English poetry. Only the three works named above will be discussed as background material; they are essential, for Chaucer employs both idea and phrase from them. The


9 Dean S. Fansler, *Chaucer and the Roman de la Rose* (New York, 1914), pp. 221 ff.
fact that he translated the Consolation and at least part of the Roman indicates that he held both works in high regard; and the Convivio is by an "auctour" of whom his knowledge and admiration cannot be doubted.

In Boethius' Consolation Chaucer found the reflections of a noble Roman both summing up the argument he had inherited and making a bequest of it to a "new age." Having persuaded the prisoner to re-examine his fortune and to regard more serenely the apparent caprice which governs the distribution of mankind's blessings, Philosophy attempts to bring him to an appreciation of true happiness. Men, although by different means, all "strive to reach one end, which is happiness. . . . that highest of all good things, which embraces in itself all good things." Although men have a natural desire for true good, error leads them toward "false goods": riches, honor, power, fame, pleasure. To show the folly of pursuing these ends, Philosophy discourses on the vanity of each. The passage cited by Jefferson as an important Chaucerian source lies in her disquisition on the vanity of earthly glory:

10Gaylord, p. 54.

11Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy, trans. by W. V. Cooper, with an Introduction by Irwin Edman (New York, 1943), p. 43. For the corresponding passage in the original Latin and for the Latin of Dante and the Old French of Jean de Meun corresponding to passages to be cited in the following pages, see Appendix.
Again, who can but see how empty a name, and how futile is noble birth? For if its glory is due to renown, it belongs not to the man. For the glory of noble birth seems to be praise for the merits of a man's forefathers. But if praise creates the renown, it is the renowned who are praised.

From like beginning rise all men on earth, for there is one Father of all things; one is the guide of everything. If ye look to your beginning and your author, which is God, is any man degenerate or base but he who by his own vices cherishes base things and leaves that beginning which was his?

(p. 53)

Frequently repeated is the "from like beginning" argument here presented. The Loathly Lady's speech to her bridegroom is recognizably indebted to such passages.

The material is the abstract reasoning of the philosopher, as is the definition which Gaylord derives from it: "that inner virtue or harmony in a man which exhibits itself in good works." The "harmony" is a reflection of the order of a divinely created and governed universe and is the "love which rules" in the truly noble man.

Chaucer found similar ideas in Dante's Convivio. The Canzone of Tractate IV announces, "I will speak of worth, by which a man is truly gentle." Dante develops his new theme by using the device of an Emperor who

12 Gaylord, p. 65.
13 Ibid., p. 67.
"deemed that nobility . . . consisted in possession of ancestral wealth coupled with manners fine." A person of "slighter wisdom" removed from this definition the second part, and there has followed the "false opinion" of "all those who deem a man gentle by reason of his stock, which long hath been possessed of great riches." Riches are by nature mean. They can neither give nor take away nobility. The logic of those who consider nobility hereditary is faulty, for by such reasoning it must be concluded that "we are all gentle or base, or else that man had no beginning." Having established the falseness of one definition, Dante continues, "And now I will . . . say what nobility is and whence it springeth." This section of the Canzone is important enough to quote from liberally:

... every virtue primarily cometh from one root, virtue, I mean, which maketh a man happy in all his doing. This root (as the Ethics affirm) is a habit of choice, which resideth only in the mean; and such words the book setteth down. I say that nobility by its conception ever importeth good of its subject, as baseness ever importeth ill. . . .

Wherever virtue is, there is nobility. But virtue is not always there where nobility is. . . .

God alone endoweth that soul with it, whom He seeth in her own person stand perfect. . . .

(p. 192)

The soul thus blessed displays her virtue throughout the stages of life until "in the fourth stage she is married again, to God, and contemplateth the end which awaiteth

\[15\] Ibid., p. 191.
her, and blesseth the times gone by." The entire Tractate is a long and careful exposition of the Ideas of the Canzone. Even if there were no other evidence, the widespread popularity of the Consolation would be sufficient proof that the main outline of Dante's argument was not unknown to the Middle Ages, but his insistence that error was common is interesting (although it must be remembered that the insistence may be more poetic device than actual raison d'être for the expression of his reflections).

Chapter XVI begins an elaboration of the positive aspect of Dante's definition of nobility: "this word . . . signifies in each thing the perfection of the nature peculiar to it." "Hence a circle can then be called perfect when it is truly a circle . . . and can then be called a noble circle." Subsequent chapters demonstrate that necessary components of nobility are the Aristotelian moral virtues and treat human goodness, "which it is clear that he is . . . equating with nobility." The quest of the soul is described in terms of its love and its seeking out the "noblest" part of its facilities in order to enjoy the final blessedness of the contemplation of God, the highest good. The "noblest" man of all is he who has been translated to the Paradiso and the feast of light.

Thus Dante's concept soars even further into the ether

16 Ibid., p. 193.
17 Ibid., p. 251.
18 Gaylord, p. 284.
19 Ibid., p. 285.
than does Boethius'. It should be explained at this point, perhaps, lest the thinness of the atmosphere suggest a doubtful route to Chaucer's work, that the Father of English poetry had indeed a more concrete approach to the subject. The descent to earth begins in the passages from the Roman de la Rose.

In the section written by Guillaume de Lorris and possibly translated by Chaucer, Love speaks of nobility:

... undirstonde in thyn entent
That this is not my entendement,
To clepe no wight in noo ages
Oonly gentill for his lynages.
But whoso is vertuous,
And in his port nought outrageous,
Whanne sach oon thou seest thee biforn,
Though he be not gentill born,
Thou maist well seyn, this is in sooth,
That he is gentil by cause he doth
As longeth to a gentilman.

... . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
A cherl is demed by his dede.

(2187-97; 2200)

But the fuller discussion of the theme appears in the section of the work written by Jean de Meun and is presented by Nature. The ideas are familiar but the terms more vigorous than those of the philosopher-poets. In the admirable translation of Harry W. Robbins Nature thus declares the natural equality of men:

Princes unworthy are that stars should give
More warning of their deaths than of the ends
Of other men. Their bodies are not worth
An apple more than those of laborers
Or clerks or squires; for I make all alike.

(213-217)

Fortune may do the rest, but ne'er displays Dependability. 

Like Boethius, Nature finds a capricious Fortune responsible for inequalities among men. In the parceling out of excellences and favors, she takes no part; it is her assertion that

no man's gentle who is not intent On virtue, and that none ungentle are Except by foolish outrage or by vice.

The source of nobility is an "upright heart"; worthy ancestry is worth nothing to him who "lacks goodheartedness." One thinks automatically of the Canterbury pilgrim who would gladly learn and gladly teach when Nature declares that learned men are more likely to be "Gentle and courteous and wise, than kings / And princes who may be illiterate" (23-24). Clerks find recorded in books the good and evil deeds of the past and learn from the experiences of others.

He who would be gentle, continues Nature, must at all costs avoid pride; he must be humble and courteous; he must honor women (but, of course, not confide in them). She could, if she wanted to, name many who were lowborn,

yet had much nobler souls Than many a son of count or even king, And so were rightly known as gentlemen.

She deplores the fact that many men who have given their lives to the pursuit of learning suffer the most extreme
poverty and neglect, although they are worthier than those "whose sole ambition seems to be / The dung heaps of their fathers to maintain" (117-118). There are Boethian echoes in her declaration that

**Gentility confers no other good**
**Upon a man but the necessity**
**Of his performing deeds befitting it.**

(157-159)

To strengthen her disclaimer of any responsibility for inequalities of rank, Nature observes that only because the death of a prince is more widely known than the death of a peasant do "the simple folk suppose that when / They see a comet it is for a prince" (226-227). Even if there were no kings or princes, celestial bodies would still perform as they do.

Jean de Meun's presentation of the familiar ideas lacks the detached logic of Boethius and the scholastic comprehensiveness of Dante, but it gains in forcefulness by its use of Nature (who, after all, should know what she's talking about) and its addition of such tangible objects as clerks and comets. She is less prone than they to emphasize only the lesson that reads "material possessions and social rank are temporal and therefore valueless, therefore let the nobility cultivate virtue," more inclined to consider the implications of the doctrine in terms of the simple folk; to pronounce bluntly that princes' bodies are worth no more than others', to
say that she could name lowborn people who by virtue deserve to be known as gentlemen.

To list members of the literary family in which such ideas figure would be an endless task; the whole body of courtly love literature, for example, with its instructions in worthiness for the lover, or the vast number of works designed for the instruction of the faithful, young and old, with their admonitions to eschew vice and pursue virtue are, obviously, related. But the present discussion is concerned with the concept which was given the name gentilesse, a word after "roughly the middle of the twelfth century" used with the two connotations of noble birth and "cultivated behavior and mien." Gaylord explains that the term was increasingly popular because it had "originally a somewhat stricter and more exclusive meaning than noble." But perhaps partly because of the currency of the generositas virtus idea, it seems to have been difficult to reserve exclusively for the titled any generic adjective. By a common linguistic process the meaning of the word broadened so that The Romaunt of the Rose could describe a nose as "gentyl" (1216).

In spite of semantic expansion, however, the word continued to imply a question. Social inequalities existed, although "one of the central tenets of both Roman

21Gaylord, p. 195.
law and Christian theology had been the natural equality of all men, the former basing it upon reason and the latter upon the soul. Both institutions, however, accepted even such flaunting of the tenet as slavery as a "temporal reality," thus tacitly endorsing the "contradiction between theory and practice" supported by Matthew XX:21: "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things which are God's." But so long as the "simple folk" assumed that comets fell for princes, it somehow seemed that the things which were Caesar's were getting an unfair portion of cosmic attention.

That Chaucer was concerned with these matters is evident in his poetry. His discussions of gentilesse and his portrayals of two gentil peasants, the Plowman, and, more importantly, the patient Griselda, indicate his interest. The words gentil and gentilesse play tantalizingly throughout his poetry. His definition of the word is elusive; it seems, however, to narrow as he matures. In his early works it is freely used as a vague expression of approval like the more modern "nice": although the formel eagle of the Parliament of Fowls is gentil in every way, even her "shap" is described by the word gentil (372). By the time of the later Canterbury tales, however, it has assumed a greater richness of meaning.

and has been largely limited to the province of secular morality. It comes to represent an ideal of social virtue which has nothing to do with rank or religion and everything to do with man's humanity to man. That Chaucer has been praised for centuries for his broad humanism is directly related to his practical commitment to immediate reality. And his use of the concept of gentilesse reflects that commitment. The word gentilesse, as he uses it most commonly, divorces itself from its philosophical origins. In so doing it acquires a new complex of meanings and loses its mystical connotations.

It has been a trend of much recent criticism to appreciate Chaucer's satire, to lavish praise upon his irony—unfortunately, not always where it exists—at the cost of forgetting that his purpose was to chide, not to scorn; to delight, sometimes to instruct, but not to baffle. It is difficult to tread a middle ground, perceiving the subtlety which often plays beneath a naive façade without neglecting the candor which is innocent of twentieth-century cynicism. Chaucer intended to be reasonably easy to understand to a reasonably perceptive audience. One does not necessarily claim for him sophistication in any complimentary sense of the word by attributing to him ambiguity responsible for directly and dangerously opposed interpretations. It is a widely accepted critical principle that, if a work is capable
of several interpretations, generally the simplest one adequate to explain all of its parts and consonant with all that is known of its context is the soundest. Although readers can disagree about the meaning of "Amor vincit omnia" and the Prioress' treatment of her dogs, they usually agree that she is portrayed affectionately and tolerantly. But only a less felicitous stroke of a brush wielded by a less generous hand could sketch a Squire seemingly gracious and appealing (albeit given to youthful exuberance and sheer verbosity) only to denounce his "moral obtuseness," a Franklin apparently both hospitable and dignified only to judge him, finally, superficial and self-indulgent.

Chaucer's art is subtle; he uses irony and naïveté as devices, and he is indeed a satirist of the first order of excellence. But if approval of efforts and undeluded forgiveness of failure to approximate an ideal of conduct are naive, then Chaucer was not only artistically but actually naive. He was not guilty of the kind of cynicism which would condemn Dorigen and Arveragus for honoring a promise or the Franklin for admiring them; if the Franklin was too attentive to the delights of the table (as was, perhaps, his creator; the eagle of the

House of Fame found him a hefty burden), perhaps he was over-indulgent, perhaps merely careful of his health, but numerous areas remain in which he may still exercise virtue. Undoubtedly by comparison to Sir Gawain, the Squire cuts rather an unheroic figure; but his kind was more likely to be found on real battlefields where green horses bearing green knights were something of a rarity, even in the fourteenth century. Troilus may be somewhat hasty and rash in his total submission to love, and indeed the narrator finds humor in the story he is telling; but it is unlikely that the poet has buried in the poem a severe moral condemnation so far beneath the surface that four centuries of readers failed to perceive it.

**Gentilesse** in Chaucer's poetry is simply the virtue operative in human affairs. Although the idea of *generositas virtus, non sanguis* was common during the Middle Ages, it was regarded chiefly as a pleasant abstraction. Chaucer's attention was drawn by his study of Boethius and of Dante to the idea of a God-given impulse to virtue that transcends social distinctions; but the word applied to that nobility, in his dramatic poetry, comes to represent a primarily secular ideal of conduct. Chaucer's morality as bodied forth in his work is too humanistic to be ideal in the strictest religious terms of his own

Parson. This opinion is supported by the attitudes and ideas prevalent in *Troilus* and *Criseyde* and in certain of the *Canterbury Tales*; and such a view can account for the common habit of recent criticism of seeking for signs of condemnation of Troilus or of the Franklin, the former representing, the latter describing, an ideal of conduct not sufficiently disposed to renounce worldly affections to be in accord with what is supposed to have been Chaucer's doctrinal position. It is the belief expressed in this study that *gentilesse* is a matter not of doctrine, but of behavior guided by human relationships. Possibly a unifying theme of the whole of the *Canterbury Tales*, almost certainly one of the "Marriage Group," *gentilesse* properly studied affords a key to the appreciation of much of Chaucer's greatest poetry.

But in order to perceive the distinctiveness, and therefore the significance, of Chaucer's uses of *gentilesse*, it is essential to see to what extent the concept is discussed, employed, or ignored in the larger context of contemporary literature. As Fisher observes, "it is only by juxtaposing the ideas of the individual thinkers in all their overlapping and ambiguity that the distinctive characteristics of either the individual or the period become evident." For purposes of comparison, this dissertation will examine two of the greatest of Middle English poems,

25Fisher, p. 139.
Piers Plowman and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, in the hope that one phase of both their creators' and Chaucer's art and thought will thereby be made more meaningful. Tracing an idea as complex and inclusive as this one can, in Fisher's words, present "a falsely over-simplified picture unless the prejudices and contradictions of an individual author are kept in mind," and it is patent that one author's prejudices are at best elusive unless some attempt is made to define other attitudes. Chaucer's individuality in the dream vision genre, for example, can be appreciated by reference to similar efforts by Machaut or Deschamps. By the same token, his attitudes toward gentilesse become distinct only when they are seen in relationship to a larger context than his own poetry.
CHAPTER II
LANGLAND: THE TRADITIONAL VIEW

During the very years when Chaucer was functioning incomparably well in the social and political life of London and serving a literary apprenticeship to his French masters, dreaming literary dreams of a May-morning when birds sang and of a December morning when a less musical but more practical sort of bird took him on an alarming journey, the creator of a wilder dream was wandering among the Malvern hills or, perhaps, was haunting the very London streets that Chaucer knew. Nevill Coghill surmises that the two greatest English satirists of their age must have seen some of the same people.¹ It is extremely likely that Chaucer read Langland's poem, for, as Coghill reasons, Chaucer is known to have been an avid reader. He finds, further, "direct evidence" that Chaucer had read and been influenced by Piers Plowman; the exemplary plowman of the Canterbury Tales bears the stamp of Piers, the two poets draw similar portraits of pardoners, and both condemn priests for frequent trips to London.² There are other

¹Nevill Coghill, "Chaucer's Debt to Langland," Medium Aevum, IV (1935), 90.
²Ibid., p. 91.
parallels, but the debt of Chaucer to Langland is of "idea and not of phrase," and is, consequently, like most material about Langland, difficult to pinpoint.

The assumptions commonly made about Langland's life are that he lived from about 1332 to 1400, that the information contained in his poem about his wife Kit and his daughter Nicolette and their cottage on Cornhill is factual, and that he was a priest in minor orders. E. Talbot Donaldson attempts to define his clerical position: he was "a married clerk and Donaldson has presented evidence that Langland's marriage, so long as he occupied a low rank among the secular clergy, was in no way disrespectful or defiant of Church law, of an order certainly no higher than acolyte, who made his living by saying prayers for the dead or for the living who supported him." Whether the more colorful details about its narrator which appear in Piers Plowman are autobiographical or artistic only, it will probably never be possible to say. But there is undeniable appeal in the image of the tall and lean Will, dressed in beggar's clothes, who, half-mad in his efforts to discover Dowel, earned a name

3 Ibid., p. 90.


for idleness and lost his respect for rank. Social acceptance in London was, fortunately, probably not his ambition; not a southern man, he could well "‘rum, ram, ruf' by lettre," but he might have told a tale not displeasing to the Parson had he made one of the Canterbury pilgrims.

The gift of this nebulous figure to posterity has been described as "a Christian poem about humanity, which deals entirely with the most important of all questions possible to the Christian, namely, 'How can a man win salvation?' In other words, the poem is an inquiry into the nature of the Good Life, judged by Christian criteria." In depth and scope, the work is often compared to the Divine Comedy; it belongs to the traditions of pulpit oratory and of English mysticism. It attacks the evils of the day—abuses of Christianity by churchmen, of law by lawyers, of trade by merchants; exponents of private vice and public irresponsibility are exposed and despised, from the man who feigns an infirmity to excuse himself from work to the divines of whom Langland writes,


Here messe and here matynes . and many
of here oures
Arn don vndeoulych; . drede is at the
laste
Lest crist in consistorie . acorse ful
manye.

(B Pro 97-99)\(^9\)

It portrays the quest of an earnest, if at times misguided
or lazy, Christian for the pathway to salvation. The
focal point of the poem is man's relation to God, of
which man's relation to man is a subordinate but nonethe­
less essential element.

Certainly the Langland that scholars have recon­
structed from the scant evidence that exists could have
known little of courtly life; his own social and vocation­
al rank was low, and his poetry displays little knowledge
of and less concern for the literary traditions with
which gentilesse is most often associated. To attempt a
discussion of the concept as it appears in Langland's
work seems, upon first thought, something of an irrele­
vancy; the courtly connotations of the word, its complete
appropriateness in the controlled, chivalrous world of
Sir Gawain and the Green Knight or the Squire's Tale,
render it incongruous in the world of Piers Plowman.
Langland does not even use the word itself, although he
uses such near relations as gentil. Yet the value of a
study of the ideal of true nobility in Piers Plowman does

\(^9\)All references to the text of Piers Plowman will
not lie merely in the clearer view it affords of Chaucer's humanism; for an understanding of Langland's own work it is desirable to be aware of the social attitudes of the man who has sometimes been considered a democratic champion of the common man or a revolutionary.

Langland is a fervent traditionalist, devoted to the chivalric order and aspirations and "possessed by the fear that an age of decadence had set in." According to Fisher, he "subscribes to the principle of hereditary aristocracy. . . . We never find in Piers Plowman the 'generositas virtus' cliche." Fisher adds, unnecessarily complicating his point, that "this is largely an emotional commitment." But he is similarly reluctant to grant the possibility of a genuine commitment to Wyclif, to whom the aristocracy "was the true governing body of the state," for, he says, "one cannot help feeling that Wyclif's emphasis on the power of the lords had political overtones." One wonders why Fisher "feels" a need to qualify where that need is not apparent. Although Langland's poetry contains qualities that have associated it with the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and with

11 Fisher, p. 144.
12 Ibid., p. 142.
the Reformation, it seems very likely that the use of *Piers Plowman* by John Ball must have "embarrassed" Langland, and as Fowler declares, "if anything is clear in the poem, it is that the author believes loyally in the teaching of Holy Church. He is no heretic, nor is he, as earlier critics have thought, a forerunner of the Reformation."14

Langland was a clear-sighted realist. His environment was imperfect and he desired change; to say that he was therefore a revolutionary is obviously an unwarranted extension of his thought. The evils that he perceived were many. Attacks against the excesses of the Friars— all four Orders of them, as William carefully explains—who grew fat and sleek upon income from patrons for whom they interpreted the Scriptures leniently (B Pro 58-61) and the parish priests who joined forces with pardoners with whom they could "parten the siluer" (B Pro 81) or lived too much in London do not make of Langland an incipient Protestant; and he has praise for the religious who stay in their cells (B Pro 28-30). Nor do complaints against oppression make him a democrat. The trial, Peace versus Wrong, in Passus IV, is, according to


Coghill, an actual "matter of recent history."\(^{15}\) The passage is directed against "a particular form of outrage or aristocratic oppression exercised through 'Purveyors,' who made arrangements for the commissariat of feudal revenues in their periodical cross-country journeys from one estate to another; they are accused of billeting themselves without mercy or honesty on innocent and helpless villages." It is easily granted that attacks against genuine corruption in church and state do not mean that Langland opposed clergy or aristocracy per se.

But there are other passages in the poem that seem faintly "modern." One is spoken by the earnest voice of Piers:

\begin{quote}
For in charnel atte chirche . cherles ben yuel to knowe, 
Or a kni3te fram a knaue there . knowe this in thin herte.
\end{quote}

(B VI 50-51)

This passage contains the essence of Nature's remark in the Roman de la Rose that one body is worth no more than another. Will's discussion with Lady Scripture sounds other democratic notes; Scripture comments,

\begin{quote}
Kynghod ne kny3thod . by nau3t I can awayte, 
Helpeth nau3t to heuseneward . one heres ende, 
Ne ricchesse ri3t nau3t . ne reaute of lorde.
\end{quote}

(B X 333-335)

Will adds later,

\begin{quote}
Aren none rather yrauysshed . fro the ri3te bileue
\end{quote}

\(^{15}\)Nevill Coghill, The Pardon of Piers Plowman, Proceedings of the British Academy, XXX (London, 1944), 311.
An interesting point of contrast occurs in this matter of clerks; whereas Nature, in the Roman, believes that clerks, who have the guidance of literature and philosophy, are likely to be "gentle and courteous and wise," William suspects that they are easily "yrauysshed fro the riȝte bileue." William is at this point in the poem weary and disillusioned with intellectual exertion, however, and his more objective judgment might be in less conflict with Nature's. But Holy Church, who is not subject to human vacillation, also suggests equality among men in a passage reminiscent of Boethius:

For in kynde knowynge in herte . there a myȝte bigynneth,
And that falleth to the fader . that formed vs alle.

Finally, the classic argument against social inequality appears:

For the best ben somme riche . and somme beggers and pore.
For alle are we Crystes creatures . and of his coffres riche,
And bretheren as of o blode . as wel beggares as erles.
For on caluarye of Crystes blode . Crystenedome gan sprynge,
And blody bretheren we bycome there . of o body ywonne,
As quasi modo geniti . and gentil men vche one,
No beggere ne boye amonges vs . but if it synne made.

(B XI 191-197; op. C XIII 108-115)
The meaning of the speech in terms of Langland's own beliefs, of course, depends on the speaker. The B-text gives it to Scripture; the change in the C-text that attributes it to the character called Recklessness is troublesome, for it seems doubtful that such a character is a reliable voice. Donaldson comments that the praise of patient poverty contained in the passage "would serve as a guidebook for any one who is looking for authority to cast his burdens upon the Lord and to renounce all anxiety for the affairs of this world."\(^1^6\) Considering that "to reck" means "to take heed for," the word "might conceivably be used to interpret the Latin *ecc\(e\) solici\(t\)i in the phrase, 'take no thought for the morrow,'" and might be applied to "the apostles who, casting their burdens upon the Lord, forbore to suffer anxiety for worldly things." In this case, the speaker in both texts may be considered reliable.

Conscience, of irreproachable reliability, mentions a time to come when

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Shal neither kynge ne kney\(3\)te . constable ne meire
Ouer-\(\)led the comune . ne to the courte sompsne.

(B III 313-314)
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Is it to be concluded that since death and God are not respecters of rank, since knowledge of truth is within every heart and all are brothers by the blood of Calvary, that Langland's adherence to the idea of here-

\(^{16}\)Donaldson, p. 171.
ditary aristocracy and his "respect for a long line of noble ancestors [and] ... high opinion of knighthood" are merely an "emotional commitment"? Langland's view of the world is the Christian view, and the democracy of which he is an exponent is "Christian democracy" only; his social consciousness is, according to Dawson, "rooted in his religious faith." The 'on berne' (C IV 477) who will rule in the time foreseen by Conscience in the passage cited above is Christ; clearly the reference is not to any new and democratic government, but to the Second Coming. There is a "definite limit to doctrines of equality and brotherhood." The lesson to be learned from the explanation of Christian brotherhood is a moral, not a social, lesson:

For-thy lołe we. as leue children . and lene hem that nedeth, And euery man help other . for hennes shulleth we alle To haue as we han deserve. . . .

(C XIII 116-118)

The doctrine of charity contained herein has no bearing on the social hierarchy. The social community and the religious community both exist in the poetry of Langland and in his world. God is king in one, Caesar in the other;

17 Chadwick, p. 50.

18 Christopher Dawson, Mediaeval Religion and Other Essays (New York, 1934), p. 184.

19 Ibid., p. 103.

20 Chadwick, p. 50.
ideally Caesar should be an agent of God, as the knights are of the kings. But that the social hierarchy may be turned upside-down when the religious community is actualized (B VI 40 ff.) does not invalidate the social order upon earth. In Langland's thought there is no dichotomy. It is possible for man to live and function within both systems.

There remains the problem of the central symbol. If Piers is an ideal because he is a plowman, if he is representative merely of the peasantry, then William's disillusionment with the pursuit of learning and resultant assumption that "plowmen and pastoures . and pore comune laboreres" (B X 459) are "sonner saued" than clerks (or knights, perhaps, or kings) and Scripture's comment that knighthood in itself does not merit heaven might add up to a lesson in a kind of Wordsworthian democracy; but it remains religious, not political, in effect.

The plowman has, according to Robertson and Huppé, "unique symbolic significance" in Scriptural exposition. 21 Literally as a member of the food-producing foundation of society, 22 Piers is, they believe, representative of "the tradition and ideal of the good plowmen, the producers of spiritual food: the patriarchs, the prophets, Christ,


St. Peter, the apostles, the disciples, and those other followers who actually fulfilled the ideal of the prelatical life. The spiritual significance of the agricultural symbolism is explicitly defined in the C-text, Passus XXII, where Piers is designated "my plouhman" by Grace, and details are provided: his seeds are to be the cardinal virtues; his harrow, the law; the weeds to be removed, human vices. The food to be produced by the plowmen of the poem is the "spiritual food of the Church." Piers as a plowman is a religious, not a social symbol. To further caution the reader against considering Piers as representative of his class is the fact that his lesson to the people on the plain is a lesson in order; the Vision has revealed to William a chaotic society in which each level fails to meet its particular responsibility. Pilgrims lie about their adventures on visits to shrines; friars preach for money; beggars bustle about with full stomachs and bags.

The appearance of a king in the first vision is a step toward a social order in which each man is to know his own duty (B Pro 122). The duty of a king is to execute the laws of God; if he fails in this responsibility

23Robertson and Huppe, p. 75.
24Ibid., p. 19.
25Ibid.
to justice or in the equally important responsibility to mercy, the result is felt throughout the kingdom. The fable of the mice dramatizes the plight of a community irresponsibly governed. The mice shrink, for none dares attach the bell to the tyrannical cat; but the practical mouse who declares that the assembly, incapable of self-government, would not be any better off without the cat is probably speaking for the poet; it is the part of the people to suffer and to serve (B Pro 13:1), to function within the existing framework. Langland did not desire to alter the pattern; he wanted rather "a return to the sacred order on which society rested, according to mediaeval ideas." The pattern has an august history:

For David in his days, dubbed kni3tes,
    And did hem swere on here swerde, to serve
trewthe euere;
And who-so passed that poynte was apostata
in the ordre.
    But criste kingene kynge kni3ted ten,
Cherubyn and seraphin, suche seuene and
    And 3af hem my3te in his maistre, the muryer
hem thou3te;
And ouer his mene meyne, made hem archangeles,
    Tau3te hem bi the Trinitee, treuthe to knowe,
To be buxome at his biddyng, he bad hem
    nou3te elles.

(B I 102-110)

The ideal society is one in which "kynges and kni3tes"

26 Ibid., p. 30.
27 Donaldson, p. 94.
28 Dawson, p. 190.
(B I 93) rule under the guidance of reason and in support of truth, in which, as Carnegy remarks, "labourers must perform the tasks allotted to them, in a conscientious manner, and . . . obey the commands of their superiors, and not presume to judge them, however unworthy they may be. The whole System must be based on mutual trust between master and labourer, justified by the conduct of each one to the other, the root of which should be . . . justice and . . . affection."

The pattern is of great antiquity, but so, too, is the failure of a link in the chain to perform its proper function, for Lucifer broke the commandment of obedience (B I 111-112).

The king of Passus III and IV is brought to a perception of truth by the guidance of Reason and Conscience; such rule is ideal, and Langland has dramatically portrayed the demands upon a monarch. His rule is a function, not merely an honour; he is "the head of law, the defender of his realm, and the defender of the Church." The only "democratic" element here is that the king is subject to as well as executor of laws and regulations. An effectual ruler is essential to the

29F. A. R. Carnegy, The Relations between the Social and Divine Order in William Langland's "Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman" (Breslau, 1934), p. II.

30Donaldson, p. 90.

31Chadwick, p. 39.
harmonious state.

The sermon of Reason in Passus V exhorts the people to perform their own duties: the parents to discipline their children and teach them responsibility; the secular clergy to practice what they preach; the regular clergy to keep to their Rules; the king to love his people; the Pope to govern himself as well as the Church. The incapacity of the people to govern themselves is emphasized when, with no more order than would have existed among the mice of the fable without a ruler, they respond to the eloquence of Reason but only blunder fruitlessly in their search for Truth. Directions do not suffice; Piers can tell them the way, but the people, by their own admission, need a guide:

"This were a wikked way . but who-so hadde a gyde
That wolde folwen us eche a fote;"
thus this folke hem mened.

(B VI 1-2)

Piers is a practical soul. He cannot abandon his duties, and his first action is to impose rule upon the people who appeal to him for leadership. Langland emphasizes "a universal obligation to work"\(^\text{32}\); each man or woman is to perform the task appropriate to him. The knight in this scene is a tribute to the nobility. It is Piers, and not he himself, who excuses him from the task of providing food:

\(^{32}\text{James, p. 98.}\)
"Bi Crist," quod a knynte tho. "he kenneth vs the best;
Ac on the tene trewly. tau3te was I neuere.
Ac kenne me," quod the knynte. "and, bi Cryst, I wil assaye!"
"Bi seynt Poule," quod Perkyn. "3e profre sow so faire,
That I shal swynke and swete. and sowe for vs bothe,
And other laboures do for thi loue. al my lyf-tyme,
In couenaunt that thow kepe. holikirke and my-selue
Fro wastoures and fro wykked men. that this world struyeth."

(B VI 22-29)

After the expansive gentleman promises to perform his task of defense, Piers gives him a lecture on his further duties. Besides hunting animals injurious to crops, the nobility have many responsibilities:

"3e, and 3it a poynct," quod Pieres. "I preye 3ow of more;
Loke 3e tene no teneant. but Treuthe wil assent.
And thouagh 3e mowe amercy hem. late Mercy be taxoure,
And Mekenesse thi mayster. maugre Medes chekes,
And thouagh pore men profre sow. presentis and giftis,
Nym't nau3te, an auenture. 3e mowe it nau3te deserue;
For thow shalt 3elde it a3ein. at one 3eres ende,
In a ful perillus place. purgatorie it hatte.
And mysbede nou3te thi bonde-men. the better may thow spede;
Thowgh he be thyn vnderlynge here. wel may happe in heuene,
That he worth worthier sette. and with more blisse,
Than thow, bot thou do bette. and lyue as thow shulde; Amice, ascende superius.
For in charnel atte chirche. cherles ben yuel to knowe,
Or a kni3te fram a kmaue there. knowe this in thin herte.
And that thow be trewe of thi tonge. and tales that thow hatie,
But if thei ben of wisdome or of witte . thi 
werkmen to chaste. 
Holde with none harlotes . ne here nou3te her 
tales, 
And nameliche atte mete . suche men eschue; 
For it ben the deueles discoures . I do the to 
\[\text{vnderstande}.\]
(B VI 38-56)

Because of his rank, the knight is exempt from menial 
labor, but he is subject to the weighty responsibilities 
attendant upon wealth and power. Like the peasants, he 
must perform those tasks appropriate to his position.

Langland took the efficacy of the archetypal plan 
of society for granted. Noble blood deserved respect; 
he distrusted wealth unless the wealthy freely dispensed 
it in acts of charity, but he regretted unwise giving on 
the part of the nobility:

\[\text{Alias! lordes and ladyes . lewed conseille haue 3e} \]
\[\text{To 3yue fram 3owre eyres . that 3owre ayeles 3ow lefte,} \]
\[\text{And 3iueneth to bidde for 3ow . to such that ben riche,} \]
\[\text{And ben founded and feffed eke . to bidde for other.} \]
(B XV 316-319)

The value of "gentle birth" is a point of reference 
throughout the poem. Lady Meed, in the denunciation by 
Holy Church, is necessarily inferior because of her 
lineage:

\[\text{. for she is a bastarde.} \]
\[\text{For Fals was hire fader . that hath a fykel tonge,} \]
\[\text{And neuere sothe seide . sithen he come to erthe.} \]
\[\text{And Mede is manered after hym . ri3te as kynde axeth;} \]
\[\text{Qualis pater, talis filius; bona arbor bonum fructum facit.} \]
(B II 24-28)
About herself, Holy Church, the "direct opposite" of Lady Meed,\(^{33}\) adds,

\[\text{I auȝte ben herre than she . I cam of a better.}\]

\(\text{B II 29}\)

And the defense of the Lady is undertaken on the same grounds when Theology claims that she is the daughter

\[\text{of Amendes engendred,}\]
\[\text{And god graunteth to gyf . Mede to Treuthe. . . .}\]

\(\text{B II 118-119}\)

\[\text{And Mede is moylere . a mayden of gode,}\]
\[\text{And myȝte kisse the kynge . for cosyn, an she wolde.}\]

\(\text{B II 131-132}\)

Intelligence ponders the *bona arbor* theme later in the poem:

\[\text{Ac I fynde, if the fader . be false and a shrewes,}\]
\[\text{That somdel the sone . shal haue the sires tacches.}\]
\[\text{Impe on an ellerne . and if thine apple be swete,}\]
\[\text{Mochel merueile me thynketh . and more of a schrewes,}\]
\[\text{That bryngeth forth any barne . but if he be the same,}\]
\[\text{And haue a sauoure after the sire . selde seestow other.}\]

\(\text{B IX 145-150}\)

The social order on earth has its pattern in heaven, and

\[\text{Kynges and knyȝtes . that kepen holycherche,}\]
\[\text{And ryȝtfullych in reumes . reulen the peple,}\]
\[\text{Han pardoun thourgh purgatorie . to passe ful lyȝtly,}\]
\[\text{With patriarkes and prophetes . in paradise to be felawes.}\]

\(\text{B VII 9-12}\)

\(^{33}\)Robertson and Huppe, p. 51.
There follows the promise that bishops who fulfill their function well will sit with the Apostles on Judgment Day; the assumption seems to be that, as in Dante, "in each thing the perfection of the nature peculiar to it" is nobility.

God, Christ, and bishops are in Piers Plowman frequently discussed by analogy to kings and knights; for example, the priest is "knighted" by the bishop who ordains him (B XI 285). And Christ incarnate, though poor, was no commoner. The B text claims for Him a full measure of aristocracy:

Iesu Cryste on a Iewes douȝter alyȝte. gentil woman though she were,
Was a pure pore mayde. and to a pore man wedded.

(B XI 239-240)

Faith in the C-text describes the incarnation in the terms of chivalry:

... loue hath vndertake
That this Iesus of hus gentrise. shal Iouste
in Peeres armes,
In hus helme and in hus haberion. hûmana natura.

(C XXI 19-21)

That Piers transcends social boundaries is tacit in the knighthood here conferred upon him, as well.

In the narration of the Crucifixion, the phraseology of generositas sanguis again appears. When the soldier comes to break the limbs of the two thieves,

... was no boy so bolde. goddes body to touche;
For he was knyȝte and kynges sone. kynde forȝaf that tyme,
That non harlot were so hardy, to leyne hande vpon hym.
Ac there cam forth a kny3te... (B XVIII 74-77)

The writer of such lines decidedly adheres to a notion of inherited aristocracy. In the C-text, speaking in answer to Reason's charge of idleness, Langland explicitly deplores the condition of that nobility:

Ac sith bondemenne barnes, han be mad bisshopes,
And barnes bastardes, han ben archidekenes,
And sopers and here sones, for seluer han be knyghtes,
And lordene sones here laborers, and leid here rentes to wedde,
For the ryght of this reame, ryden a-zens our e emynys,
In confort of the comune, and the kynges worship,
And monkes and moniales, that mendinauns sholden fynde,
Han mad here kyn knyghtes, and knyghtfees purchased,
Popes and patrones, poure gentil blod refuseth,
And taken Symondes sone, seyntewarie to kepe.
Lyf-holynesse and loue, han ben longe hennes,
And wole, til hit be wered out, or otherwise ychaunged.

(C VI 70-81)

Langland is not democratic. The intuitive knowledge in every heart whence spring the basic virtues is not in itself sufficient to insure a habitable society. A hierarchy with responsibilities relegated to and met by each level is essential. It is not adequate to say that Langland was only "emotionally" committed to the idea of *generositas sanguis*. He "believed" in the Kingdom, the Aristocracy, the Church, and the social systems as they
"were," comments Iijima;\(^\text{34}\) it would be more accurate, perhaps, to say "as they should have been."

Langland's position is a practical one that might be termed rationalization; that he acknowledged the equality of all men in the eyes of God is undeniable, but it is equally undeniable that he respected the social hierarchy. He indulges in the conventional admonitions: the aristocracy, more subject to the sins of avarice and pride than the peasantry, must remember that rank does not entitle them to a passage to heaven. Nevertheless, it does seem that a tree will bear fruit of its own kind. Great poet and honest critic of life that he was, Langland cannot accurately be called a modern or a leveller.\(^\text{35}\)

In his thought and in his art he uses as a touchstone the medieval ideals of order; in his acceptance of that order he neither defends nor condemns.

His artistic use of gentilesse is natural and devoid of self-consciousness; the explanations of relationships among men or between men and God are clearest in the terms of feudalism, and Langland draws from those terms. His application of the concept is simply reliance. He is innocent of the philosophizing of Dante or Boethius, the poetizing of Jean de Meun. Essentially, his thought


\(^\text{35}\)Dawson, p. 183.
is in accord with theirs in several areas. He could have agreed with Boethius that "there is implanted by nature in the minds of men a desire for the true good; but error leads them astray towards false goods by wrong paths."

But when Boethius mounts the high hill to propound an abstract definition of true nobility, Langland remains on the plain, an observer of the blind gropings of an ignoble populace. And whereas Boethius, of noble birth, is attempting to explain an undeserved loss of happiness in the solitude of prison, Langland, of obscure ancestry, is seeking Dowel in the bustle of life. Langland shares with both Boethius and Dante a distrust of wealth; and the Dantean definition of nobility as "in each thing the perfection of the nature peculiar to it" would have suited Langland well.

But the idea basic to these discussions was the generositas virtus, non sanguis idea to which it is evident that Langland did not subscribe. Doubtless if he had read the works of these men he could have respected their theories; but from his vantage point he could perceive too clearly the field full of folk, wretched, vicious, and fruitless, to doubt the necessity of the order implicit in the traditional concept of a hereditary aristocracy responsive to the demands of noblesse oblige.
CHAPTER III
THE GAWAIN-POET: A SECULAR IDEAL

The concept of nobility according to birth unquestioned in Piers Plowman is similarly accepted in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. But the similarity ends in the poems' reflections of authorial acquiescence to status quo, for despite the fact that they are often linked in references to the Alliterative Revival or to the flowering of Middle English poetry, probably no two poems in the English language have less in common. It is tempting to conjecture that their authors were likewise dissimilar, but biographical information, scarce in the case of Langland, is virtually non-existent in the case of the Gawain-poet. Probably this nameless figure was writing in Lancashire or West Riding during the decades between 1365 and 1386.¹ It is a reasonable assumption that, as Savage believes, he was a man of the world. Possibly Savage's very cautious suggestion of a connection between Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the marriage of Edward III's eldest daughter is valid. But to present any such

hypothesis is to rely on scant evidence, and one is likely to evoke nods of unqualified scholarly assent only to such abstract statements as "the set of his mind is aristocratic." But this generalization is a valuable one.

Like Langland, the Gawain-poet is sympathetic toward the nobility. Perhaps because he was closer to it than was Langland, his sympathy is less perfunctory; for while Langland, although relying upon his audience's acceptance of the idea of *generositas sanguis*, writes little about the aristocracy per se, the Gawain-poet seems to be writing intimately both to and about the courtly classes. Certainly a central idea of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is human conduct; as Kitely notes, it has "by far the greatest concentration of references to courtesy of any romance," and plainly the criticism of life intended by the poet is related to this emphasis. Although wearing courtly robes rather than beggar's rags, and emphasizing the means--individual responsibility--rather than the end--the common good--this poem, like the other, conveys its author's view of human responsibility.


4 J. F. Kitely, "The *De Arte Honeste Amandi* of Andreas Capellanus and the Concept of Courtesy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Anglia*, LXXIX (1961), 7.
Fisher classifies the poet as one "whose apparent unconsciousness of social attitudes or doctrines itself offers a contrast to the acute awareness" of such a man as Langland. The Gawain-poet does not pose the interesting question,

When Adam dalf, and Eve span,
Who was thanne the gentilman?

He is concerned with the moral responsibility of the individual, not with the source of nobility or the political implications of hereditary gentilesse. Within the framework of courtly romance, he explores human conduct, the ideal of which it is valid to equate with gentilesse, "the virtue operative in human affairs"—Chaucer's secular ideal—for, as Green observes, the poem's "central concern with the ideal of secular perfection." More concretely, the poem measures Gawain against standards of conduct which, although including theological virtues, are primarily social and practical.

Precisely what judgment the poet intends of Sir Gawain or of the traditions which produced him has not been satisfactorily explained. Certainly critics have not neglected the poem; they have consistently praised it as a masterpiece. They have, however, applied to it

5Fisher, p. 150.

6Richard H. Green, "Gawain's Shield and the Quest for Perfection," ELH, XXIX (1962), 123.
relatively little of the detailed analysis which has illuminated the subject, theme, and form of nearly every line produced by Chaucer. To be sure, the results of close scholarly scrutiny are not always in themselves felicitous, but their effects are usually salutary; Savage's historical thesis is too tentative to be of great value as more than an example of the scholarly method, and Manning's "psychological interpretation" of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight as a story about "the ego's encounter with the shadow" forces traditional ideas into non-traditional language, but both men by their observations help to pave the approach to a poem about which much remains to be said.

It is patent that the poet relied upon the chivalric tradition and attempted to recall to his hearers the ideals to which they were accountable. It is widely assumed that his technique is dramatization of the ideal. One who approaches the poem, however, as an unqualified encomium of the court, its monarch, and particularly of Gawain, inevitably stumbles across more obstacles than the glibly rationalized matter of Gawain's concealment of the girdle in violation of his compact with his host. Hans Schnyder has ventured to say that Arthur as depicted by the Gawain-poet is by no means exemplary and has seen

*Stephen Manning, "A Psychological Interpretation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Criticism, VI (1964), 167.*
in the poem something of a criticism of kingship; and indeed there is some room for speculation in that "the first discomfiture of the court" results from the Green Knight's failure to distinguish Arthur from his knights. The point of this detail may, however, be the discourteous behavior of the intruder rather than any shortcomings of the king. Kitely has found in the romance an "implied criticism of that courtesy which was the outcome of Courtly Love, a courtesy important not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end," and points to its "reversal" of the "typical Courtly Love situation" as a satiric device. But as McNamara has argued, the De Amore "clearly allows a woman to assume the role of aggressor, at least in the initial stages, when she knows that some good reason constrains the man from doing so."

Another interesting interpretation is offered by R. H. Green:

"In Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" everything is excessive and slightly ridiculous; the great Gawain lies in bed far into the morning while


10Kitely, p. 12.

his host is out in the forest, engaged in the chivalric exercise of hunting. His wife, a gentle lady, is engaged in a hunt of her own, with all the courtoisie of a sophisticated trollop. . . . this is a gentle mockery of manners mistaken for morals.\textsuperscript{12} In the poem, he adds, there exists "an ideal society in a marvellous world where the virtuous hero represents the temporal and spiritual ideal, flattering and encouraging those whose model he is meant to be."\textsuperscript{13} The difficulty in accepting these dicta is that, although Gawain's actions are less morally commendable than most critics have believed, the poem does not read like even "gentle" satire.

Gawain has, of course, long been considered a paragon; but his behavior does not seem to support Miss Borroff's opinion that he is "exquisitely courteous,"\textsuperscript{14} or Zesmer's judgment that "the hero emerges from his experience with one minor blemish upon an otherwise spotless character."\textsuperscript{15} But the challenge to such interpretations cited above is evidence of justified dissatisfaction with the traditional approach to the poem.

The knight who at last returns from an encounter

\textsuperscript{12} Green, p. 137.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 122.
\textsuperscript{14} Borroff, p. 247.
\textsuperscript{15} David M. Zesmer, Guide to English Literature from Beowulf through Chaucer and Medieval Drama (New York, 1961), p. 156.
with the Green Knight is a man whose behavior has been unequivocally dishonorable. The denouement of the poem offers excuses for him; nevertheless, it is easier to concur in the judgment that human conduct is "the heart of the poem" than in the opinion that "the primary purpose of the poem is to show what a splendid man Gawain is."¹⁶ A careful consideration of both the author's preoccupation with conduct and the degree of Gawain's failure to realize the ideal leads to a questioning of the usual approach to Gawain.

The knight carefully cultivates perfection, and only once do the inhabitants of his own world perceive imperfection in him—only a minor one, to be sure. But it seems that Gawain, his creator, and the readers share a different point of view. Undoubtedly one must judge a literary character in the terms of the total composition in which he appears and by the standards of his creator if literary interpretation is to be a valid art. It is a misreading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight to accept the pronouncements of Bercilak and Arthur's court as the poet's voice.

The poem is ambiguous. The presentation of the action is largely dramatic; a paucity of commentary by the author contributes to difficulties in interpretation. The poet is reluctant to divulge the thoughts and feelings

¹⁶Markman, p. 575.
of his characters; he tells how Gawain acted and what he said about his journey to the hidden retreat of the Green Knight, but he does not tell how Gawain felt about the journey. His occasional relation of thought is likely to be as puzzling as informative: Gawain, for example, feigning sleep when the lady first enters his chamber, wonders what this visit may lead to and decides to let her talk and reveal her purpose to him. The reader in his turn must rely upon Gawain's speech and actions for understanding of him. The poet is similarly reticent as judge; his objectivity is the more remarkable when one considers that in the other great Middle English romances—King Horn, Gamelyn, Havelock the Dane—characters are freely and explicitly judged, their emotional states described, their reflections recorded. Although free with descriptions of physical objects, the Gawain-poet is less generous with moral judgments.

It must be granted that the objectivity of the Gawain-poet is relative to other poets of his own century. Compared to Dreiser he is, of course, highly subjective. He labels Gawain "be segge trwe" (1091), comments about the innocence of Arthur's court and of Gawain's first

17Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. Sir Israel Gollancz, with an Introduction by Mabel Day and Mary Serjeantson, for the Early English Text Society, Original Series, No. 210 (Oxford, 1940). All quotations from the poem will be cited from this edition.
conversation with Lady Bercilak. He calls knights "noble"; he introduces his hero as "gode Gawan" (109); he reports that Arthur was not afraid of the Green Knight. Generally, however, to the frustration of the reader attempting to gather evidence of Gawain's gentilesse or lack thereof, the poet remains in the background, presenting judgments through the speeches of his characters or through the employment of stock epithets. Both of these devices, obviously, are weak and possibly misleading clues to the author's views. Reliance upon them has led readers to ask the wrong questions and to propose irrelevant interpretations of the poem.

The poem depends heavily upon a discrepancy for its effect; Gawain's achievement falls short of the hopes of the reader and of Gawain himself. Adding to the irony is the failure of Gawain's world to share in his disillusionment. Unexpectedly, unjustifiably, he has completely betrayed himself and his world. Tactfully the poet leaves him to self-recrimination and a boisterous reception at the court of Arthur. Although ironic, the poem is not satiric; if Gawain is not "splendid" in his performance, he is by no means ridiculous.

Gawain first appears as a figure distinguished for courtesy in the court where superiority was only normal. Into the midst of that court, at the height of the Yuletide merriment, rides a Green Knight whose errand
whether the men of the court are "so bold as alle burneʒ
tellen" (272). Rudely dispensing insults, he inquires
abruptly for "be gouernour of þis gyng" (225), remarks
that since only "berdleʒ chylder" (280) appear before
him he does not seek battle, and issues his puzzling
challenge. Answered by a marked silence, he laughs at
the cowardice of the assembly and thus finally provokes
Arthur to a response. Acknowledging the impropriety of
Arthur's striking the blow and modestly confessing to
weakness of mind and body, Gawain protests that it is
"not semly" (348) for the king himself to answer the chal­
lenger and volunteers to perform the task. By the removal
of the Green Knight's strangely durable head, Arthur's
young follower commits himself to a second engagement,
and it is only with effort that the company returns to
merrymaking after the unorthodox adventure.

The reader, knowing now of Gawain's renown, is
prepared to learn how he acquits himself. He may be,
too, somewhat puzzled. Should the Green Knight have had
to ask for the king? Borroff comments that his question
"implies . . . that the king does not stand out . . . [and] is ambiguously, if not rudely, worded." \(^\text{18}\) Among "þe most
kyd knyʒteʒ vnder Krystes seluen" (51), should the Green
Knight have had to wait so long for a response? Should
the king himself have had to save the face of the court?

\(^\text{18}\) Borroff, p. 117.
Although some of the knights remained silent "for cor-
taysye" (247), the poet explains, many of them were afraid. The response to the challenge comes only when shame has brought the blood to Arthur's face (317) and left him no recourse but to break the silence as quickly as possible. The sight of Arthur "sturnely" (331) brandishing the ax stirs Gawain to the action that "shows . . . [him] superior to the rest of the court" and spares Arthur the humiliation of having to conduct his own adventure. Having hitherto remained mute, the nobles now break into whispers and agree to let Gawain handle the situation.

At the risk of displaying overbearing pragmatism one might suggest that even Gawain's response is a bit tardy and that the degree of danger seems hardly fatal at the time of his volunteering. True, the intruder may be more than human. But barring an unlucky stroke or a miracle, Sir Gawain should be safe enough. Arthur implies as much:

"Kepe þe, cosyn," quod þe kyng, "þat þou on kyrf sette, 
"& if þou rede þym ryȝt, redly I trowe þat þou schal byden þe bur þat he schal bede after."

(372-374)

Gawain carefully eliminates the danger of facing a substitute in the event of the Green Knight's demise: a

Ibid., p. 129.
year hence, he says, repeating the terms of the agreement, he will receive a blow from the Green Knight and from "no wyʒ elleʒ on lyue" (384). With a touch of wit the challenger picks up the cue and elicits from Gawain the assurance that he will himself seek out the Green Knight on the coming year; questioned, he adds that he will give more explicit directions if he can speak after receiving the blow—if he cannot, so much the better for Gawain.

A moment later retrieving his head, the intruder leaves a court tactfully struggling to conceal its astonishment, and the poet closes his fit with an admonition to Gawain:

Now penk wel, Sir Gawan,  
For wobe ʒat ʒou ne wonde  
ʒis auenture forto frayn  
ʒat ʒou hatʒ tan on honde.

(487-490)

Gawain, however, is more cheerful than any of his peers when the season arrives for his departure; he wonders,

Of destines derf & dere  
What may mon do bot fonde?

(564-565)

The other knights mourn that he is to be sacrificed for pride (681) and complain,

Who knew euer any kyng such counsel to take  
As knyʒteʒ in cauelaciounʒ on Cryst-masse  
gomneʒ!  

(682-683)

But fortified spiritually by the mass and physically by the shield, Gawain bids goodbye to his friends, forever
he thinks (669), and rides off in search of the Green Chapel.

The poem to this point has been exposition: Gawain is to be tested. The poet has attempted to portray Gawain and his peers as human, not as heroic, and has allowed the reader to suspend judgment. There would seem to be little need for his emphasis upon the fear and astonishment of Arthur's court and upon Gawain's caution except as a reminder to the reader not to accept Gawain's reputation as the final appraisal of him. Gawain is superior, perhaps; but the poet has taken care to show that he is also human.

Exercising the knightly virtue of piety, Gawain prays as he rides through the wild woods. The detailed account of his reception at Bercilak's castle shows both that Gawain's conduct is impeccably proper and that he commands the respect due to the foremost knight of Arthur's court even before it is known who he is. When the household learn Gawain's identity, they are overjoyed; they expect much of him:

Now shal we semlych se aleste of bewe & be teccheles termes of taldyng noble, 
Wich spede is in speche, vnspurd may we lerne, 
Syn we haf fonged pat fyne fader of nurture; 
God hat3 geuen vs his grace godly forsope, 
pat such a gest as Gawan graunte3 vs to haue, 
When burne3 blype of his burpe schal sitte & synge. 

In menyng of manere3 mere 
pis burne now schal vs bryng, 
I hope pat may hym here 
Schal lerne of luf-talkyng. 

(916-926)
Almost immediately Gawain has the opportunity to display his skill in "luf-talkyng." It is not irrelevant to point out the lack of enthusiasm with which he responds to his introduction to the less fair of the two ladies in Bercilak's household; but his reaction to the "loue-loker" is hardly chilly, for "he kysses hir comlyly" (974) and holds her in his arms, asking to be her servant. Sitting together during meals, the two engage in polite conversation and mind their own business.

In consideration of the less pleasant business to follow, Gawain cannot be begrudged this happy distraction; but having witnessed these scenes, one can but wonder at Gawain's surprise to find the lady entering his bed-chamber. If the scene is "slightly ridiculous," it is not because of Gawain's compliance with his host's request that he sleep late; it is because of his naive dismay at the lady's boldness. With her entry begins the test of Gawain, and under pressure he shatters; the routine activities to this point have not taxed his knightly fortitude.

Gawain's performance is rather shabby. In rapid succession he violates the standards of chivalry, of Christianity, and of courtly love. As a guest of Bercilak, he owes his host complete loyalty, and as a knight he must be faithful to his word; yet he betrays Bercilak and violates a contract in concealing the green girdle from
him. As a Christian, he is obliged to place heavenly things above earthly ones, yet in his acceptance of the girdle and concealment of it he commits the sin of covetousness, a "turning away from God's love."\textsuperscript{20} As a lover, he is expected to display devotion to womankind, yet he is guilty of a bitter attack against women in his response to Bercilak's explanation of the temptation planned for him. The appeal to "mitigating circumstances"\textsuperscript{21} but even Hills, in his excellent discussion of the theological implications of the poem, comments that "one might almost say that from a layman's point of view the sin is a theological technicality, though it is a technicality which requires the fault to be expiated by a due sense of guilt." Hills concludes his defense of Gawain in the same vein: "That Gawain shows a sense of guilt in spite of the mitigating circumstances is a measure of his coming as near as is humanly possible to the ideal of Christian knighthood."

Hills sounds two false notes. He relies on the common assumption that Gawain's fault can be rationalized away; in so doing, he ignores the sweeping implications of the hero's conduct. If a poet is successful, then what he includes is purposeful; and the author

\textsuperscript{20}David Farley Hills, "Gawain's Fault in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," RES, XIV (1963), 126.

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid., p. 131.
of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has included the violation of an agreement and the indictment of womankind as well as a "theological technicality." To excuse Gawain by claiming that his "one" blemish is "minor" requires an exercise of casuistry and distorts the poet's intention. Moreover, it complicates the business of analyzing the poem, to understand the meaning of which does not demand such mental gymnastics.

Hills' second error is likewise representative of *Gawain* criticism and is closely related to the first; it is a matter of misplaced emphasis. Perhaps Gawain does come "as near as is humanly possible to the ideal of Christian knighthood." Perhaps not. It is an interesting subject, but it concerns the moralist, the theologian, the psychologist—not the literary critic. The poem is about Gawain, not about human potentialities. Hills, observing that Gawain regards his fault as serious "while everyone else tends to laugh it off," remarks, "I do not think we ought to make too much of this difference of emphasis; it is only fitting and in keeping with his moral scrupulousness that Gawain should be harder on himself than the others are." To the contrary, "this difference of emphasis" is essential to the poem. Gawain's moral refinement is the *sine qua non*, the quality which entitles him to the reader's sympathy in spite of his failings. It is difficult to conceive of Sir Gawain
joining in the laughter of Arthur's court without losing the respect of both the court and the reader.

But Sir Gawain has the sympathy and admiration of the poet and of his associates precisely because of his penitence. He has been carefully portrayed as a believable young man who, like others, hesitated to accept a mysterious challenge; unlike them, however, he did step forward and in his first utterance declare his devotion to doing the right thing; he did not want to commit "vylanye" by leaving his place without Arthur's permission, but he did not think it "semly" for Arthur himself to strike the Green Knight. When the lady entered his chamber, his decision to let her speak first was what he considered "semly." There was a limit to his fearfulness, for his "gruchyng" (2127) response to the porter who offered to direct him away from the Green Chapel and toward safety is based on a distaste for even well concealed cowardice.

Gawain's despondency is poignant because of the extent to which his reach exceeded his grasp. In failure he develops his most splendid quality: the moral awareness which prompts the confession that cowardice and covetousness have caused him his "kynde to forsake, / pat is larges & lewte pat longe3 to kny3te3" (2380-2381). Hills feels that Gawain "could not with proper humility" remind Bercilak and Arthur of the mitigating circumstances
of his actions. But the truth is that Gawain does not consider the circumstances at all. In his refusal to do so he triumphs.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a work of psychological realism comparable in fidelity to life to Troilus and Criseyde. It deals with practical human responsibility. Although it implies an ideal of conduct, the ideal is not its province; it portrays a failure to realize it and a recognition of human frailty—a more credible subject, after all, than a dramatization of the ideal itself. Not because of the negligible quality of his sin, but because of the candor and sincerity of his self-indictment, Gawain retains both dignity and stature and a valid claim to gentilesse. He becomes most admirable at the end of the poem; nothing that he has done before has set him far apart from other knights. But in his attitude toward his own behavior he is markedly different from all of the others, and in that one significant attitude he is superior.

Despite his "apparent unconsciousness of social attitudes or doctrines," the Gawain-poet displays the insight and tolerance of Chaucer, the practical recognition of human limitations of Langland. He has portrayed the aristocracy as human beings who, although they must strive to uphold the traditional standards, may easily fail.
PART II

"THE MORAL CHAUCER"
Unlike his two most important literary contemporaries, Chaucer moved freely among levels in the stratified London society of the mid-fourteenth century. It seems likely that Langland's access to the courtly society was at best limited and that the Pearl Poet occupied a world shaped more by the nobility than by the common people. Probably their attitudes toward and uses of the concept of true nobility were affected by their restricted points of view. But Chaucer's business took him from royal households to public offices, from London to Italy and even possibly to Ireland, and afforded him the opportunity to observe closely people of high, middle, and low classes.

Although "of the London bourgeoisie born and bred," Chaucer could regard members of the nobility with both the detachment of the untitled and the intimacy of an associate. He was almost certainly still in his second decade of life when his name first appeared in the account

books of Prince Lionel's household (1357); and it is known that he had no little contact with other members of the highest social rank, including that progenitor of royalty, John of Gaunt, whose name is inevitably prominent in biographical sketches of Geoffrey Chaucer. The outlines of Chaucer's busy political career are too generally known to require repetition. It is apparent that he occupied an almost ideal coign of vantage for a student of human nature. The poetic benefit of such a position is, according to Bennett, reflected particularly in his love poetry: "Chaucer knew from first-hand observation and daily contact the way in which a lady of breeding would behave: he was not a mere adventurer or a flunkey whose knowledge of 'high life above stairs' was limited to fugitive and partial contacts." And even in his earliest poetry Chaucer uses his own experience; but he portrays the best of what he knows, and he displays no concern for the idea of *generositas virtus*.

Relevant to this point is the treatment of the feathery social hierarchy in the *Parliament of Fowls*. There is decidedly a respect for rank among the birds:

```the foules of ravyne
Weere hyest set, and thanne the foules smale
That eten, as hem Nature wolde enclyne,
As worm or thyng of which I telle no tale;
The water-foul sat lowest in the dale;
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But foul that lyveth by sed sat on the grene,
And that so fele that wonder was to sene.

(323-329)

Only the highest class is "gentil." The "formel egle, of shap the gentilleste / That evere Nature among hire werkes fond," the "gentil formel," the "gentil tercelet" engage in "gentil" laughter at the ignorance of courtly love requirements revealed by the lower fowls, and, of course, hear the "gentil ple" of each tercel in his turn. The commoner birds, meanwhile, chatter and squawk in a most uncourtly manner, displaying little patience and less idealism except in the soft voice of the turtle dove, who blushes at her own temerity in defending the complexities of love on higher planes. In spite of the reliance on hierarchy in the poem there seems to be little evidence of any kind of social criticism that might have bearing on the generositas virtus theme. It is not until later in his career that Chaucer demonstrates artistic interest in the practice or neglect of virtue which can mark a peasant gentil or a lord churlish. Although never a social protestant, Chaucer was finally a humanist who defined in his poetry a standard of conduct which permitted no distinction among social levels.

In his early poetry, Chaucer's uses of the words gentil and gentilesse are conventional and random. In the Parliament of Fowls his narrator notices "the bestes smale of gentil kynde" in the garden and sees Gentilesse
herself keeping rather unsavoury company—although she stands alone, she is part of the enumeration which includes Delyt, Plesaunce, Aray, Lust, and Craft, as well as the more respectable Curtesye. (It must be recalled, however, that such personifications are standard in courtly love poetry and that the unflattering implications can be adequately explained by McDonald's interpretation of the poem as mildly satiric of the courtly love tradition.3)  

In the lesser poems, there are many references to Gentilesse personified and to the desirability of gentilesse in a lover. And if small beasts and a lady's nose (1216, Romance of the Rose) are both gentil, the word has a broad application indeed. In Chaucer's poetry, however, the use of gentil to mean "pleasing in appearance" is rare. The conventional love poetry uses gentilesse frequently in the enumerations of the accoutrements of a lover. In "The Complaint unto Pity," Gentilesse is, with Bounte and Curtesye, deceived into an alliance with Crueltee; in "A Complaint to his Lady," gentilesse is merely a lover's responsiveness. The word assumes greater significance in the work of Chaucer's maturity, and as a result it is used more selectively. It is appropriated as the designation of an ideal of conduct.

But the contribution of the earliest poetry to a study of Chaucer's use of gentilesse is largely negative; the virtual absence of any distinctive employment of the word in *The Book of the Duchess*, *The House of Fame*, and *The Parliament of Fowls* supports the thesis that only gradually does gentilesse come to mean, to Chaucer, an ideal of human conduct, independent of birth or wealth or even religion, never seriously ascribed to a character who is not essentially admirable. It is a moral standard operative in both the non-Christian world of Troilus and the Christian world of Griselda (and even, one might add, in the bird-land of the Squire's interminable romance.)

In spite of the elusiveness of the word in the early poetry, however, the qualities which are later to be associated with gentilesse appear regularly in it. In the portrait of Blanche in *The Book of the Duchess* Chaucer describes the "goode faire White" in all of the traditional terms: various aspects of her character and person are "noble," "debonaire," "without malyce," "goode," "gladde," or "symple." But there is more than conventional depth in the portrayal, as Huppe and Robertson point out: "The intention of the lady's heart was the intention of charity, the source of true beauty."^4

Although the word gentil is not used in the poem, the lady epitomizes what Chaucer elsewhere calls gentilesse. The grieving knight in describing his lady strongly emphasizes two virtues which are the sine qua non of true nobility in much of Chaucer's poetry: steadfastness and compassion, qualities which appear again and again in characters for whom the poet shows the highest regard. "Hir symple record," the knight remarks, "Was founde as trewe as any bond." Although the lady was witty, she was "withoute malyce"; although she conformed to the courtly requirement that she be not too quick to love, she put her lover to no cruel tests, employing no "knakkes smale"—"she served as a good example and as a worthy object of love, but did not take it upon herself to send men on vain crusades." After saying no "al outerly" to his first suit, she yielded "in anothere yere," convinced of her lover's fidelity; her motive was "pitee" lest he should "sterve." White's virtues were innumerable, but those most valued by the bereaved knight were her "trouthe" and her "pitee." Indeed, compassion underlies the whole conception of the poem; the narrator laments for the plight of two grieving lovers, his own most striking quality being responsiveness not only to their misery but even to the futility of the small dog that "koude no good" in the dream hunt.

5 Ibid., p. 79.
In the first book of The House of Fame there appears the same insistence on truth to one's word and on compassion. Ariadne and Dido are only two in a legion of women whose sympathetic natures have been betrayed by perfidious and merciless lovers. The theme is here a formula, of course. A rejected lover inevitably suffers for lack of "pitiē" in his beloved, just as a hopeful one appeals to her compassion. And the lament of an abandoned lover is against the treachery which has taken advantage of his innocence. But the themes are not to be abandoned by Chaucer as he asserts his own artistic originality. In Troilus and Criseyde, he is to employ them with the depth and feeling that make the poem great; in some of the Canterbury Tales he is to translate them beyond the confines of courtly love and into other phases of life. But they are to remain constant in his poetry.

It is undeniable that Chaucer's attitude toward gentilesse was influenced strongly by Boethius. It has been pointed out (see Chapter I) that he drew upon three sources for discussions of the ideal, but what is known or soundly conjectured about the chronology of his poetry leads inevitably to the recognition that probably before he translated the Consolation of Philosophy his poetry contained practically nothing—with the possible exception of the Clerk's Tale, a translation from Petrarch—that relates explicitly to the theme of true nobility, and
that the word gentil had, for him, little meaning. There is fairly uniform agreement among scholars that the translation of Boethius was the work of the early 1380's. Translation is a long and demanding enterprise; Chaucer must have admired Boethius greatly to have been willing to undertake the task, and in the process of completing it he must have absorbed much from his master. The work left one of its most obvious imprints in the influence of Boethius' discussion of true nobility on the subsequent works of Chaucer.

Credulousness is hardly strained by the assumption that the composition of the "ballade" on gentilesse was related to the intensive study of Boethius accompanying the translation; nor is it strained by the inference that Chaucer was sufficiently impressed by the ideas as they appeared in his source to employ them consciously and dramatically in his later poetry. The group of short poems which are most directly related to the Consolation express the ideas that underlie much of his greatest poetry. "The Former Age," "Fortune," "Truth," "Gentilesse," and "Lak of Stedfastnesse" suggest that the study of the Consolation provoked reflection the fruits of which are evident in the all-inclusive humanism of his best poetry.

These poems are significant for their moral content. In "The Former Age," referring to the golden age of man, Chaucer writes that people once were without
"galles," that "everich of hem his feith to other kepte"; he laments that

in oure dayes nis but covetyse,
Dubleness, and tresoun, and envye,
Poyson, manslaughtre, and mordre in sondry wyse.

Thematically echoing the story of the patient Griselda, "Truth" advocates resignation:

Tempest thee noght al croked to redresse,
In trust of hir that turneth as a bal,

and

That thee is sent, receyve in buxumnesse;
The wrastling for this world axeth a fal.

"Lak of Stedfastnesse" emphasizes a quality frequently pivotal in Chaucer's plots: faith to one's words.

"Sometyme," he mourns,

the world was so stedfast
That mannes word was obligacioun;
And now it is so fals and deceivable
That word and deed, as in conclusioun,
Ben nothing lyk.

The poem also deplores the exile of pity:

no man is merciable;
Through covetyse is blent discrecioun.

Although in "Gentilesse" Chaucer enumerates several virtues that belonged to "the firste stok," "pitee" and "stedfastnesse" are prominent again, as they are in the later dramatic works. A line several times repeated in his poetry is the poignant "Pitee renneth sone in gentil herte": and in the tales of the Clerk and the Franklin, certainly steadfastness is a dominant manifestation of gentilesse.
These two qualities are main components of the formula by which Chaucer wrote the stories of Cupid’s martyrs in the Legend of Good Women. The Prologue contains a disquisition on nobility in Alceste’s plea on behalf of the poet. To the God of Love she explains

ryght of your curtesye,
Ye moten herken yf he can replye. . .
A god ne sholde nat thus be agrieved,
But of hys deitee he shal be stable,
And therto gracious and merciable.

(F 342-346)

"Stable" obviously can be equated with "stedfast"; and the quality of mercy again appears automatically as a component of nobility. It is the God's responsibility, too, to withstand the pressures of rumor and opinion and to hear the poet's reply,

For he that kynge or lord ys naturel,
Hym oghte nat be tiraunt ne crewel.

(F 376-377)

The person of high station, specifically a king, must
do on bothe ryght, to poore and ryche,
Al be that hire estaat be nat yliche,
And han of poore folk compassyoun.

(F 388-390)

Always the noblest of beasts, the lion serves as a model:

For loo, the gentil kynde of the lyoun!
For whan a flye offendeth him or biteth,
He with his tayl away the flye smyteth
Al esely; for, of hys genterye,
Hym deyneth not to wreke hym on a flye,
As dooth a curre, or elles another best.
In noble corage ought ben arest,
And weyen every thing by equytee,
And ever have reward to his owen degree.

(F 391-399)
The gentle heart is above petty revenge; Chaucer relies on an assumption shared with Langland, expressed in Luke 12:48: "For unto whomever much is given, of him shall be much required." When the God of Love answers Alceste, he generously praises her virtue before granting her plea:

"Madame," quod he, "it is so long agoon That I you knew so charitable and trewe."  
(F 443-444)

Penance is exacted by Alceste; the poet is "yer by yere" to spend most of his time making a "glorious legende / Of goode wymmen" who were "trewe in lovyng" but who were betrayed by false men. The mildness of the assignment leads the God to use the favorite line, "But pitee renneth soone in gentil herte" (F 503).

Although the poet has offered in his own defense the plea that he intended, by writing of false lovers, to warn "by swich ensample" (F 474) against treachery in love, and that he wanted "to forthren trouthe in love," he is chided for "a ful gret neglygence" (F 525) in writing "unstedefastnesse" of women:

Why noldest thow han writen of Alceste,  
And laten Criseyde ben aslepe and reste?  
(F 530-531)

To atone for his sin, Chaucer offers a catalog of Cupid's martyrs. The women are all notably virtuous in love, if rather dull; the tales are mere outline accounts of the romance of women, irreproachably faithful, who were be-
trayed by false men. The Legend is a tribute to compassion and constancy. The fate of Medea's children is discreetly omitted because it is irrelevant; her constancy as Jason's lover is her raison d'être in the work. She saved his life and for "hire trouthe and for hire kyndeness" (1664) was cruelly betrayed, not the first nor yet the last to be so used by Jason. Similarly, Ariadne aids Theseus and is abandoned; in her "compassioun" for the young prince she merely saves him for a sister "fayrer . . . than she" (2172). Each narrative tells the tale of a woman of consummate virtue in matters of love betrayed by a lover false and cruel or, as in the case of Thisbe, by a cruel fate.

Although the virtues exercised by love's martyrs are gentil virtues, the word gentilesse is used in the tales arbitrarily. It is clearly equated, for example, with mere rank in the legend of Medea, for Jason was "a famous knyght of gentilesse" (1404), yet he is the blackest of villains. It is tempting to conjecture that, as has been suggested, some of the legends were composed before the Prologue and thus perhaps belong to the period before Chaucer began to take seriously the idea of true nobility.

At any rate, in his earliest poetry Chaucer uses the word gentilesse conventionally, without distinctiveness. He has, however, discussed the responsibilities of
a person endowed with power and denied that nobility can be inherited. He has also begun to emphasize qualities that are to be recurrent themes in his most moral poetry. But it is only in *Troilus and Criseyde* that the tension between word and action takes on dramatic significance.
CHAPTER V.

TROILUS AND CRISEYDE: A GENTIL TRAGEDY

Although there is no explicit discussion of gentilesse in Troilus and Criseyde, one is conscious of its importance throughout the poem as a standard of excellence which Troilus realizes and Criseyde does not. She entirely lacks stedfastnesse, and she is unable to perceive or to cope with her failing. The other qualities of nobility she possesses in abundance.

It is, however, Criseyde to whom gentilesse is first attributed in the poem. Upon learning whom Troilus loves, Pandarus is pleased because

\begin{quote}
of good name and wisdom and manere
She hath ynough, and ek of gentilesse.
\end{quote}

(I, 880-881)

But gentilesse after this is attributed almost exclusively to Troilus; and in this instance, the speaker, Pandarus, is not necessarily authoritative. He is fond of the word, however, and Troilus' nobility figures prominently in the wooing of Criseyde; Pandarus emphasizes it in extolling to her

\begin{quote}
The wise, worthi Ector the secounde, 
In whom that alle vertu list habounde,
\end{quote}
As alle trouthe and alle gentilesse,  
Wisdom, honour, fredom, and worthinesse.  

(II, 158-161)

He is not alone in his evaluation of Troilus. Criseyde has already heard that the prince bears himself "gentily" (II, 187), and after she has seen him she thinks at length about

his excellent prowesse,  
And his estat, and also his renown,  
His wit, his shap, and ek his gentilesse.  

(II, 701-702)

She thoughte wel that Troilus persone  
She knew by syghte, and ek his gentilesse.  

(II, 701-702)

Again, after she has written the letter demanded by Pandarus and has seen Troilus pass the second time,

Criseyde, which that alle thlse thynges say,  
To telle in short, hire liked al in-fere,  
His person, his aray, his look, his chere,  

His goodly manere, and his gentilesse.  

(II, 1264-1267)

She appeals to his gentilesse at the scene in Deiphebus' house (III, 163); and it is obvious that it has been instrumental in winning her love, for Pandarus explains when he expresses doubts about his own role,

For the have I my nece, of vices clene,  
So fully maad thi gentilesse triste,  
That al shal ben right as thiselven liste.  

(III, 257-259)

Pandarus' machinations are most successful when he urges Criseyde to act in the name of virtue; by suggesting that Troilus' death will result from her refusal, he plays upon her compassion. And he does so again on the rainy night
at his house when he attempts to persuade her to allow
Troilus to enter her room:

What! platly, and ye suffre hym in destresse,
Ye neyther bounte don ne gentilesse.

(III, 881-882)

Such appeals to further the cause of Troilus lend a pathos
to the shoddy little scene of Book V in which Diomede
pleads his cause:

I am, al be it yow no joie,
As gentil man as any wight in Troie.

(V, 930-931)

And to prove it, he explains that if his father had lived,
he would be a king.

Criseyde's most pathetic cry after her default is
that she has "falsed oon the gentileste" (V, 1056); and
for whatever it is worth to Troilus, her last letter ad-
dresses him as "sours of gentilesse" (V, 1591) with a
more than superficial truth; for Troilus is indeed the
source of Criseyde's faltering gentilesse, no less than
she of his, but without him she is easy prey to Diomede.

In recognition of the significance of gentilesse
in the poem, Gaylord has written that "the tragedy of
Troilus . . . is the tragedy of his gentilesse."¹ However, he argues that the tragic fall of Troilus is "very
closely related to the kind or quality of the gentilesse
which [he] displayed," and that Chaucer intended through

¹Alan T. Gaylord, "'Gentilesse' in Chaucer's
'Troilus,'" SP, LXI (1964), 21.
ironic use of the concept to lead his courtly audience to a recognition of the superficiality of the "gentil life they took for granted." This interpretation of the poem rests upon an assumption that the whole affair of Troilus and Criseyde was blameworthy; but it is difficult in reading the poem not to believe that Criseyde is presented as the only sinner and that her sin was betrayal of, not yielding to, Troilus. It is necessary to grant the poem the particular suspension of disbelief that it requires.

We know, of course, that Christianity condemns fornication and that Chaucer was a Christian; but we can not assume that he therefore intended moral condemnation on that basis of Troilus and Criseyde. The poem moves in the world of its own conventions where courtly lovers are subject to the God of Love. In such a world we do not remark that Thisbe should have obeyed her parents; and in such a world Criseyde is innocent until she accepts Diomede as her lover. Otherwise she is held blameless by the narrator until in the Epilogue he re-enters the actual world of medieval England; by the standards within the narrative her relationship with Troilus is acceptable. Lowes and Corsa agree that, as Baum expresses it, there is nothing "shady and


illicit about the affair. Furthermore, it is Criseyde the false lover, not Criseyde the fallen woman, who gets Chaucer into so much trouble with the God of Love that he must do penance by writing stories not of chaste, but of faithful, women.

Gaylord argues that Troilus invites tragedy by building a relationship upon passion and by yielding himself to it too fully. But there was no reason, outside the world of Christian morality, for the lovers not to enjoy a physical relationship, and the poem hardly suggests that theirs was more or less physical than most. The God of Love demands wholehearted service, and whether Troilus and Criseyde were more taken with each other's sex appeal or virtue simply seems not to be a concern of the poet. They loved each other. He was not one to quibble over how.

The failure of gentilesse in Troilus and Criseyde is not a failure of Criseyde to be chaste, of Troilus to be temperate, or of Pandarus to be a good uncle. Chaucer examines in the poem not a sin, but a human weakness out of a Christian context; and the tragedy results from the reflected quality of Criseyde's gentilesse, which is as

beautiful as the virtues which it reflects, but as helpless

to sustain them alone as the water of a brook to hold the

image of a flower it has passed.

The poem implies a secular standard of conduct.

According to Payne, to fulfill the intention of tragedy,

"Chaucer must reveal a truly human morality, so that the

'worldes blysse' that lasts so little while must be seen

as real bliss"; he adds later that the poem "defines a

complex and humane morality" (p. 206). And it is in the

character of Troilus, a thoroughly gentil hero, that the

morality is embodied. The young prince is, according to

Muscatine, "conceived and constructed almost exclusively

according to the stylistic conventions of the courtly

tradition . . . [and] is described in conventional, hyper-

bolical terms." It is significant that, as Kirby points

out, Chaucer, in borrowing the character from Boccaccio,

has made changes which result in "strengthening the moral

fiber of his hero."

Troilus is endowed with the qualities which Chaucer

values throughout his career. He is, in short, a model of

gentilesse, and the word is used repeatedly, in no ironic

6Robert O. Payne, The Key of Remembrance: A Study


7Charles Muscatine, Chaucer and the French

Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning (Berkeley, 1957),

p. 133.

8Thomas A. Kirby, Chaucer's Troilus: A Study in

sense, in reference to him. To say that he is an ideal courtly lover is not precisely the same thing as to say that he is *gentil*; yet the standards of courtly love which attracted Chaucer to the convention remain constant in his poetry even after he has rejected the more formal aspects of the tradition and are absorbed by the concept of *gentilesse*. Thus the most—and perhaps only—unattractive quality of Troilus is the scorn with which he regards love before his "conversion"; for as will be shown in the discussion of the Merchant, Chaucer has little sympathy for people who show no reverence for noble institutions. And thus the qualities of steadfastness and pity are prominent in the poem, as they are later to be in the Franklin's Tale.

As a king's son, Troilus possesses hereditary nobility, but for all his royal blood—or because of it—he is destined both to love and to suffer unreservedly. Early in the poem, immediately after the complimentary description of Criseyde, Troilus materializes with an arrogant swagger,

Byholding ay the ladies of the town,
Now here, now there; for no devocioun
Hadde he to non, to reven hym his reste,
But gan to preise and lakken whom hym leste.

(I, 186-189)

Not only was he without "devocioun" at this point, thus deprived of a strong incentive to perform noble deeds, but he was disdainful of lovers: if he saw any man
"of his compaignie" sighing or too attentively looking at any one woman,

He wolde smyle and holden it folye,
And seye hym thus, "God woot, she slepeth softe
For love of the, whan thow turnest ful ofte!"

(I, 194^-196)

He compounded his sin of cynicism a few lines later:

O verray fooles, nyce and blynde be ye!
Ther nys nat oon kan war by other be.

(I, 202-203)

Such failure to sympathize with the sufferings of others is not a *gentil* quality; but Troilus' glance soon fell on Criseyde, "and ther it stente" (273).

From this moment on, Troilus is an exemplary figure. He atones quickly for the cynicism of which he has made such unseemly display by his instinctive response to Criseyde's apparent virtue:

And ek the pure wise of hire mevynge
Shewed wel that men myght in hire gesse
Honour, estat, and wommanly noblesse.

(I, 285-287)

Since according to the courtly code, love must be secret, Troilus hides his feelings; since it must be complete, he appeases the offended God by yielding utterly to his passion for Criseyde. The effect of his love extends to his performance in battle, and he intensifies his efforts against the Greeks,

But for non hate he to the Grekes hadde,
Ne also for the rescous of the town,
Ne made hym thus in armes for to madde,
But only, lo, for this conclusioun:
To liken hire the bet for his renoun.
Fro day to day in armes so he spedde,
That the Grekes as the deth him dredde.
(I, 477-483)

So deserving is Troilus that Pandarus thinks it would be a vice for Criseyde not to love him (I, 986).

Troilus' nobility is enhanced when, fortified by the hope that Pandarus offers him after his reluctant disclosure of his love, he springs up to go to battle. His improvement is noticed by "the town":

For he bicom the frendlieste wight,
The gentiliste and ek the mooste fre,
The thriftest and oon the beste knyght,
That in his tyme was or myghte be.
Dede were his japes and his cruelte,
His heighe port and his manere estralue,
And ecch of tho gan for a vertu chaunge.
(I, 1079-85)

It would be unjust, then, to condemn Troilus for "yielding to [his] passion," as does Patch. His nobility is enhanced by love. Even on hunting expeditions, as Kirby points out, he "shows his bravery in attacking the larger animals, while his mercy and tenderness become manifest in his letting the small ones escape" (III, 1779-81).

And moost of love and vertu was his speche,
And in despit hadde alle wrecchednesse;
And douteles, no nede was hym biseche
To honouren hem that hadde worthynesse,
And esen hem that weren in destresse.
And glad was he if any wyght wel ferde,
That lovere was, whan he it wiste or herde.
(III, 1786-92)

10 Kirby, p. 255.
Although he is "of blood roial," he is not proud, but "benigne... to ech in general" (III, 1802); and he flees from every vice (1805-06).

If love enhances Troilus' nobility, Criseyde's uncle and Troilus' enthusiastic friend is, as Bennett remarks, "placed in an impossible position—a double loyalty is demanded of him."\(^{11}\) As impoverished as the poem would be without his presence, little needs to be said about Pandarush in connection with the gentilesse theme. Bennett points out that he is loyal to the code of love; for as soon as he learns that Troilus is in love he is as committed to the suit as he has been, albeit with less success, to his own for many years. It is hardly fair, in view of his intentions, to point out that the lies and half-truths so necessary to the promotion of the love affair are not permissible to the noble soul; the only line in the poem which attributes gentilesse to Pandarush is spoken by Troilus in an outburst of gratitude: "calle it gentilesse" (III, 402), he says of the role as go-between, about which Pandarush has expressed serious doubts.

Pandarush is full of compassion for his friend, and he is not doing his niece a disservice in bringing her together with Troilus. Even his compassion, however, fails him at the last. Although upon hearing of the ex-

change of Criseyde for Antenor he is stricken and becomes "ful ded and pale of hewe" (IV, 379), he is not able to comprehend the unhappiness of his friend, else he could never offend the gentil heart of the lover with crass rationalizing. The notion that one who has pledged eternal love could be consoled by the other fair ladies of Troy (IV, 401) is heresy, not only against courtly love but against gentilesse. With all good intentions but with amazing lack of understanding, Pandarus preaches such a sacrilegious sermon of consolation that the narrator remarks, "He roughte nought what unthrift that he seyde" (IV, 431) and Troilus "at the laste" answers that the advice would be well directed "if that I were fend" (IV, 437).

But the flaws in Pandarus' character are not determinants of the tragic action. As enthusiastic go-between he is effectual, but nothing in his power could have prevented the catastrophe.

Troilus' helplessness is implicit in the nobility of character which prohibits his bluntly wooing a widow clad in black with the inelegant directness of Diomede or blatantly abducting the lady when all seems lost. He is forced to trust a woman so "slydyng of corage" as to be incapable on her own of sustaining a mood, an emotion, or a thought. Although she is able to project herself into the hearts of others and to feel unselfish compassion, the
emotion is as momentary as it is instantaneous. She grieves for Troilus as quickly as for herself when she learns of a forthcoming separation:

How shal he don, and ich also?
How sholde I lyve, if that I from hym twynne?
O deere herte eke, that I love so,
Who shal that sorwe slen that ye ben inne?

(IV, 757-760)

But the feeling for that "deere herte" is perfunctory in her last letter to her lover. She is dignified and clever enough to seem practical and poised; she is witty and adaptable and delightful. But life confounds her. She could indeed have lived alone for years if no one "had arrived to rouse her," but forced to active participation in a "newe cas" she is ineffectual and dependent. What Criseyde lacks is all too apparent when she is compared with Dorigen of the Franklin's Tale; both women are approached by suitors in the absence of their loved ones and both are too much grieved by the separation to be interested. But Dorigen knows her own commitment and gives Aurelius a firm answer which she softens with a disastrous jest. She recognizes the suit for precisely what it is and her faithfulness to Arveragus determines her answer. She accurately assesses the situation and handles it frankly and directly. This kind of immediate evaluation and unhesitant response is beyond Criseyde. She, half

hearing and, we may be sure, half understanding Diomede, thanks him politely and ambiguously. She is not resourceful. Any decision entails an agonized weighing of alternatives and a final perception of the easiest course of action accompanied by a thorough justification of following it, for she is, as Kirby suggests, in no derogatory sense of the word, an opportunist.\textsuperscript{13} Her gentilesse is vulnerable.

The first glimpse of Crisseyde epitomizes her. Everything about her is exemplary, and she clearly displays "honour, estat, and womanly noblesse" (I, 287) as she stands amid the crowd with "ful assured lokyng and manere" (182). But she is in the background near the door, as if for all her assurance she may bolt. Although her response to Troilus' gaze is "deignous"--she drops her eyes as if to say "What! may I nat stonden here?" (292)--we recall that the door is nearby, in case the answer is negative.

She values nobility, and Troilus' efforts to deserve her love are fruitful. When Pandarus comes to present the case, she has already heard about Troilus' ferocity in war against the Greeks whom she so dreads (II, 124), and she admiringly discusses him with Pandarus. Her reliance upon her uncle is evident at this meeting, for when he rises to go she asks him to stay "to speke of wisdom."

\textsuperscript{13}Kirby, p. 196.
Pandarus is aware of her dependence and uncertainty, and he reveals something about her in planning his strategy:

For tendre wittes wenem al be wyl
Thereas thei kan nought pleynly understonde;
Forthi hire wit to serven wol I fonde.

(II, 271-273)

Criseyde has a passion for detailed, explicit information; subtle and elusive though she may be, she insists on having everything presented so that she can "pleynly understonde." What appears to be a willingness to face facts is an inability to distinguish between shades of gray; she is always searching for black and white. Unless the gentil course of action is obvious, she is paralyzed in a flood of words and thoughts. Unlike Dorigen or Griselda, she is unable to establish a set of principles by which to live. She has only the vague conception of a good way to act and an equally nebulous desire to act that way, if only she can. She is therefore eager to be told everything:

"Now, my good em, for Goddes love, I preye,"
Quod she, "come of, and telle me what it is!"

(II, 309-310)

After Pandarus explains for ten stanzas, she thinks, "I shal felen what he meneth, ywis" (387). She needs something more explicit than the request "to stynte his woo." A Dorigen, of course, would have known her answer by now; but Crisseyde will have to look for hers in the situation rather than in herself. And she appeals to the goddess of wisdom to "purvey" for her (425), sighing and
weeping out of inability to meet the situation. Only after Pandarus has assured her that her refusal will mean the death of both himself and Troilus does she assume command. With that promise the matter is solved; the deaths of two such worthy men are unthinkable, and Criseyde has no doubt of the proper thing to do. She undertakes to "maken Troilus good chere / In honour" (471-472), and asks, "Ye seyn, ye nothyng elles me requere?" She can allow no uncertainties. Having permitted the decision to be forced upon her, she rationalizes it: the request--since "ye nothyng elles me requere"--is reasonable. With great relief she declares that her fears were all in her mind (482) and in all good faith repeats her terms: she will, within reason, do what she can to relieve Troilus' misery.

Such is, at least in part, the working of Criseyde's mind. We see the process repeatedly: she quakes with indecision until something external decides for her. Once a situation is established and her role is clear, she is self-possessed and efficient, for within a limited world she knows the rules governing her own conduct; she can be the playful Criseyde who functions so incomparably well.

But in the world of Criseyde nothing is simple for long. When she sees Troilus pass and her own inclination begins to turn toward him, she plunges again into an agony of wondering what to do:
Troilus is worthy of love and should not be allowed to suffer; he is the son of my king and attachment to him would be a practical thing; though temperance is a virtue, there is no necessity for abstinence; he means well and is discreet; I cannot prevent his loving me; I am fair; I am independent; and even if I should love him in return, is there anything wrong with that? With great efficiency Criseyde lists the advantages of her position. But there immediately follows a list of the dangers of love, and her security is challenged. She cannot be sure. When she descends to the garden, the song of Antigone settles the matter:

And whoso seith that for to love is vice,
Or thraldom, though he feels in it destresse,
He outher is envyous, or right nyce,
Or is unmyghty, for his shrewdnesse,
To loven.

(II, 855-859)

For further assurance she inquires who wrote the song and whether its import is true; and she accepts the answer.

But every word which that she of Antigone herde,
She gan to prenten in hire herte faste.

(899-900)

Criseyde's impulses and actions are gentil, but she is so uncertain that they will be commendable only so long as
the influences upon her are commendable. She can be swayed by a song.

Her weakness is painfully obvious in the garden scene with Pandarus; she is afraid of the letter which he brings, and she is "stylle" and unable to accept it; but abruptly she begins to smile and jest when it is thrust into her bosom. The fright passes with the decisive gesture of her uncle, and she has the letter (which one suspects that she wanted all along) by the action of someone else. There remains, however, the problem of an answer, and it is not surprising that when Pandarus begins to approach that matter, Criseyde begins to hum. She is not being coy. She is earnestly at a loss, and can write only when Pandarus says in desperation,

\begin{quote}
\textit{at the leeste thonketh hym, I preye,}
\textit{Of his good wille, and dooth hym nat to deye.}
\end{quote}

(II, 1208-09)

It is not only the negotiation of a love affair that can complicate her life; her reaction to Poliphete's mythical lawsuit is a desire to disentangle herself in the easiest possible way. Her color changes, and she is ready to slip through the door that is always behind her:

\begin{quote}
\textit{But, for the love of God, myn uncle deere,}
\textit{No fors of that, lat hym han al yfeere.}
\end{quote}

(II, 1476-78)

Escape denied her, she relies upon her friends.
At the supper at Deiphebus' house Helen and Deiphebus comment upon her worthiness. And by now the reader knows what to expect of her. At Troilus' bedside she is sympathetic but uncertain: "I not nat what ye wilne that I seye" (III, 121). She desires to know "the fyn of his entente," and is on firm ground when Troilus voices a feeble but explicit request for an occasional friendly word and for permission to serve her. Pandarus interrupts to say that this is little enough to grant to save a life (148-154), and Criseyde can take it from here.

She will grant only so much, she explains; but her decisions are subject to revision. There is no need to review the events of the rainy night at Pandarus' house; appeals to her kindness, to her gentil herte, win the lady.

It has been sufficiently demonstrated that Criseyde's gentilesse is limited by her lack of steadfastness. She is inconsistent, but the inconsistency is in her character, not in Chaucer's portrayal. She is the same throughout the story, but her role changes with opportunity. As she has inclined toward Troilus when circumstances have pressed, so will she incline away--despite the intensity and sincerity of her love--when neither Troilus nor Pandarus can, with honor, maintain control of her world. All that Troilus can do after the decree of exchange is beg her to return; love urges him to die rather than to let her go.
to the Greek camp, but reason restrains him; he must present the matter to Criseyde and learn "hire entente" (IV, 173). But it is evident that Criseyde cannot handle the situation. Pandarus' suggestion shows more understanding of her than of Troilus:

And Troilus, o thyng I dar thee swere, 
That if Criseyde, which that is thi lief, 
Now loveth the as wel as thou dost here, 
God help me so, she nyl nat take a-grief, 
Theigh thow do boote anon in this meschief. 
And if she wilneth fro the for to passe, 
Thanne is she fals; so love hire wel the lasse.

(IV, 610-616)

It is all too true that Criseyde would be grateful to have Troilus impose her role upon her, but he cannot with honor. Catastrophe is inevitable when the decision is turned upon the sely Criseyde. Even while Pandarus and Troilus are discussing the matter, Criseyde, who can face only bearable facts, is hoping that the report of the exchange is false:

But shortly, lest thise tales sothe were, 
She dorst at no wight asken it, for fere.

(IV, 671-672)

In spite of her grief, when Pandarus implores her to be cheerful for Troilus' sake, she complies with his request; but her first effort fails, and as a result her knight almost takes his own life (1156-1211). There is no doubt of the necessity of action, and she begins quickly to devise a plan to save them both—as she did, it will be recalled, when Troilus' life was first in
danger for love of her--and as always, she first sizes up the situation:

Now herkneth this: ye han wel understonde,
My goyng graunted is by parlement
So ferforth that it may nat be withstonde,
For al this world, as by my jugement.
And syn ther helpeth non avisement
To letten it, lat it passe out of mynde,
And lat us shape a bettre wey to fynde.
(IV, 1296-1302)

She is eloquent, yet unconvincing; the execution of her plan, however ingenious and plausible it seems, demands an independent singleness of purpose that is beyond Criseyde, although she believes herself. But there will be no one at the Greek camp to plead the cause of Troilus.

The poem contains not two Criseydes or a developing Criseyde but one Criseyde throughout: Stroud appropriately describes her as "the finest gem that earth affords, yet flawed to her very core."\(^{14}\) Her inconstancy defeats her. In the Greek camp her effort to persuade her father to send her back to Troy fails, and the night is too full of horrors for her to steal away alone (V, 701-707). But she plans to try:

But natheles, bityde what bityde,
I shal to-morwe at nyght, by est or west,
Out of this oost stele on some manere syde,
And gon with Troilus where as hym lest.
This purpos wol ich holde, and this is best.
(V, 750-754)

She can never execute her own plans, however, and she lingers waiting for opportunity to take control of her. She is, in fact, as aimless and as susceptible as she was at the beginning of the poem. And again, when her new role is established, she sets about doing the best she can under the circumstances:

\[
\text{But syn I se ther is no bettre way,} \\
\text{And that to late is now for me to rewe,} \\
\text{To Diomede algate I wol be trewe.} \\
(V, 1069-71)
\]

Thus she has "falsed oon the gentileste" for lack of the constancy that sustained Dorigen and Griselda. Distance lessens the pity for Troilus, and in her last letter she is rationalizing still: the separation is for the present beyond remedy, and the best thing to do is to accept it. She will come when she can. But now even to Troilus the sentiments ring false, a matter of form only. "This Diomede is inne" (V, 1519), but only because it is easier for one as passive as Criseyde to remain with him than to return to Troilus. Had Diomede not existed, it would probably still have been easier to remain in the Greek camp, for he was, after all, only the door through which she escaped complexities she could not face.

The morality by which Criseyde is condemned is secular; in acknowledgement of his own milieu Chaucer makes an application of Christian values in the Epilogue, but within the narrative itself the important thing is human relationships. The tragedy of Troilus is a tragedy
of gentilesse, and in no ironic sense. His conduct is irreproachable; but he is betrayed by one morally weaker than he. The irony is that by no honorable act could he save them both.
CHAPTER VI

THE CANTERBURY TALES: GENTILESSE DEFINED

Emphasis on the "dramatic framework" of the Canterbury Tales is somewhat misleading, implying that the pilgrimage is an excuse to tell a series of tales and relegating the journey to secondary importance. The Canterbury Tales, as a group of related stories, enjoys distinguished literary company, but as Chaucerians are often reminded, Chaucer's framework is unique and superb. The beauty of his use of a situation in which a company of people entertain each other by telling stories lies in the conception of a human drama with dialogue and action supplemented by the characters' selection and presentation of narrative materials. An enigmatic but decidedly gregarious master narrator describes each of the pilgrims before recounting the details of the pilgrimage, which include the stories told along the way. What was completed of the plan remains an unfinished collection of stories; but a perennial challenge to the reader is the inevitable temptation to look beyond the fragment in search of the intention which gave it form.
Chaucer begins with a **dramatis personae** in a series of incomparable vignettes. But these are not like the figures on the Grecian urn forever arrested in an instant; they are moving, talking, busy people, active from the moment they appear. The monk, dominating a conversation, his commanding rhetoric rising above the mild voice of the narrator:

How shal the world be saved?  
Lat Austyn have his swynk to hym reserved!  
(I, 187-188)

the Prioress, delicately and quietly wiping her lips, reaching "ful semely" for her food; the Miller, noisily leading the company out of town with his bagpipes—the pilgrims assert themselves as human beings and the poet declares himself as dramatist. He undertakes to sustain "two levels of fiction,"¹ for the second time in his literary career beginning a series of narrative poems but this time devising a pattern which affords opportunity for the full exercise of his genius.

It is, of course, impossible to make a definitive statement about the poet's intention; but it is possible to form hypotheses from examination of the completed portions of the work: about the beginning and the end there is no question, and within the work there is a group of closely related stories which obviously represent a

dramatic exchange among some of the pilgrims. This "Marriage Group," the most polished and integrated section of the Tales, exemplifies the poet's dramatic technique and supports Ruggiers' opinion that in portrayal of character—of the tellers as well as in the tales—Chaucer implies assessable moral and intellectual agents. Few readers would deny that his poetry is instinct with a sense of responsibility. The positions in the Canterbury scheme of the Knight's Tale and the Parson's Tale suggest strongly that the entire work was intended to make some exploration of values, for in the first the chivalric ideal is pervasive, in the second the Christian. Moreover, both the Knight and the Parson are described in highly idealized terms: the exemplary man of arms begins the series of narratives that is concluded by the exemplary man of God. And, as Ruggiers points out, "Each pilgrim is involved in the personal task of his own salvation. ... Yet within the world man is involved with others, and in the literature which represents him the processes of enlightenment, of recognition or discovery, of catharsis are worked out socially." Each tale represents the idiosyncratic response of its teller to life, nourished by the fruits of his knowledge and experience, submitted to the scrutiny and judgment of his fellow travellers. The

2Ruggiers, p. 13.

3Ibid., p. 6.
personal task of salvation from some of the pilgrims receives no more application than a trip to a sacred shrine undertaken perhaps for less than excellent reasons, and their tales as response to life represent no more than momentary pique or the enjoyment of a good joke at no matter whose expense. For others, life is an extended quest for truth which demands full exercise of the noblest human capacities. All are, however, united in their interest in the story-telling contest and each is to have the opportunity to reveal his wisdom or his folly.
A. The Knight’s Tale

It is very unlikely that Chaucer’s decision to allow the Knight to tell the first story was arbitrary. The Knight is the highest-ranking pilgrim; that he is aware of the responsibility which his position entails is evident in his intervention to effect a reconciliation of sorts between the Host and the Pardoner after Harry Bailley’s abusive response to the Pardoner’s performance and, perhaps, in his interruption of the Monk’s recital of tragedies:

\begin{quote}
litel hevynesse
 Is right ynough to mucho folk, I gesse.
\end{quote}

(VII, 3959-60)

His love for restraint and balance, emotional and artistic, is patent in the tale which he tells, both in its structure and in the distance which he employs to prevent the climactic misfortune from being oppressive.

The Knight tells enough "of storial thyng that toucheth gentilesse" (I, 3179-79), but he makes the very conventional use of the principle that characterizes Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. So embued is he with the forms of noble conduct that Muscatine reads the poem as "an example of the struggle between noble designs and chaos."\(^1\) The romance is indeed concerned with form and

\(^1\) Charles Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale," PMLA, LXV (1950), 929.
order; certainly it employs the confrontation of "the wilful use of absolute power" by "innocent creatures."\(^2\) But it adumbrates as well the theme of the free exercise of the noblest human capacities, and it is in this respect that it has relevance to the present study.

Its teller is an ideal knight who loves "trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie" (I, 46) and who has fought for their preservation. A successful soldier, he undertakes the pilgrimage to give thanks for his victories.\(^3\) He is wise and meek, and he

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde} \\
\text{In al his lyf unto no maner wight.}
\end{align*}
\]
(I, 70-71)

His commitment to internal rather than external symbols of his dignity is implied in his attire; it is all "bismotered," for he has just returned from a campaign.

The Knight's gentillesse is nobility according to blood. His tale makes frequent references to lineage. In pleading to Theseus for revenge upon Creon, who refuses to allow them to bury their husbands, the company of widows remind him that

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{certes, lord, ther is noon of us alle,} \\
\text{That she ne hath been a duchesse or a queene.}
\end{align*}
\]
(I, 922-923)

And Theseus' pity is intensified by their nobility:


Hym thoughte that his herte wolde breke,
Whan he saugh hem so pitous and so maat,
That whilom weren of so greet estaat.
(954-956)

The "blood roial" (1018) of Palamon and Arcite is basic to their complaints: Palamon beseeches Venus to have compassion on them for their "lynage" (1110), and Arcite laments the fall of "the stok roial" (1546-1555) when he, disguised as Philostrate, acts as a servant to Theseus. It is significant, too, that even when believed to be a "povre laborer" (1409), Arcite's inherent nobility is as evident as Haveloc's ray of light:

\[
\text{They seyden that it were a charitee} \\
\text{That Theseus wolde enhauncen his degree,} \\
\text{And putten hym in worshipful servyse,} \\
\text{Ther as he myghte his vertu exercise.} \\
\text{thurgthout al the court was his renoun.}
\]

(1432-1436)

Theseus, moreover, is sufficiently independent of class distinctions—or sensitive to excellence—that "ther was no man that \(he\) hath derre" (1448) than the lowly Philostrate. But all of the Knight's characters are of the highest orders of nobility, and he is well aware of it.

As "Duke" of Athens, Theseus stands above and controls the action of the tale. He appears first, arriving home in triumph with a dual occasion for celebration: he has conquered "the regne of Femenye" and married its queen. He is immediately shown to be in conduct as well as by birth gentil, for his homeward progress is interrupted "whan he was come almoost unto the toun" (894) by
a company of weeping ladies. His impulsive compassion is thus displayed at the beginning of the tale:

And telleth me if it may been amended
And why that ye been clothed thus in blak.

(910-911)

It is clear that he intends to act in behalf of the women "if it may been amended." They appeal to "som drope of pitee, thurgh thy gentilesse" (920), and the "gentil duc," leaping from his horse "with herte pitous" to comfort the women "in ful good entente," swears that he will avenge them upon Creon.

He immediately fulfills the promise, for he reverses his course, sending Ypollta and Emelye, "hir yonge suster sheene," on to Athens. Having introduced Theseus as triumphant warrior, successful lover, and compassionate knight (Neuse points out that he successfully combines the service of Venus, Mars, and Diana⁴), the pilgrim Knight turns his attention to Palamon and Arcite, who, by the same Theseus, are sentenced to perpetual imprisonment.

Languishing in prison, Palamon is fair game for Cupid; Arcite, hearing his companion's cry of pain, assumes that he is grieving over their confinement and preaches a short and gentil sermon:

For Goddes love, taak al in pacience
Oure prisoun, for may noon oother be.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

We moste endure it; this is the short and playn.

(1184-5; 1191)

The distress to which Palamon succumbs, however, is the noble affliction of love for a woman, but he is not sure "wher she be womman or goddesse" (1101). Arcite falls in love as quickly as Palamon does, but he has no doubts about her identity.

In view of Chaucer's nostalgia for the time when "mannes word was obligacioun" ("Lak of Stedfastnesse") and of his insistence upon "truth" and "stedfastnesse" elsewhere, it is difficult to accept the opinion of those critics who find Palamon and Arcite equally worthy. Although the poem is extremely symmetrical in its structure, the two lovers are not equally gentil, for one of them betrays one of the cardinal laws of gentilesse. It is "the short and playn" that Palamon saw and loved Emelye first; his reiterated rebuke of Arcite is for treachery to a sworn brother:

"It nere," quod he, "to thee no greet honour
For to be fals, ne for to be traitour
To me, that am thy cosyn and thy brother
Ysworn ful depe, and ech of us til oother,
That nevere, for to dyen in the peyne,
Til that the deeth departe shal us twayne,
Neither of us in love to hyndre oother,
Ne in noon oother cas, my leeve brother;
But that thou sholdest trewely forthren me
In every cas, as I shal forthren thee,—
This was thy ooth, and myn also, certeyn." (1129-39)

The absurd hopelessness of the situation--two young men quarreling over a woman whom neither can hope to win--seems to have overshadowed for many readers the seriousness
of the genuine treachery. Arcite defends himself with blatant casuistry:

Thou woost nat yet now
Whether she be a womman or goddesse!
Thyn is affeccioun of hoolynesse,
And myn is love, as to a creature.

(1156-1159)

Palamon's confusion is merely part of the traditional and essential reverence of the courtly lover, and Arcite's love "as to a creature" seems rather coarse by comparison. To his own further condemnation, he adds,

Love is a gretter lawe, by my pan,
Than may be yeve to any erthely man;
And therfore positif lawe and swich decree
Is broken al day for love in ech degree.

(1165-1168)

The oath is simply invalidated by love. If this is acceptable, "trouthe is nat the hyeste thyng that man may kepe" and Dorigen could have neatly freed herself from her commitment to Aurelius. If promises are to be amended or canceled by circumstance, then chaos is come again—and Arcite's defiance of his "obligacioun" is patently the basis of much of the disorder in the Knight's Tale.

Although Arcite appeals to common sense—

We stryve as dide the houndes for the boon;
They foughte al day, and yet hir part was noon.
Ther cam a kyte, whil that they were so wrothe,
And baar awey the boon bitwixe hem bothe—

(1177-1180)

and speaks truth, since any dispute about Emelye is futile and cannot be supported by action, his rejection
of his oath is very real. He has clearly violated a trust, and Palamon is sternly aware of it. Upon first meeting Arcite after his escape from prison, he greets him with a reminder of it:

Arcite, false traytour wikke,  
Now artow hent, that lovost my lady so,  
For whom that I have al this payne and wo,  
And art my blood, and to my conseil sworn.  
(1580-83)

But Arcite is adamant:

I defye the seurete and the bond  
Which that thou seist that I have maad to thee.  
(1604-05)

While Arcite calmly denies the obligations of friendship, Theseus, conducting himself more gentilly, is honoring the request of his friend, Perotheus, to release Arcite. The Duke of Athens thus displays what Westlund describes as a "moral flexibility" which later allows pity "to prevail over justice." Ultimately, "order and justice can be expressed not by formal situations and rulings, but by pity: a flexibility which is at once the essence of noble and of moral conduct." The juxtaposition of the two scenes is highly ironic. In the first, Arcite displays a "flexibility" based on the quality that Bennett calls "naked self-interest," unjustifiable and responsible


6Ibid., p. 537.

for the disorder that can finally be resolved only by his death. "Ech man for hymself," he has said (1182). In the second, Theseus demonstrates a flexibility based upon loyalty.

Banished from Athens and the sight of Emelye, Arcite departs for Thebes, leaving Palamon to mourn in prison: "he wepeth, wayleth, crieth pitously" (1221). And neither lover can believe that the other is not more fortunate: Arcite, freed from prison, can assemble an army and march against Athens; Palamon, still in prison--"nay, but in paradys!"--will still enjoy the vision of Emelye. The knight ends the first part of his romance with a demande d'amour: "Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamoun?" (1348)

The second part begins with a portrait of Arcite as wasted, "woful lover" (1379) deciding to return to Athens because he must again see Emelye. In his return he again displays his "naked self-interest," for he gives no thought to Palamon, alone now for "a yeer or two" (1381), still languishing in prison. Arcite's method of return is perhaps questionable: he is, after all, a banished Theban, and regardless of his "dedes and his goode tonge" (1438), the vision of Arcite as a trusted and valued member of Theseus' household is a somewhat distasteful one. But so the years pass, and after Palamon has spent seven lonely years suffering, more for love than from his imprisonment (1455), he, like Arcite, receives aid from a friend; but his departure from prison is by escape.
By chance the cousins meet and make plans for a resolution of the conflict between them; thus they are fighting "up to the ankle" (1660) in their own blood when Theseus passes by on a hunting trip. His demand for an explanation is answered by Palamon, whose response is commendable in its submissiveness and its acknowledgment of the guilt of both combatants. Identifying himself and Arcite, he declares that both deserve to die. Theseus, enraged, quite agrees: the two "shal be deed, by myghty Mars the rede!" He is hardly to be condemned for his angry response: Arcite has been banished on pain of death, yet he is in Theseus' service as Philostrate, and Palamon has escaped from Theseus' prison. But the women plead on behalf of the two young men

Til at the laste aslaked was hid mood,
For pitee renneth soone in gentil herte.
(1760-61)

With an effort Theseus overrules his passionate, but just, impulse to execute the offenders:

And although that his ire hir gilt accused,
Yet in his resoun he hem bothe excused.
(1765-66)

Flexibility, the exercise of mercy to temper justice, is essential to a man in power:

And in his gentil herte he thoughte anon,  
And softe unto hymself he seyde, "Fy  
Upon a lord that wol have no mercy,  
But been a leon, bothe in word and dede,  
To hem that been in repentaunce and drede,  
As wel as to a proud despitous man  
That wol mayntene that he first bigan."
(1772-78)
"That lord hath litel of discrecioun,
That in swich cas kan no divisioun,
But weyth pride and humblesse after oon."

(1781-83)

It is significant to the gentilesse theme that it is the "humblesse," the "repentaunce and drede" of Palamon, his submission to the order of things, that prompt Theseus to be lenient. Gentilesse effects gentilesse here as it will in the Franklin's Tale. And it is the ability to project himself into their suffering that enables Theseus to cope successfully with the conflict between the cousins:

And therfore, syn I knowe of loves peyne,
And woot hou score it kan a man distreyne,
As he that hath ben caught ofte in his laas,
I yow foryeve al hoolly this trespaas.

(1815-19)

That Palamon and Arcite constitute a recognizable political threat to Theseus is here made explicit, lest he should seem harsh in any of his dealings with them:

And ye shul bothe anon unto me swere
That nevere mo ye shal my contree dere,
Ne make werre upon me nyght ne day,
But been my freendes in all that ye may.

(1821-24)

More leniency would be unwise.

The third part of the tale is given to preparation for the tournament; interesting though the long descriptive passages are, they are not relevant to the gentilesse theme, which appears again with the beginning of the tournament in Theseus' decree that there is not to be a battle to the death. The people pay him tribute:
God save swich a lord, that is so good,
He wilneth no destruccion of blood!

(2563-2564)

After winning the battle but suffering the accident that is to deprive him of his life, Arcite, in a generous deathbed speech, renounces his "self-interest" in a recommendation of his cousin to Emelye: "Foryet nat Palamon," he says, restoring the order disrupted by his initial failure to promote his friend's cause in love by honoring it now. It remains for Theseus to accomplish the final resolution by arranging, after an interval of mourning, the marriage of Palamon and Emelye.

This is, of course, but a partial analysis of a tale which, according to Frost, is "deeply infused with a sense of significance transcending both human beings and their material environment." And certainly that the poem projects a tragic view of life is not contradicted by the suggestion that the two young rivals in love are not equally worthy. But the theme of gentilese, which will be shown to be central in the "Marriage Group," figures also in the first of the Canterbury Tales. Arcite renders himself unworthy by violating the requirement of "truth" in his renunciation of his oath to Palamon, and in so doing is responsible for the dissension that leads directly to his own death. Theseus is a touchstone of gentilese:

true to his word, compassionate, wise, mindful of order and form, flexible but nonetheless steadfast, he is human in his impetuosity and his quickness to anger, but he is noble. Palamon is, in terms of the tale, a worthy victor because, unlike Arcite, he is guilty of no breach of faith, unless one is to frown upon his escape from prison; but his repentance and his humility vitiate that flaw.

Gentilesse is not the whole explanation for the outcome of the Knight's Tale; it attempts to assume cosmic proportions in appealing the issue to the gods and in resorting to Boethian philosophy. But the key to character interpretation lies in the degree to which the characters possess or lack true gentilesse.

B. The Parson's Tale

The true, perfect, gentle knight has told a tale set in a pagan land; his characters are ignorant of the Divine Plan and their actions are futile against the malignancy of planetary influences. Their conduct is, however, assessable according to standards of gentilesse. Chaucer's omission of the flight of Arcite into heaven, with the consequent broadening of perspective, perhaps supports the contention that gentilesse is a secular ideal. But the "povre persoun of a toun," given the last word on the journey,

For, as it seemed, it was for to doone,
To enden in some vertuous sentence,
(X, 63-64)

undertakes to show the company
the wey, in this viage,
Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrimgage
That highte Jerusalem celestial.
(50-51)

The Parson touches on gentilesse, warning his hearers that pride in inherited nobility "is ful greet folle; for ofte tyme the gentrie of the body binymeth the gentrie of the soule; and eek we been alle of o fader and of o mooder; and alle we been of o nature, roten and corrupt, bothe riche and povre" (460). But "the wey," he announces early in the "tale," "is cleped Penitence" (80), and his contri-
bution to the story-telling game is a long and vigorous sermon on the need for repentance. The ideal which he represents is the ideal of spiritual perfection, which has as its end the "final blessedness of a contemplation of God."¹ As Baldwin explains, the Parson "knew very well that the superlative and only genuine good for the Christian was the sight of God, face to face, immeasurably and ecstatically loved. The end is infinite, so is the desire; therefore all men are pilgrims of the Absolute."² Therefore, "the viæ, the various roads that all the pilgrims have traveled in their Specific Actions which severally comprise the Enveloping Action of the pilgrimage, must now be reconsidered from this spiritual vantage point."³

It is dramatically not merely appropriate, but necessary, that the Parson eschew the diversion of a tale in favor of a sermon, for

```
were any persone obstinat,
What so he were, of heigh or lough estat,
Hym wolde he snybben sharply for the nonys.
(I, 521-523)
```

The sermon is an orthodox exposition of a central point of Christian doctrine, the need for penitence. It is an exhortation to its hearers not to forget the reality and

¹See above, p. 11.

²Ralph Baldwin, The Unity of the Canterbury Tales, Anglistica, V (1955), 90.

³Ibid., p. 101.
the consequences of sin. And the pilgrims so fully exemplify the human condition, the dogma that "whan the soule is put in oure body, right anon is contract original synne" (323), that the Parson's Tale has seemed to some readers to be an admonition to each of them. The sermon is, however, too unwieldy to be forced into a schematic denouement for the pilgrimage. Tupper's effort to see the Canterbury Tales as a treatise on the seven deadly sins is more thought-provoking than convincing.² Corsa's view, though not so neat, is a truer expression of the effect of the tale placed at the end of the collection: "It makes a prose statement, abstract and theoretical, moral and religious, about the human nature that the tales have revealed in vital concreteness and in all the particularity of 'accidence,'" but it "directs no clearly specific condemnation toward any one of the 'nyne and twenty,'" although "certain pilgrims come vividly to mind as the Parson describes the appearances of the sins."⁶ As Rugiers expresses it, the conclusion provides "a subtle integration by which the dramatic and realistic level of the frame and the fictive level of the tales are made finally to coalesce in a single moral statement general

⁴Frederick Tupper, "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins," PMLA, XXIX (1914), 93-128.
⁵Corsa, p. 235.
⁶Ibid., p. 238.
enough for all the pilgrims." 7 But Ruggiers goes on to find the statement "specific enough to elicit from Chaucer himself the prayer for salvation in the Retraction" and to remark that the sermon "makes clearer the drift of Chaucer's moral intention for the design as a whole."

Certainly it is a "drift" and not a clearly indicated intention that is implied in the Parson's Tale. Its meaning in terms of life is clearer than its artistic function.

So difficult is the tale of interpretation in its total context that Owen suggests that there is insufficient evidence that Chaucer intended the treatise to be included among the Canterbury Tales, that the inclusion of the tale in the manuscript may be attributed to the earliest collectors of the tales. "Chaucer may well have been himself responsible for their mistake, planning to mine the work for more ore and keeping it for ready reference with his Canterbury material." It is probable, according to Owen, that Chaucer made virtually no adaptation of the treatise to the Parson; he argues that the position of the Retraction favors his view: Chaucer "could hardly have intended to revoke the 'sinful' tales at the end of the work at any time while he was writing them." 8 Owen presents a "theory of a religious lacuna in the middle of the Canterbury Tales.

7 Ruggiers, pp. 248-249.

period" to account for the composition of the Parson's Tale and to divorce it entirely from the Canterbury scheme.

For purposes of the study of gentilesse, it is not essential to resolve all the problems posed by the existence of the tale in the manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales. It is necessary to grant only that the tale represents to Chaucer sound and sacred dogma and that it can be accepted as the expression of the ideal the Parson would have employed, in whole or in part, in one form or another, if he had been given a tale or a sermon carefully tailored for him. It is evident that he would have been placed last in the modified scheme which Chaucer alludes to in the link between the last and the next-to-last tales, and appropriately so, for

He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie.
And though he hooly were and vertuous,
He was to synful men nat despitous,
Ne of his speche daungerous ne digne,
But in his techyng discreet and benygne.
To drawen folk to hevene by fairnesse,
By good ensample, this was his bisynesse.
(I, 514-520)

Regardless of the presence or absence of dramatic propriety in the tale regarded as his contribution to the merriment on the road to Canterbury, the Parson, whose business was "to drawen folk to hevene," would of necessity express the ideas in the long treatise on penitence. "He that synneth

9Owen, p. 459.
and verrailly repenteth hym in his laste, hoo ly chichre yet 
hopeth his savacioun, by the gret mercY of our Lord 
Jhesu Crist, for his repentaunce; but taak the siker 
wey" (X, 93), the Parson advises. The "siker wey" is 
penitence. He defines penitence (*the pleynynge of man 
for the gilt that he hath doon, and namoore to do any 
thyng for which hym oghte to pleyne* [3^37]) and anatomizes 
it, naming the "three acciouns of Penitence" (94), the 
three "speces" of penitence, the requirements of penitence, 
one of which is contrition; he enumerates the "causes that 
oghte move a man to Contricioun" (132), the "manere" of 
a man's contrition (291), and the effects of contrition 
(307). He concludes the first division of his sermon 
with a comment on the wisdom of penitence.

And therfore, he that wolde sette his entente 
to thise thynges, he were ful wys; for soothly 
he ne sholde nat thanne in al his lyf have 
corage to synne, but yeven his body and al his 
herte to the service of Jhesu Crist, and 
therof doon hym hommage. / For soothly ourc 
sweete Lord Jhesu Crist have spared us so 
debonairly in ourc folies, that if he ne hadde 
pitee of mannesc soule, a sory song we myghten 
alle synge. /

(314-315)

The next division of the sermon treats confession, the 
explanation of which requires an examination of those 
things which a man ought to confess and leads into the 
discussion of the seven deadly sins.

It is in his definitions of the sins that the 
Parson suggests qualities of the pilgrims; it is not
necessary, however, to make too much of the correspondences between the sermon and the pilgrims, for the seven deadly sins are but attributes of mankind in its fallen condition and any true portrayal of a large number of people would of necessity imply their existence. In discussing pride, the sermon attacks "superfluitie of clothing" (416), perhaps recalling the expert cloth-maker of Bath whose fondness for attractive clothing was a point of strife between herself and her old and good husbands; or the Monk in his splendid attire; or the Prioress with her small vanities. The Parson denounces "pride of the table" in terms that undeniably could apply to the Franklin. Yet in discussing "Remedium contra peccatum Superbie" he just as surely suggests the Franklin. Of the four "maneres" of humility of heart, the Franklin notably exemplifies at least one: "he ne despiseth noon oother man," and certainly he has an occasion to show contempt for the somewhat bumptious Harry Bailley when the latter says "straw for youre gentilesse!" (V, 695) The Franklin also shows "humblesse of speche" in his disclaimer of rhetorical facility; he "preiseth the bountee of another man, and nothing amenuseth" in his response to the Squire's Tale and its youthful teller. And it is not straining a point to credit him with another humble quality, the willingness to "stonde gladly to the award of his sovereyns, or of hym that is in hyer degree," for in the story-telling game Harry Bailley is "in hyer degree" as moderator.
Passages of the tale applicable to individual pilgrims are numerous; Baldwin has made a very satisfactory list of the sins of the various travelers, and it could be extended ad infinitum. The above details have been pointed out merely as a reminder that for each sin there are presented remedies, and that among the remedies as well as among the sins may be found glimpses of the pilgrims.

The fruit of penitence is "the endeles blisse of hevene, / ther joye hath no contrarioustee of wo ne gre-vauce; ther alle harmes been passed of this present lyf; ther as is the sikernesse fro the peyne of helle; ther as is the blisful compaignye that rejoysen hem everemo, everich of otheres joye. . . ." (1076-1078) As a Christian, Chaucer undoubtedly accepted the Parson's definition of "the wey . . . / Of thilke parfit glorious pilgrymage," and as a moral poet he then quite properly gave the Parson the last tale. It does not necessarily follow, however, that the sermon and the Retraction and the body of the Tales are of a piece, that the Retraction indicates "a final decision between the opposing claims of those poems affirming the life of natural man untrammeled by morality and those affirming the life of the spirit," or that "the spirit of repentance implicit in the theme of pilgrimage from the very beginning now has its final statement."  

Ruggiers, p. 28.
The *Canterbury Tales* are as disorderly as life. No attempt at a final statement of the poet's intention has as yet been universally accepted, and this discussion does not hope to resolve the irresolvable. But it is evident that Chaucer declares more than one set of values in the tales. The debate among critics as to the intention of the *Franklin's Tale* or the *Knight's Tale* is a not insignificant evidence of this dichotomy in the scheme. It is true that by the Parson's standards, by which adultery "is a fouler thefte than for to breke a chiroche and stele the chalice; for thise avowtiers broken the temple of God spiritually, and stelen the vessel of grace, that is the body and the soule . . . " (X, 878), there might be some question of the excellence of Dorigen and Arveragus in their honoring of her careless promise to Aurelius. Yet it is impossible to accept an interpretation of the tale which calls it an ironic denial of the Franklin's kind of gentilesse. In the world of the poem the first obligation of Dorigen is to her promise, and the world of the poem excludes the kind of condemnation of her action which the Parson, had he been consulted, might have made. Chaucer himself makes no such condemnation. Similarly, the Knight is an admirable character whose tale is not one affirming "the life of the spirit."

The decision mentioned by Ruggiers calls for a third choice. In addition to "those poems affirming the
life of natural man . . . and those affirming the life of the spirit there are those tales affirming neither: the tales affirming the "wey" of gentilesse. In the light of Christian doctrine it is, of course, inadequate; it is man-centered and it asserts the dignity of human beings in their milieu, disregarding without denying the opposition of "original synne" and celestial aspirations in human nature according to Christian dogma. Thus the collection contains gentil tales, holy tales, and churlish tales. Perhaps Chaucer's awareness of the distinction is expressed in the separation of "storial thyng that touch-eth gentilesse" and that which touches "moralitee and holynesse" (I, 3179-3180).

Ruggiers comments that in Chaucer's maturest poetry he displays an "increasing sympathy for and interest in human actions which are mainly secular and profane." This interest is in the Canterbury Tales related to the theme of gentilesse. Where Langland has been able to dismiss the problems of life-on-earth in favor of a concentration on life-after-death, to accept conventional views of human society as interpreted by the Church; and where the Gawain-poet poses no problem of sorting out values—in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight he relies on courtly standards without allowing them to come to cross-purposes with religious ones, and in the Pearl he is concerned solely with religious values—, Chaucer has been unable
to avoid a conflict of interests. This divergence of divine and human demands is a pervasive element of the morality of the *Canterbury Tales*.

And the poet's own sympathy is as strong toward the pilgrims who pursue the "wey" of *gentilesse* as toward those who pursue the "wey" of holiness. The pilgrims held up for laughter or for loathing are those who pursue neither way—the Reve and the Miller, the Friar and the Summoner, who in their excessive *joie de vivre* concern themselves with nothing more significant than their own gratification; the Pardoner and the Merchant, who with their acid cynicism momentarily twist the smile of their creator to bitterness. The churls have the advantage, however, of a commitment to life which saves them in the eyes of their creator. Even their rivalries are based on a responsiveness or an enthusiasm which sets them apart from the Pardoner and the Merchant, who represent negation of everything.

A large segment of the best of the *Canterbury Tales* is, as will be shown, a debate on the source and nature of *gentilesse*. The debate culminates in the Franklin's definition of the concept. The tales are bounded by statements of secular and religious perfection, and within this framework pilgrims who aspire to virtue embrace one or the other ideal. The problem of unity in the work
probably could not have been solved by its creator even
had he finished it, for he can reject neither of the stan-
dards explored in it. The final acceptance of the philo-
sophy of the Parson's Tale requires a harsher judgment of
the Wife of Bath, the Franklin, the Squire, even the Knight,
than Chaucer was willing to make. Theoretically he must
have consistently granted the efficacy of the Parson's
"wey" of life; but in more practical terms he does not
modify the morality of the Franklin. The absence of a
refutation of the standard of gentilesse, despite its
inadequacies, is not a rejection of the austere doctrine
of the Parson. Yet it qualifies the position of Chaucer.
The characters whom he most feelingly portrays frequently
fall short of holyness; but inevitably they embody--
partially, at least--gentilesse.
C. The Prioress' Tale

Unique in her confusion of values is the Prioress, that coyly smiling, mildly swearing representative of the Church, who may be merely another example of corruption among medieval religious orders or who may be a sympathetic figure whose presence among the Canterbury pilgrims helps to offset the condemnatory effect of the descriptions of such members of the clergy as the Friar or the Pardoner. The chief problem in interpreting the character of the Prioress is the ambiguity of Chaucer's attitude toward her. There is surely satire in the portrait; but the critical appraisals of her range from the highest praise to the severest condemnation.

The ambiguity of character is not to be explained by paucity of material. The Prioress' manners, her physical appearance, and her character are set before the reader for examination. The details of the physical description are explained by Sister Mary Madeleva as being no more than should be expected of a Religious of the Benedictine Order.¹ Her hospitality is implied in "hir smylyng ... ful symple and coy"; her mildness in the delicacy of her greatest oath—but then, of course, she should not swear

¹Sister Mary Madeleva, Chaucer's Nun and Other Essays (New York, 1925), pp. 1-28.
at all, as she is informed in due time by the Parson. Her name has been seized upon as an indication of a romantic nature, but it has been replied that she may have chosen "Eglentyne" as well for reasons of piety. She sings the Divine Office "ful weel," she speaks French (but with an English accent), she has excellent table manners, she is amiable, and she takes care to be dignified.

But the Prioress was a gentlewoman bred; and her becoming a nun did not necessitate her discarding her innate gentilesse. She was either first or second in command in her community, depending on whether or not it was large enough to include an Abbess; therefore it is suitable for her to be worthy of reverence, as Chaucer remarks that she "peyned hire" to be. Chaucer as narrator is impressed with her ready sympathy for suffering creatures. This misericordia has been regarded as false on the ground that it is misdirected and applies only to animals, but Chaucer does not limit her sympathy; rather, he states that all "was conscience and tendre herte," and her tale bears out this assertion. Moreover, it seems highly unlikely that Chaucer, who himself shows affection for animals, would use such a detail for a satirical purpose.


Nevertheless, the narrator is perhaps too much impressed with her fastidiousness and her pleasantness; and the unusual and tantalizing beads that she wears imply a love for beautiful things. She swears; she imitates courtly behavior; she goes on pilgrimages; she keeps pets. She is, in short, not as "holy" as she might be. There are, however, no serious offenses counted against her. There is no indication, for example, that she is not as chaste as she might be, no insinuation that she misuses Church funds, no suggestion that she eats too much or fails to perform her duties. She simply seems to be a bit too much infatuated with the world.

The final word on the Prioress is her own. Her tale is of a child martyr. Its Prologue is a model of reverence, a prayer offering her effort to Christ and the Virgin. This is in keeping with her position; she has consecrated her life and all that it produces, and a story told on the road to Canterbury is no exception. But the tale is motivated by pity. She does not abandon her reserve in telling it, for the tone is formal and subdued, but she displays the "tendre herte" for which she has been criticized without letting it run rampant. The dominant quality of the tale is a delicate simplicity epitomized by the stanza picturing the bereaved mother:

This povre wydwe abeiteth al that nyght
After hir litel child, but he cam noght.
(VII, 586-587)
As soon as it is "dayes lyght," the woman begins to search for the child. The traditional daybreak with the brilliance of sunrise and the clamor of birds is missing; here is simply the coming of light, a pallid morning sky to which the widow's face "pale of drede and bisy thoght" is no contrast. The Prioress succeeds in communicating a picture of motherly anxiety that would be spoiled by elaboration. She shares the anxiety of the mother, repeatedly using the words "litel" and "sely" as epithets for the child, thus emphasizing the pathos of the story but without lapsing into sentimentality.

It is a tale of martyrdom—"O martir, sowded to virginitee" (587)—and the Prioress tells it for that reason. But she dwells upon the human grief, even to the tears of the abbot who removes the grain from the slain child's throat (674), rather than the spiritual glory of the physical death.

The human quality of her tale is more clearly defined by contrast to the Second Nun's Tale, the teller of which follows her superior's example in presenting a story of martyrdom. But the Second Nun tends more toward sermonizing than does the Prioress. In her Prologue she warns against idleness; in her tale she sets up an example of what she as a nun regards as an ideal Christian life. There is no evidence of personal sympathy for her series of martyrs: martyrdom is a thing to be taken in stride,
and indeed, her martyrs seem to insist on rather than to accept their executions. She praises virginity as well as martyrdom. According to Legouis, "The impassioned eulogy to virginity preserved even after marriage, the ironical and half hysterical outburst of the saint before a kindly judge, the intemperate virtue and holiness depicted to us—all this becomes, as it were, the expression of a fanatic Nun, and ceases to have an imperative significance outside her. It is less the truthful account of the life of a saint than the truthful revelation, by means of the account, of the feelings and of the atmosphere which reigns in a monastery."

The Second Nun is efficient and relentless and "holy" in the portrayal of total renunciation of temporal things in favor of eternal things. The Prioress is tender and artful. The Legend of Saint Cecilia was probably written too early to have been originally intended for the Canterbury scheme, and it contains little evidence of dramatic intention other than the fact that it was appropriately assigned to a nun. It is a typical saint's legend. But the Prioress' Tale, tenderly written and tenderly ascribed to Chaucer's Mona Lisa, is perfectly suited to the context. The Prioress, with her worldliness and her compassion, with her refinement and her dignity,

5Emile Legouis, Geoffrey Chaucer (New York, 1913), p. 185.
is innately gentil. In telling a tale of martyrdom, in gently reminding the Monk of his responsibilities (643), she attempts to be "hooly." She seems to be a drifter, self-indulgent and affected yet so compassionate as to win Chaucer's affection in spite of the apparent weaknesses of character. Her efforts are toward gentilesse rather than hoolynesse, with the result that she loses a valid claim to either state. Yet like the Wife of Bath, she rides serenely along the road to Canterbury exempt from any but the mildest criticism.

Her vision is perhaps faulty, her will weak, but at least she responds to the need of her companions to be taught and she teaches a virtue which human experience has shown to be valid. That she does no disservice to humanity most clearly distinguishes her from the religious whom Chaucer severely criticizes: the Friar who "acorded nat . . . / To have with sike lazars aqueyntaunce" (I, 245); the Summoner who frightens children and has questionable relationships with "yonge girles of the diocese" (I, 664); or the Pardoner, whose villainy is unsurpassed in Chaucer's poetry. The Prioress' offenses, in short, are minor; to Chaucer her essential kindness matters more than her laxness in following rules. She is not a good nun but she is a gentil woman, and in his affectionate portrayal of her Chaucer ruefully reveals his preference for flexible humanity over rigid austerity.
D. The **Wife of Bath**'s Prologue and Tale

Although Alisoun of Bath is one of the classical creations of English comedy, Salter's view of her as a tragic figure\(^1\) is a true conception which adds depth to the more common view expressed by Gerould, who finds her "quick of tongue and sharp of wit," but having "no other interesting quality of mind except common sense."\(^2\) The existence of pathos underlying a comic façade is not paradox, and Dame Alice is both sad and funny. Her inexhaustible *joie de vivre* is her most appealing quality.

Five marriages have not been too many: "Welcome the sixte" (III, 45), she cries, and she takes great pleasure in her memories:

> Whan that it remembreth me  
> Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee,  
> It tickleth me aboute myn herte roote.  
> (468-470)

She is a volatile being whose energetic monologue and tale inspire in her companions the long and thoughtful response which Kittredge regarded as a debate on marriage.

\(^1\) F. M. Salter, "The Tragic Figure of the Wife of Bath," *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, XLVIII (1954), 1-14.

Almost as soon as it was proposed, however, Kittredge's interpretation was challenged, and it has remained on probation ever since. But with criticism, as with art, there seems to be a direct relationship between intrinsic worth and the ability to endure; and in spite of flaws in the theory, the tales involved have an unmistakable interdependence that endows the interpretation with a ring of truth. The Wife of Bath does indeed initiate a discussion; the real theme, however, is gentilesse. Jefferson, at the suggestion of Root, comments that in the Wife of Bath's Tale, the Clerk's Tale, the Squire's Tale, and the Franklin's Tale, Chaucer was "deliberately considering phases of the question of gentilesse." More recently, Baker has found gentilesse to be a common theme of the Wife and the Clerk; Neville has discussed gentilesse as a link between the tales of the Squire and the Franklin; Albrecht has remarked that "the desirability of gentilesse

3George Lyman Kittredge, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," MP, IX (1912), 435-467.


in love and marriage is a theme linking several tales.\textsuperscript{8} Actually, the theme is pervasive in the \textit{Canterbury Tales}. It is, however, explicit in the discussion precipitated by the Wife of Bath.

The sermon on \textit{gentilesse}, a learned disquisition which the Loathly Lady offers to her bridegroom on their wedding night, has constituted a critical stumbling block. It has been considered inappropriate both to the Wife and to the tale. Even Bowden, in her recent and sound introduction to Chaucer, is guilty of dismissing the sermon as a violation of the principle of narrative unity.\textsuperscript{9} But so to regard it is to accuse Chaucer, at the height of his powers, of ineptness in the use of materials, of a flagrant blunder presumably to be attributed to infatuation with a thesis. The sermon on \textit{gentilesse} is an artistic flaw only if the tale is regarded, as Chaucer did not regard it, as a work meaningful only in itself. Having created Alisoun, he allowed her to characterize herself frankly and to adapt a romance to her own purposes. She is "a noble prechour" and if the sermon seems ill at ease in Arthurian legend, it flows readily from the lips of Dame Alice, whose preoccupation with moral and social issues, no matter how distorted, has been well

\textsuperscript{8}W. P. Albrecht, "The Sermon on Gentilesse," \textit{CE}, XII (1951), 459.

established. The sermon reflects, not an oversight on Chaucer's part, but his delight in constructing tales that fulfill the dramatic promise of the framework. If ineffective, it illustrates merely the poet's liability to misjudgment.

The General Prologue prepares for the Wife's loquaciousness—she can "laughe and carpe" with the best—and for her aggressiveness—she is an excellent cloth-maker and an eager giver of offerings. Her desire for superiority adumbrates the habit which she later displays of demanding that common sense, authority, and her own practice be brought into alignment, even if one has somehow to be adjusted to accomplish the agreement. She has been frequently a wife and more frequently a pilgrim, and she knows "muchel of wandrynge by the weye." Apparently in Alisoun's opinion whatever is worth doing is worth doing well. Her partial deafness is a master stroke, suggesting as it does a loud voice; and the "spores sharpe" complete a picture of a rather forbidding woman who dominates a crowd at church or at a tavern. She regards her marital experiences as the most meaningful element of her life, and with a great amount of self-conscious authority she proclaims a theory of marriage which she militantly and illogically supports with descriptions of her own marriages. Dame Alice requires justification;
and the desire is closely related to the sermon with which she brings about the resolution of the knight's dilemma.

Yielding to her penchant for rectitude, the Wife begins her Prologue with an elaborate self-defense. In Muscatine's words, "she represents practical experience as against received authority, female freedom as against male dominion, and unblushing sensuality as against emotional austerity."¹⁰ She has outlived five husbands; vigorously she defends her marital record, and it is greatly to her credit that what Pursell calls her "argument against virginity"¹¹ is inappropriately described by that phrase. Her purpose is to strengthen her own position, not to attack that of another. If the Prioress has chosen to be a vessel of gold, the Wife of Bath is not one to belittle that choice. Her intention is to prove that she is not to be condemned for her career as wife; if the basis for a condemnation of celibacy lies in her discussion, it neither attracts her attention nor relates to her purpose. She is too good-natured to descend without provocation to innuendo.

Although "men may devyne and glosen, up and doun" (26), Dame Alice knows of no "authoritee" which limits the number of marriages she may morally dominate. "God


bad us for to weye and multiplye." To be sure, there is
the matter of the Samaritan woman at the well. But of
Christ's reproach to the woman Alisoun remarks, "What
that he mente thereby, I kan nat seyn," for nowhere can
she find explicit "differnicoun" of a prescribed number of
husbands.

Eek wel I woot, he seyde myn housbonde
Sholde lete fader and mooder, and take to me.
But of no nombre mencion made he,
Of bigamy, or of octogamy.

(30-33)

Her "female freedom as against male domination" is re-
lected in her forthright employment of masculine examples
to justify herself: Solomon, Abraham, and Jacob had
"wyves mo than two" (57). A woman may be advised "to
been oon," but "conseilyng is no comandement"; the
matter is "in oure owene juggement" and the Wife is not
one to cavil at making "juggements." Perhaps to the
virgin may go the dart—"Cacche whoso may, who renneth
best lat see"—perhaps the golden vessel is greater than
the wooden one, but even the latter may be of service
to the lord in his household (100-101); the advice to
choose the celibate life is directed to "hem that wolde
lyve parfitly"; "And lordynges, by youre leve, that am
nat I," announces Alisoun with candor. She is not perfect
because she does not choose to be; she is nevertheless a
very serviceable vessel of wood, a good wife who considers
the anatomical compatibility of male and female a
feasible argument for marriage. And she intends to undertake a sixth, expressly to "some Cristen man" (48), for can she not prove that she is innocent of moral offense? Moreover he, like the others, shall be both "dettour" and "thral" (155), for

I have the power durynge al my lyf
Upon his propre body, and noght he.
Right thus the Apostel tolde it unto me.  
(158-160)

Thus the Wife of Bath challenges, frankly, and surely not innocently, the nine and twenty pilgrims. Perhaps the "love of adventure" which Gerould finds in her\textsuperscript{12} prompts her to a direct attack against established attitudes. She has supported her own judgment as a guide for conduct, has boldly announced her pleasure in sex, has demonstrated a relentlessly argumentative turn of mind and employed an unusual amount of learning, and has declared her intention not only of wedding but of dominating a sixth husband. Her hearers include a number of religious, among whom are two nuns, and a number of laymen with some claim to learning (consider, for example, the physician and his classical tale of martyred virginity) upon whose distinguished masculine toes she has frankly stepped. She has thus engaged the attention of many of her companions by effrontery. In due time the Clerk and the Franklin deal with her; the Squire and the

\textsuperscript{12}Gerould, p. 78.
Merchant are also drawn into the discussion. More immediate evidence of an alert audience is the Pardoner's interruption; Alisoun's delivery draws a tribute from one whose own preaching is as hypocritical as hers is honest, as smoothly orthodox as hers is flagrantly unorthodox. The good-humored exchange between the Wife and the Friar at the end of her Prologue reminds us again of the dramatic situation. Both interruptions remind us of the length of the Prologue--Alisoun silences the Pardoner with "my tale is nat bigonne" (169)--as well as of the attentiveness of an audience which is willing to demand an end to any tale which bores it.

Provoking but not boring, Dame Alice resumes her "noble" sermon after the first interruption with an account of her technique in achieving dominance over her husbands. The contradictions in the Prologue are patent; three of her husbands were good, rich, and old, and two were bad, yet the favorite, Jankin, belongs to the latter group. "Good," however, simply means docile, and despite the sovereignty thesis, the manageable husbands did not figure in happy marriages. They were susceptible to the manipulations of a young and energetic wife who, now past forty, delights in recalling the ease with which she subdued them so thoroughly.

That ech of hem ful blisful was and fawe
To brynge me gaye thynges fro the fayre,
(220-221)
eager to please the woman who "chidde hem spitously" (223). Basic to her procedure was flattery: the good husbands were very old, yet the young wife, besides feigning an unfelt appetite (417), shrewishly accuses them of unfaithfulness—

What dostow at my neighebores hous?  
Is she so fair? Artow so amorous?  
(239-240)

—and completes her conquest by an appeal to their masculinity:

And sith a man is moore resonable  
Than womman is, ye moste been suffrable.  
(441-442)

Remembrance of her tactics, which "tikled /The/7 herte" of each of her good husbands "for that he / Wende that I hadde of him so greet chiertee" (395-396) haunts her during the marriage with Jankin, for as Pursell notes, "She is heartsick at the thought that Jankyn could be feigning his appetite for her, and then scholding her for revenge."13 In her first marriages she worked a common sense compromise with the result that all between her and the husbands was "quit" (425); if she sacrificed to them much of her youth, 14 and if she submitted to

13 Pursell, p. 15.

14 Salter, p. 11, cogently suggests that "since the Wyf first married at the age of twelve, we may be sure that her own wishes were not then consulted." Since her age between twelve and forty is not mentioned, the following generalization from the same page is less convincing: "Indeed, none of these three old dotards could have married her at her own choice."
love-making distasteful to her, she was mistress of the relationship and received the money and property of each husband. From her point of view, there is an inescapable fairness about the exchange.

The fourth husband provides "a problem in every respect."\(^\text{15}\) Still young when the marriage took place, Allsoun gave him the rest of her youth in an impractical and unprofitable bargain, for she was forty when he died and the marriage left her with nothing she can use even in support of a thesis. "He hadde a paramour," she comments, but changes the subject to her own "ragerye" and sounds a note of pathos in her innocent drift to an attack against "Metellius, the foule cherl, the swyn" (460) who beat his wife for drinking wine. Not even he could have prevented Allsoun's drinking. As antidote to a husband's unfaithfulness, however, wine was a failure; "after wyn on Venus moste I thynke." The pathos is intensified by her quick rally--sentimental regrets are impractical--after she admits that of the flower of her youth only "bren" remains:

\[\text{But yet to be right myrie wol I fonde;}\]
\[\text{Now wol I tellen of my fourthe housbonde.}\]
\[\text{(479-480)}\]

Her only achievement with him was to make his life a "purgatorie," and she passes rapidly over the story.

At forty Dame Alice was again widowed and again wed. Circumstances and resourcefulness have taught her to deal

\(^{15}\text{Pursell, p. 7.}\)
with old and rich husbands and pride has necessitated vengefulness with a fourth; the Wife is an accomplished shrew, unequipped for a happy marriage. It remains for Jankin to restore her to youth and beauty.

Jankin's methods are much like her own.

I trowe I loved hym, for that he
   Was of his love daungerous to me,
   (515-516)

she confesses, and we recall the ease with which she overwhelmed the good husbands diminished the worth of the victory (209-214). It seems that the fourth husband's death was an unexpected boon; her first acquaintance with Jankin was as a woman with a husband; marriage to the Clerk was out of the question. She therefore employed a different approach with him, assuming the role of a wretched lover. Although "al was fals" (582), she reported to him dreams of the suffering which she endured because he had "enchanted" her (575). Before the death of the fourth husband, she declares,

I spak to hym and seyde hym how that he,
   If I were wydwe, sholde wedde me.
   (567-568)

When the marriage becomes fact, the Wife finds that the blunder of having declared her love so unreservedly renders her customary handling of marriage ineffectual, her experience useless; and she is firmly born in hand by the young Jankin.
The resolving of the last marital dilemma is the high point of the long narrative. What Allsoun really wants is, as Pursell says, love. Probably for the first time married to a man whom she loves, like a naughty child or an insecure woman she tests his love for her by misbehaving. The fourth husband lacked the concern, the first three the spirit, to curb her flagrant actions and sharp tongue. Although in Jankin she finds a man of spirit equal to, and therefore worthy of, hers, the marriage is unsatisfactory unless he loves her. A poignant uncertainty underlies the façade of easy self-confidence expressed in such lines as

I was a lusty oon,
And faire, and riche, and yong, and wel bigon.

(605-606)

Stubborn, sharp-tongued, independent, after her fifth marriage she continues to visit as she has done before in spite of the restrictions placed upon her by the new husband. But as a "noble prechour" Jankin is Alisoun's match; as she harangued her first husbands, he harangues her, but his matter is antifeminist literature. The fourth husband's paramour was relegated to the background, the Wife's revenge emphasized, for salvation of her pride required that a very real injury be passed over as quickly as possible; nothing in the behavior of the "revelour"

16Pursell, p. 4.
had value to her. But she lingers over descriptions of Jankin and marvels over his persistence in telling her tale after tale of men brought to ruin by women.

Alisoun's endurance breaks, and her first words upon her regaining consciousness after the resultant battle are "O! hastow slayn me, false theef? . . . . And for my land thus hastow mordred me?" Pursell finds here a suggestion of the Wife's fear that as her old and rich husbands were to her, so is she to Jankin. But by this time that fear is without basis, for she knows that she has provoked him to the blow, and moreover, that both of them have cared enough about the relationship between them to push it to violence and force the resolution of the conflicts. Only now can she safely put into words the ideas which can no longer threaten her. Jankin has remained a vague figure during the courtship and Alisoun has been the aggressor; after the wedding he has attempted to establish a conventional marriage. He seems rather a bloodless character—perhaps he is merely sly—until his rage is aroused, quickly to be extinguished by repentance and tenderness, all for Alisoun.

The reconciliation is shadowy. Jankin's remorse is genuine, for he promises never to strike her again and burns the offending book; but although he yields to her

17Pursell, p. 15.
"governance," he charges her with the responsibility of keeping her "honour" and his "estaat" (831), a safe enough behest since the Wife, assured of Jankin's love, has undergone a transformation:

After that day we hadden never debaat.
God helpe me so, I was to hym as kynde
As any wyf from Denmark unto Ynde,
And also trewe, and so was he to me.

(823-826)

Sovereignty has been her proclaimed desire, but the source of her happiness is not sovereignty. She had that in her first three marriages. Loved enough, she has no need to be a shrew. But she misunderstands herself, and plans to make of the sixth husband a debtor and thrall. In spite of her common sense and practicality, Dame Alice has a way of missing the points that she makes as well as of choosing wrong husbands.

But she believes that she has shown the efficacy of her methods and the worthiness of her goal. Having completed the sermon, she re-inforces the thesis with an exemplum, appealing to legend to support it. Again the story ends with a woman in control; but again the truth has been somewhat distorted by Alisoun's choice of the wrong material to support an argument. Where she expounds on her desire for sovereignty but actually demonstrates her need for love, the Hag irrelevantly lectures her unwilling mate about her gentilesse in answer to his complaint about her ugliness.
The voice is still unmistakably that of Alice of Bath; exquisitely appropriate to her are the innuendo against Friars in the opening lines, the efficient rapidity of the narrative played against her willingness to follow an interesting thought ("Witnesse on Myda—wol ye heere the tale?" 95), a "certain flatness of delivery" in the sermon on poverty, and the whole burden of the narrative. The tale is that of a knight whose life was saved and made worth living by women. "By verray force" having gratified his appetite, "by cours of lawe, sholde han lost his heed." But women assume command ("the queene and othere ladyes mo"), and the knight is born in hand. Some time after their intervention on his behalf the knight is presented with the task which he must perform to save his life; he must tell the queen what women most desire. With noticeable lack of knightly readiness to meet a challenge, the knight "siketh" and "at the laste" chooses to accept her terms because "he may nat do al as hym liketh." The quest is a puzzling one, for no two women seem to agree on the thing they most desire. Dame Alice, with characteristic eagerness to air her views comments on the merits of some of the suggestions and abandons her narrative entirely to tell the story of Midas with its peculiar departure from Ovid. The substitution of Midas' wife for his barber in the digression does not

18Ruggiers, p. 213.
necessarily show, as Roppolo suggests, the Wife's willingness to "alter details of a story to achieve her own ends," although the point is well taken; it perhaps reminds us that the Wife owes to her fifth husband much of her education, and he might have seen fit to alter a myth to suit his purposes. One of Alisoun's wifely traits has been the indiscretion which has allowed her to tell her "gossib" things that made her husband blush (531-542). Her defense is a comment on the theory that women desire to be trusted: "that tale is nat worth a rake-stele" (949).

Strangely at odds with the desire for feminine sovereignty is the strong suggestion that men should not trust women.

The knowledge which the young knight seeks is supplied at last when he draws "ful yerne" toward a group of twenty-four dancing ladies. They vanish and the only living creature left in the place is a Loathly Lady, youth and beauty having been replaced by age and wisdom which, the Wife of Bath is in a position to believe, can serve the knight better for his present need. The blind promise made by the knight at this point has decided affinities with the promise to be made later by Dorigen, and here, as in the Franklin's Tale, the matter of gentilesse is to figure prominently. The knight finds himself rapidly re-

leased from danger of his life and put to bed with the agent of his salvation. A natural complainer, he tosses and turns wretchedly, ignoring the bride who lies "smylynge evermo" beside him. She ventures, for his consolation, to preach a sermon which advocates the use of common sense, an appeal characteristic of Alice. The comedy of the Hag’s patient argument that her miserable bridegroom ought to love her has not been sufficiently appreciated. The young "bacheler" is "lusty" enough to have committed rape and, having done so, appealing enough to have won the favor of a court of women; and here he lies with a wife not only ugly and old but even low-born who, instead of leaving him to his grief, is reproaching him for it in most irrelevant terms. He has not by any means complained or accused her of any lack of true nobility; her social rank is the only gentilesse that matters to him. If one accepts Huppé’s opinion that the victim of the rape was a peasant who under the rules of courtly love needed not be accorded the courtesy required in relationships with gentlewomen, certainly the knight cares little for true gentilesse. And in any case he cares a good deal for beauty: "Taak al my good, and lat my body go," he cried

Bernard F. Huppé, "Rape and Woman’s Sovereignty in the Wife of Bath’s Tale," MLN, LXIII (1948), 378-381.
in horror when the hag reminded him of his promise and demanded its fulfillment in marriage.

Ruggiers remarks of the wedding night scene that "one by one, the hag examines the charges lodged against her." That is precisely what she does not do. She launches into a sermon on virtue; she ignores the real charges made against her until the end of the sermon, when she offers lean comfort: an old and ugly wife is a faithful wife. Faithfulness loses its value when the wife is not the object of anybody's desires, including those of the husband. Moreover, the Loathly Lady mars her defense of her virtue in the implication that her faithfulness will stem from "filthe and eelde"—in other words, necessity.

The knight, still melancholy, sighs and yields control of the entire situation to his wife. He may have a true, old and ugly wife who is necessarily faithful or a young wife with whom he must take his chances. Gentilesse has been lost from view. Never an intellectual, the knight supposes that the hag, who has had full command to this point, may as well continue in charge, and the reward of the decision is great.

In attempting to impose a logical alliance on the elements of the story, Ropollo analyzes the character of the knight and shows that he, too, undergoes a trans-

\(^{21}\)Ruggiers, p. 212.
formation; since he raped a maiden he does not deserve happiness until he has been changed, through comprehension of the sermon, to something finer. But evidence for the transformation is slight. The subdued and respectful response to the sermon, as well as the sighs, can be as readily attributed to resignation bordering on despair as to new moral vision; the yielding of sovereignty is inevitable, and the knight makes a positive response only when the beautiful young wife appears.

Roppolo remarks that "perhaps the change / From loathliness to beauty/ occurs only in the mind of the Knight." He does not insist, nor is it possible to find justification for the idea in the tale; for the Wife is very specific about the transformation. The sermon does not serve such a purpose, for the two women do not comprehend it. If the "old lady," if one may strip her of her identity as fairy for a moment and apply human standards—a process justified by her claim of gentilesse—were endowed with true nobility, she might exercise some mercy. The knight, however unworthy, is young; the hag, however worthy, is old, and "a fouler wight ther may no man devise." His wife and his love she nevertheless insists upon being. "At no point . . . does he show resignation or courtesy or even the sportsmanship of a good loser.

\[22\] Roppolo, passim.

\[23\] Ibid., p. 268.
His reaction to the Hag before the wedding, when she asserts that all she desires is to be his wife and his love, is violent and cruel." There is no discernible irony in Roppolo's discussion, but the phrase "all she desires" is a bit askew. What worst request could she make? She has, it is true, saved the knight's life; but until the moment of her transformation and the recognition that the whole matter has been the knight's punishment, she has by no means displayed gentilesse or even mentioned it until it occurs to her that it may be a good argument against her husband's coldness. To imagine the story ending without her transformation is to recognize the degree to which she lacks true nobility; even if the knight undergoes a spiritual transformation, a thesis open to question, her physical transformation is essential.

The hag is within limits a projection of Alice. The marriage between Jankin and the Wife was dependent on unforeseen circumstances; so is the wedding of the knight and the hag. The hag is old and ugly; when she married Jankin, Alice was forty and sensitive to the passage of time. The hag has magic, which gives her power; Alice has money. Both are subject to strong sexual drives. Both defend themselves with lengthy argument, and they

24 Roppolo, p. 267.
25 Corsa, p. 144.
have the same habits of mind, employing common sense in the dogged pursuit of a thesis, triumphantly riddling the bulls'-eyes of wrong targets. Alice of Bath neglects to discuss love, the real issue in the marriage with Jankin; the hag reasons with her husband without answering the accusations he has made. But finally both are transformed and deserve the love of their husbands, Alice by love, the hag by magic. The Wife of Bath thinks they both have proved her thesis.

Ruggiers explains that at the end of the Wife's tale, she has reached a view of marital bliss, which, if we may judge from the hag's sermon, is founded upon spiritual values. The latent materialism of the Wife of Bath, her this-for-that attitude, has yielded another bargain and this one the best she can imagine. The gentilesse of which she speaks, by its very nature, excludes mastery; the marital contract which it produces is both sane and felicitous, and if we cannot imagine the Wife as having attained the level of morality reached by the sermon of the old lady, we are forced at least to see it as a wistful hope of which she is capable, and this more than any other factor has redeemed her for posterity. 26

A "wistful hope" it remains, however, and not a very firm vision, for the Wife in practice and in narration fails to realize gentilesse. Her desire for justification is in itself potentially admirable, but the Wife is more prone to tailor principles to fit—or almost fit—her own conduct and theories than to alter herself. Recalling 26

Chaucer's respect for "pitee," his insistence that gentilesse and compassion are related, one notes a startling absence of both quality and word in the Wife of Bath's monologue and tale, even though there is the perfect occasion for pity to run in a gentle heart when the queen intervenes on behalf of the knight. In the Wife's own experience, she has employed every tactic but pity with her husbands (although she has never been cruel, except, perhaps, with the fourth husband, who had the immunity of not loving her). Her blithe dismissal of steadfastness (945-982) is a rejection of another of Chaucer's cardinal virtues; less to the point is the knight's reluctance to honor his promise, since no one claims gentilesse for him.

Nor does anyone claim that Alisoun of Bath is gentil. But her failing is not the inability to live an ideal which she perceives, for which she nourishes a "wistful hope"; it is the inability to perceive "the level of morality reached by the sermon of the old lady."

The story is part of the assertion of a personality and the beginning of an argument. And the gentilesse question is central to the debate.
E. The Clerk's Tale

It is not difficult to imagine the Clerk "cudgel[ing] his brains" during the squabble between the Friar and the Summoner, trying, as Bowden says, to think of a story which will "show Alisoun the right path,"\(^1\) although one might be hesitant to agree with her that the Clerk is innocent of satiric intent. The story which the Clerk tells, in complying "benignely" with the Host's request, has been told him by "Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete" (31). That the tale has come from Boccaccio's Italian through Petrarch's Latin to Chaucer's English without substantial alteration argues less Chaucer's failure to adapt a story to his purposes than his perception of the tale of Griselda as the perfect reply for the Clerk of Oxenford to make to the Wife of Bath. A few pointed insertions make the dramatic intention unmistakable. "For trusteth wel, it is an impossible," Dame Alys has announced, "That any clerk wol speke good of wyves" (688-689), and she has repeated some lines later: "Therefore no womman of no clerk is preyse." Certainly her fellow traveler remembers this accusation when he comments,

\(^1\)Bowden, p. 129.
Though clerkes preise wommen but a lite,  
Ther kan no man in humblesse hym acquite  
As womman kan, ne kan been half so trewe  
As wommen been, but it be falle of newe.  
(935-938)

The legend of Griselda is, according to Muscatine, "truly the tale of Chaucer's Clerk; sharing his threadbare leanness, it despises ordinary riches for the rarer, more educated pleasure of philosophical morality."² Ruggiers observes that it is characterized by a "purified style, virtually devoid of images, a tone of austerity, and an interior burden of moral suggestion."³

The tale is an account of a woman subjected to anguish and indignities to satisfy her husband's skepticism regarding her suitability to be his wife. Walter, Lord of Saluces and "gentilleste yborn of Lumbardye" (72), lives and rules in a perfectly satisfactory manner until he learns of his subjects' desire that he marry. After exacting from them a promise that they will not "grucche ne stryve" (170) against his choice, he selects as his wife the daughter of the poorest man in a nearby village. He obtains her promise to submit entirely to his will and under no circumstances to disagree with him either by word or by "frownyng contenance" (357). The wedding is celebrated and Griselda proves to be a peerless lady, loved

²Muscatine, Chaucer and the French Tradition, p. 191.
³Ruggiers, p. 219.
of her subordinates, in no way betraying the trust which Walter has placed in her divinely bestowed gentilesse. Prompted, however, by a desire to test her, Walter deprives her of her daughter and her son, letting her believe that they have been murdered, and finally of her position as his wife. Griselda remains steadfast, "disposed . . . / The adversitee of Fortune al t'endure" (755-756), honoring her promise to Walter even to lavishing high praise on the young woman whom he introduces as her successor. Convinced of his wife's incorruptibility, Walter announces, belatedly to many tastes, "This is ynogh, Griselde myn" (1051) and explains that now he has adequately proved her faithfulness. The young woman is not Walter's new bride, but their daughter, now twelve years old; the boy with her is their son. Griselda is still Walter's "dere wyf." Such is the tale which the Clerk concludes as pointedly as if he had used the words, "Thus have I quyt the Wyf in my tale."

But although the tale is the second one in the "marriage Group," as Muscatine remarks, "very little is said of marriage per se" in it. The Clerk is not foolish enough to offer this story in rebuttal of Alice's argument for feminine sovereignty in marriage.

For which heere, for the Wyves love of Bathe--

4Muscatine, p. 194.
Whose lyf and al hire secte God mayntene
In heigh maistrie, and elles were it scathe——

(1170-1172)

- chants the Clerk. But if the subject of his tale has been marriage, he has given Alisoun the victory. Nothing in her tales of "maistrie"—her own or the Hag's—has been comparable in cruelty to the sovereignty of Walter. It is not within the province of this discussion to examine the motives of Walter's actions; but he is scarcely an ideal mate. Perhaps the most satisfactory resolution of the problem is the one advanced by Kittredge, which applies as well as to his wife:

Whether Griselda could have put an end to her woes, or ought to have put an end to them, by refusing to obey her husband's commands is parum ad rem. We are to look at her trials as inevitable, and to pity her accordingly, and wonder at her endurance. If we refuse to accept the tale in this spirit, we are ourselves the losers. We miss the pathos because we are aridly intent on discussing an ethical question that has no status in this particular court, however pertinent it may be in the general forum of morals.  

The ethical question that does have "status in this particular court" is a positive, not a negative, consideration of Griselda's conduct. Her virtue is not peculiarly that of a wife, and it is not the Clerk's intention to apply her story to an argument about the conduct of a wife more than that of another woman. To consider the tale as a comment on marriage leads inevitably to a recognition that  

5Kittredge, pp. 436-437.
here is a marriage dominated by a husband—and that the results are not particularly felicitous. Such an apparent inappropriateness prompts Bowden to suggest, concerning the Clerk's moral application of his tale, that "actuality has overcome him and he is obliged to remember Petrarch and to turn the Tale, which he has modestly hoped would show Alisoun the error of her theory, into an allegory as best he can." The stanza in question is this:

This storie is seyd, nat for that wyves sholde
Folwen Grisilde as in humylitee,
For it were inportable, though they wolde;
But for that every wight, in his degree,
Sholde be constant in adversitee
As was Grisilde; therfore Petrak writeth
This storie, which with heigh stile he enditeth.

(1142-1148)

The admission that as a model for wives Griselda's conduct is "inportable" comes directly from Petrarch, however, and certainly Chaucer did not allow his idealized Clerk to fumble into inanity. Nor did he allow him, as Ruggiers believes he did, to demonstrate "something on the literal level which is completely opposed to the view of the lively Alice, and as impractical for successful marriage." If such were the case, then Corsa's view would be more than justified: "as the Clerk's cynicism becomes more evident, so her zest becomes greater. In the

6Bowden, p. 129.
7Ruggiers, p. 223.
contest of attitudes the Clerk may not lose, but neither
does he win.\textsuperscript{8}

It is true that the Clerk has an ascetic bent—even his horse is a bit disdainful of the pleasures of the flesh. The General Prologue informs us that the Clerk prefers books to other riches and that he prays diligently for those who provide the wherewithal for his pursuits of knowledge. He is shy, a fact of which we are reminded by Harry Bailley; he is formal and respectful; he is learned; and he delights in teaching. But he is hardly austere enough to regard Griselda's as a model marriage, and he is far too reasonable to submit her story as an argument against feminine sovereignty.

Heninger finds the Clerk's emphasis on the necessity of honoring the social order pertinent to the quarrel with the Wife.\textsuperscript{9} Certainly there is validity in this view, which is related to Huppe's conception of Griselda as a constant figure set against the changeable people; her faith accounts for her constancy.\textsuperscript{10} It is essential to look beyond the marriage theme to find any rational connection between the Clerk's Tale and the Wife of Bath's Tale. A valid answer to Alice's argument for feminine governance

\textsuperscript{8}Corsa, p. 155.

\textsuperscript{9}S. K. Heninger, "The Concept of Order in Chaucer's Clerk's Tale," JEGP, LVI (1957).

\textsuperscript{10}Bernard F. Huppe, A Reading of the Canterbury Tales (Baltimore, 1964), p. 145.
might present a marriage made unhappy by a woman's dominance, or a marriage made happy by a man's dominance. Griselda is a perfect wife; the marriage is at the end to be a happy one; but Walter is a decidedly flawed husband whose sovereignty is not a source of great bliss. Boccaccio denounces him, and Petrarch and Chaucer, while subordinating the human element in him in an attempt to see Griselda's trials as inevitable, have some difficulty in restraining themselves (e.g. C1T 785). If the story is interpreted anagogically, as it is by Ruggiers, Walter's role is a suggestion of the inscrutable ways of God; on this level he functions well. But since it is awkward to read Griselda literally as wife while considering Walter allegorically as God, the story is incoherent as a marriage story.

Chaucer's Clerk is using the tale as a means of instructing Alice about gentilesse. To do so he chooses as heroine a woman who is "the model of wifely obedience and womanly virtue . . . in every way what Alisoun is not." Had Corsa paid more attention to her own phrase "in every way," she might have avoided the fallacies involved in treating the story as a marriage tale. Griselda is a wife because she is married in the source; and that she is married is appropriate, for after the Wife's lengthy defense of the values of marriage, the Clerk would have

11 Corsa, p. 151.
risked being misunderstood if he had told of the saintliness of a virgin.

Elizabeth Salter notices that the word *gentil*, like the word *riche*, works, "in various grammatical forms, over the whole length of the poem." It appears first in the description of Walter (72) and is applied to him in the people's request that he marry (96). Its last application is likewise to Walter, this time on the lips of Griselda when she takes leave of him:

O goode God! how gentil and how kynde
Ye semed by youre speche and youre visage
The day that maked wasoure mariagel
(852-854)

The Clerk is very much concerned with a dramatization of true nobility and he has undoubtedly been interested in and amused by the Wife's assertions, particularly by the discrepancy between the ethereal philosophy and the earthy life. Thus he makes a point of emphasizing the respects in which Griselda differs from Alisoun. To do so requires no wrenching of material, for as was observed earlier, the tale of "Petrak" is perfectly suited to the Clerk's needs.

In appealing to the gentilesse of Walter to persuade him to marry, the spokesman of his subjects pleads,

Boweth youre nekke under that blisful yok
Of soveraynetee, noght of servyse,
Which that men clepe spousaille or wedlok.
(113-115)

The idea exists in Chaucer's source; but one wonders whether the word chosen for the translation, Alisoun's own *soveraynetee*, is not spoken with a bland glance in her direction. The people request that Walter choose a wife:

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Born of the gentilleste and of the meeste
Of al this land, so that it oghte seme
Honour to God and yow, as we kan deeme.
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But Walter's design is to test a theory. The Wife of Bath's theory is in accord with his; but where the Wife has merely verbalized it, the Clerk is to show the quality in action:

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For God it woot, that children ofte been
Unlyk hir worthy eldres hem befure;
Bountee comth al of God, nat of the streen
Of which they been engendred and ybore.
I trust in Goddes bountee, and therfore
My mariagge and myn estaat and reste
I hym bitake; he may doon as hym leste.
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To choose his wife, Walter goes, not merely to a poor lodging, but to the lodging of the man "which that was holden povrest of hem alle" (207). The true *gentilesse* motif remains prominent:

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But hye God somtyme senden kan
His grace into a litel oxes stalle.
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With this allusion to the nativity, the Clerk moves to a description of Janicula's daughter, who is "fayr ynogh to sighte,"

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But for to speke of vertuous beautee,
Thanne was she oon the faireste under sonne;
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For povreliche yfostred up was she,
No likerous lust was thurgh hire herte yronne.
Wel ofter of the welle than of the tonne
She drank, and for she wolde vertu plese,
She knew wel labour, but noon ydel ese.

But thogh this mayde tendre were of age,
Yet in the brest of hire virginitee
Ther was enclosed rype and sad corage;
And in greet reverence and charitee
Hir olde povre fader fostred shee.
A fewe sheep, spynnynge, on feeld she kepte;
She wolde noght been ydel til she slepte.

And whan she homward cam, she wolde brynge
Wortes or othere herbes tymes ofte,
The whiche she shredde and seeth for hir lyvynge,
And made hir bed ful hard and nothyng softe;
And ay she kepte hir fadres lyf on-lofte
With everich obeisaunce and diligence
That child may doon to fadres reverence.

Upon Grisilde, this povre creature,
Ful ofte sithe this markys sette his ye
As he on huntyng rood. . . .
(212-235)

Like the Wife's tale, the Clerk's gets under way with a nobleman attracted by a peasant girl while he is passing by on a pleasure trip. But it is "hir vertu, passing any wight / Of so yong age" (240-241) which Walter notices—the gentilesse about which Allsoun attempts to teach her young hero. It is significant that, as Baker observes, the Clerk pictures Griselda "not as a character of patience per se, but as an example of natural gentilesse. Her obedience, reverence, modesty, moral virtue and affability are described in detail."¹³ The pointedness of the contrasts between Alisoun and Griselda is evident. As Corsa

¹³Baker, p. 635.
remarks, lines 215-217 have "little relevance for the description of [The Clerk's] heroine but a great deal for the Wife of Bath," and these lines are Chaucer's own addition to the story (see Robinson, Notes, p. 711). Twice the Clerk insists that Griselda was never "ydel"; and we recall Alisoun at a tender age spending her days in tirades against her hapless old husbands and in visiting with her "gossibs." The quiet simplicity of Griselda's life is in direct contrast to the noisy activity of Alisoun's. The proposal of marriage by Walter demands Griselda's submission; she makes the promise willingly and honors it unwaveringly throughout twelve years of the severest trials. She brings about a transformation in Walter by the practice of gentilesse; the hag's sermon on the subject accomplishes nothing, and magic accomplishes her transformation.

Marriage provides Griselda with opportunities to demonstrate the efficacy of true gentilesse. Her life with Walter is for a time idyllic:

Thus Walter lowely—nay, but roially—Wedded with fortunat honestete, In Goddes pees lyveth ful esily At hoom, and outward grace ynogh had he; And for he saugh that under low degree Was ofte vertu hid, the peple hym heelde A prudent man, and that is seyn ful seelde. (421-427)

And Griselda as "markysesse" wins the love of their subjects:

14 Corsa, p. 152.
Nat oonly this Grisildis thurgh hir wit
Koude al the feet of wyfly hoomlinesse,
But eek, whan that the cas required it,
The commune profit koude she redresse.
Ther nas discord, rancour, ne hevynesse
In al that land, that she ne koude apese,
And wisely brynge hem alle in reste and ese.
(428-434)

But Griselda’s virtue is not to go untried. It
has been observed that Chaucer’s version of the tale human­
izes Griselda without minimizing her perfect adherence to
the promise she has made to her husband. When she is de­
prived of her daughter she sits meek and still as a
lamb (538), neither weeping nor sighing, “Conformynge
hire to that the markys lyked” (546). She bids the child
a restrained farewell; Walter sends it to be reared "in alle
gentilesse" (593), a fact in which Baker finds evidence
of his distrust of his own theory. He is not sure that
Griselda, of low birth, is capable of rearing the child
of a "markys" as it should be reared.15

Griselda rises to a moral pinnacle when she re­
plies to Walter’s broaching the subject of a like disposal
of her son:

“For as I lefte at hoom al my clothyng,
Whan I first cam to yow, right so,” quod she,
"Lefte I my wyl and al my libertee,
And took youre clothyng; wherfore I yow preye,
Dooth youre plesaunce, I wol youre lust obeye.

“And certes, if I hadde prescience
Youre wyl to knowe, er ye youre lust me tolde,
I wolde it doon withouten negligence;
But now I woot youre lust, and what ye wolde,

15Baker, p. 636.
Al youre plesance ferme and stable I holde;  
For wiste I that my deeth wolde do yow ese,  
Right gladly wolde I dyen, yow to plese." (652-663)

The third trial is Walter's dismissal of his wife. He "may nat doon as every plowman may," he explains, with a facile disregard for his own theory of a true nobility which transcends social distinctions; the people are dissatisfied that Janicula's grandchildren will reign after Walter unless he takes another wife. Wishing him happiness, denying that she will ever "in word or werk . . . repente" (860) of having given herself to him, Griselda requires only that she may have a "smok" to cover "thilke wombe in which youre children leye" (877) as she traverses the ground between the palace and the hut of Janicula, where her old clothing awaits her because the simple Janicula has been "evere in suspect of hir mariage" (907). Griselda resumes the life of many years ago, "ful of pacient benygnytee," until, not yet satisfied that her constancy is unshakeable, Walter devises the fourth test. Again, Griselda is cheerful and eager; still plainly dressed, "the mooste servysable of alle" (979), she works with the servants to prepare the household for the wedding.

Her conduct when she meets her successor is apparently the determining factor. She praises the girl's beauty and wishes her happiness. With unsurpassable generosity
she admonishes Walter not to try this wife as he "han
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.
(1040-1043)

The voice of Griselda speaks with "no malice at al"
(1045), and Walter is convinced. Griselda's gentilesse
is rewarded.

The Clerk explains that his purpose is not to en­
courage wives to imitate Griselda, but to encourage people
to be constant in adversity (1156). If a woman could be
"so pacient / Unto a mortal man" (1149-50), then well
might the rest of mankind endure the hardships concomitant
with existence (including, perhaps, marriage to rich old
men). His ironic envoy addresses Dame Alice directly.
It is hard to find "in al a toun Grisildis thre or two"
(1165); it were pity if all the "secte" of the Wife of
Bath did not remain in "heigh maistrle," declares the
Clerk, dismissing "ernestful materere." It would be tactless
for the Clerk to make explicit what he has taught in his
tale. He is not, after all, the "persoun of a toun" with
license to reprimand the Wife for her conduct—that remains
for the last story-teller. He has simply given her and
the rest of the company an example of true gentilesse,
perfect and active. Both Chaucer and his Clerk like the
Wife too well to push the criticism further. The Wife
has, however, in her defense of multiple marriages, her challenge of the existing order in advocating feminine sovereignty, her brandishing of "rags and tatters of erudition," and her direct assault upon Clerks generally,\(^{16}\) thrown down the gauntlet. Calmly the Clerk has undertaken to show what she meant by *gentilesse*, taking her off guard by ignoring, except in his sly "clerkes preise wommen but a lite" (935), the more flagrant challenges. There is nothing of the Wife's marriage thesis, except in Griselda's promise to live, after separation from Walter, "a wydwe clene in body, herte, and al" (836), no attack against her display of learning. At the end he simply changes the subject in order to draw attention to her and disposes of her sovereignty argument in satire. If the Summoner seeks vengeance upon Friars for an insult to his profession, so may a Clerk seek a subtler and more responsible vengeance upon a wife for an insult to his calling. It fits the dignity of both Clerk and Alice that the matter has been handled deftly but decisively, lightly but meaningfully, in contrast to the bawdy vendetta that, if Robinson's order of the Tales is correct, immediately precedes the Clerk's Tale.

\(^{16}\) Kittredge, p.133.
F. The Merchant's Tale

"It is possible to conjecture that had there been no Wife of Bath and no proposal about marriage to stir the Merchant into something approaching self-revelation, he would have spoken 'ful solemnly, / Sownynge alwey th' encrees of his wynnyng,'" Corsa writes. The task of the Chaucer student would have been simplified, but the reward diminished, if this "worthy man" had chosen not to enter the debate among the pilgrims. His tale is probably the most puzzling of all the Canterbury Tales; it is brutal and obscene, yet its craftsmanship so excellent that Tatlock observes, "One might feel half-ashamed of so greatly enjoying so merciless a tale, and might balk at prolonged analysis, if this did not end . . . in cheerfully detaching us from the prevailing mood." Recent criticism has attempted to explain the story's bitterness by depriving it of its claim to a bona fide place in the context. Bronson, feeling that there is no pilgrim to whom the tale of January is especially suited, decides that the real speaker is Chaucer and the originally

1 Corsa, p. 166.

intended audience a courtly one, but he then states that when the tale was attributed to the Merchant, his "misogyny impregnated the whole piece with a mordant venom, inflaming what originally had been created for the sake of mirth." Robert Jordan, agreeing that the tale fits nobody, identifies the speaker in the problematic encomium on marriage as "the familiar Chaucerian innocent" unsuccessfully attempting to praise marriage in a passage of "high comedy, not savagery," and suggests that the purely narrative section of the tale is spoken by another voice. The tale is, he declares, "un-unified" and "bristling with discordant elements," its humor is "subtle and ironic, ... exuberant and coarse," and there is no character behind it. Elliott, however, believing that the Merchant, because of an "intense personal involvement in his subject," is stimulated "to add the bitter fruits of his own experience to the discussion of marriage," finds the tale and its teller "admirably suited" to each other.

The nameless and solemn figure of the General Prologue repeats the last words of the Clerk's Envoy,


4 Ibid., p. 596.


establishing a link between the tales of Griselda and of January. "And lat hym care, and wepe, and wrynge, and waille!" the Clerk has cried in conclusion. "Wepyng and waylyng, care and oother sorwe / I knowe ynogh, on even and a-morwe" (1213-14), echoes the Merchant:

I have a wyf, the worste that may be;
For thogh the feend to hire ycoupled were,
She wolde hym overmacche, I dar wel swere.

Ther is a long and large difference
Bitwix Grisildis grete pacience
And of my wyf the passyng crueltee.
Were I unbounden, also moot I thee!

(1218-20; 1223-26)

Two months of marriage have sufficed to convince him that marriage is a state of less than bliss; the Merchant thus defines his subject as marriage, but that Chaucer's subject is less specific than this remains to be seen.

The Host hopefully requests that the Merchant tell more about his experience, but the latter recalls the dignity and discretion which are ambiguously attributed to him in the General Prologue and declines to reveal any more about his personal life. Instead, he tells the tale of January and May. But the provocation for the tale has been established. Although the poet's success may be called into question, his dramatic intention cannot.

Stillwell observes that the Merchant in the General Prologue is described in a note of "somewhat hostile criticism," and Sedgewick agrees that Chaucer did not

7Gardiner Stillwell, "Chaucer's Merchant: No Debts?" JEGP, LVII (1958), 159.
admire him, that he was a "pompous bore" involved in "shady dealings," and that he, like the Wife of Bath and the Pardoner, must be approached in terms of his total performance. And it is true that the Merchant is briefly, perhaps distastefully, drawn. That he is a "worthy man" the narrator informs us twice; but the Merchant is obviously concerned chiefly with appearances and with questionable business matters, and "I noot how men hym calle," the narrator concludes. The portrait is curt and implies a formally dull encounter:

His resons he spak ful solemnely,
Sownynge alwey th'encrees of his wynnyng.

(274-275)

The arrangement of the Tales bolsters Bronson's view that "the Merchant and the Clerk were conceived and set side by side as a contrasting pair, in life and in philosophy," that their differences lie in "world outlook," not in their views on marriage. The contrast is between materialism and idealism. And in portraying the contrast, Chaucer for all his tolerance does for once employ bitter satire. The tale of January and May is, according to Hodge, "intended to discredit marriage, courtly


9Bronson, p. 585.

10Ibid., p. 586.
love and women." The Merchant is the only one involved in the debate "who does not tell a tale setting forth his own conception of the ideal marriage or marriage partner, but rather sneers at the possibility of happiness in marriage, and at the 'honor' of the system of courtly love."\(^1\)

It is becoming common for criticism to allude to the "bourgeois" qualities of the Franklin's Tale; the word is almost always derogatory, unfortunately, and discolours any discussion into which it is brought. The Merchant, unlike the Franklin, has provoked no questions about social status; he is instantly recognizable as a member of the middle class. The Franklin is at best, however, merely on a social fringe—probably only his concern with gentilesse has given rise to any consideration of his social status. The self-conscious sobriety of the Merchant, his concern for appearances, makes him a good foil for the generous, relaxed Franklin. The former lacks the impulse toward nobility that the latter so candidly displays. As Pearsall remarks, Chaucer is troubled by "the break-up of the older feudal society through the solvent of cash";\(^2\) it is precisely because


of such people as the Merchant that Chaucer recoils at the threats to the old order.

Although one may readily concur with Burrow's judgment that Chaucer "was not characteristically a destructive poet," one may question his assertion about the Merchant's Tale that "it contains an irony which does justice to its victims; the destructive or critical impulse does not work unchecked." If the poem is controlled by "an opposing impulse, an impulse to approach and understand, which appears in a tendency to generalize," it comes, not from the whole "performance" of the Merchant, but from the total context of the pilgrimage and Chaucer's poetry. The indictment of January is vicious because the Merchant's approach to life is destructive. Where the Wife of Bath has displayed a propensity for self-justification, a fondness for ideals which are beyond her reach; where the Clerk has fully defined gentilesse through the use of a woman of the lowest class and has wittily and delicately turned the whole thing against Dame Alice, the Merchant tells a bawdy tale in which, as Tatlock says, "nothing is sacred." He lacks the Wife's redeeming honesty, but probably, like her, he is lascivious and materialistic. He lacks the Clerk's learning, his idealism, his self-control, his wit; yet he attempts to use


14 Tatlock, p. 380.
irony in further exploration of what he considers to be
the Clerk's theme. In short, the Merchant ruthlessly abuses
the positive values that the debate has thus far honored.
It is no wonder that Chaucer followed his tale with the
rampant and luxuriant idealism of the Squire's Tale.

Since Chaucer allows his Merchant to say that he
has been unhappily married for two months, it is reason­
able to assume that this information is intended to illu­
minate his tale. Probably, as Sedgewick suggests, the
portrait of January as a prospective bridegroom is intended
in some ways to suggest the Merchant himself two months
ago, speaking now in a mood of "ugly reminiscence and self­
loathing."^15 Although experience has taught the Wife of
Bath the wrong lessons, it has not embittered her. The
Merchant has looked upon life and despaired.

His tale begins with "a worthy knyght" (1246) con­
templating marriage. All his life he has indulged his
"bodily delyt" (1249) in women, directed by his "appetyt,"
and at sixty, whether "for hoolynesse or for dotage," he
has decided to marry,

For wedlok is so esy and so clene
That in this world it is a paradys.
(1264-65)

But he wants to marry "a yong wyf and a fair" (1271) in
order to assure that she will "engendren hym an heir" and
that he will eschew endangering his soul by committing

15Sedgewick, p. 342.
adultery (1435). The encomium on marriage which, according to Sedgewick, is really "the stream which has been passing through the mind of January" (and the mind of the Merchant two months ago), pointedly recalls the Wife of Bath, but the Merchant's January is a more irresponsible rationalizer than she.

The praise of women from any other speaker would be glorious, but in context it becomes, like the whole tale, blasphemous. To her husband a wife "seith nat ones 'nay,' whan he seith 'ye,'" muses January; such was, of course, Griselda. The small Legend of Good Women (1362-74) is, Turner points out, all wrong, however; even in his pretension to learning the Merchant displays either ignorance or satirical intent.

Having fully justified his attraction to marriage, January approaches his two friends for advice regarding the selection of a wife, but he already knows what he wants:

I wol noon oold wyf han in no manere.  
She shal nat passe twenty yeer, certayn.  
(1416-17)

The arguments in favor of his marriage have but one jarring quality, but it is sufficient to wreck their doctrinal

16 Sedgewick, p. 341.

acceptability: the obtrusive and disgusting insistence on her youth and the accompanying apologies for his own age ("I feele me nowhere hoor but on myn heed" 1467).

Placebo honors his own name and supports January's argument: "I have now been a court-man al my lyf" (1492), he remarks, boasting that he never yet has disputed with a lord. "I woot wel that my lord kan moore than I" (1498). But Justinus believes that considerations other than youth and beauty might well figure in the selection of a wife:

Men moste enquere, this is myn assent,
Wher she be wys, or sobre, or dronkelewe,
Or proud, or elles ootherweys a shrewe,
A chidestere, or wastour of thy good,
Or riche, or poore, or elles mannyssh wood.

(1532-36)

He questions the practicality of January's determination to marry a young woman: "Ye shul nat plesen hire fully yeres three" (1563), but he is answered scornfully:

Wyser men than thow,
As thou hast herd, assenteden right now
To my purpos. Placebo, what sey ye?

(1569-71)

The "wyser" Placebo gives the right answer.

The Merchant evidently believes that he has enlisted himself in the ranks of the Clerk as a respondent to the Wife of Bath, but whereas the Clerk has soared to idealistic heights, he plods through cynical depths, expecting his tale to be recognized as the realist's conclusions on the subjects of marriage and human nature.
His tale so far has obvious parallels with that of the Clerk. In each, a member of a noble class is considering marriage. But Walter had to be urged to marry, and January insists upon it. Walter made an unusual choice in marrying a low-born woman; January, too, is making such a choice, but to his unorthodoxy is added the span of forty years between his age and his wife's. Like Walter, then, he has to bid his assembly to make no arguments against his "purpos," which he considers "plesant to God" (1621). In the discussion Justinus reminds us of the dramatic context by his warning that January's wife may prove to be his purgatory (1670; cf. the Wife's Prologue, 489), and finally by a direct reference to Alisoun, showing the degree of the Merchant's involvement in the discussion by a lapse of dramatic propriety too flagrant to be attributed to Chaucer's carelessness.

The preliminary debate ends as it began with January's determination to marry a beautiful young woman "of smal degree" (1625). Unlike Walter, he makes his choice for purely physical reasons and probably out of necessity, for what young and beautiful woman would marry him except one who stands to gain in social standing and in wealth?

The tale of the marriage and its progress provokes no sympathy for teller or subject. Under the circumstances May could have been made pitiable; married to January,
she could have been forgiven for her affair with Damyan. January could have been pitied for his folly or for his blindness. But the tale offers no insight into character or idea. It is an exposé, not a revelation.

Although Burrow argues that the "lyrical expansiveness" of certain passages, the courtly love machinery, and the echoes of the Romance of the Rose and of the Bible lend dignity to the portrayal of January (who remains nonetheless "pathetic, absurd, and repulsive"),\(^{18}\) it is difficult to accept his reasoning. Probably nowhere in literature has such a fabric of allusion and convention been used to more devastating effect. There is nothing "ennobling" about love for January, although he becomes the knight of Venus (1724). The goddess "laugheth" somewhat ambiguously:

\[
\text{Whan tendre youthe hath wedded age,}
\text{There is swich myrthe that it may nat be writen.}
\]

\[(1738-39)\]

Amidst an abundance of allusions the narrative of wedding "solemnpitee" (1709) proceeds, and the Merchant moves in for a close-up of January, "ravysshed in a traunce" (1750) and gazing upon May. There is little dignity or sympathy gained from the elevated references juxtaposed with the depraved presence of January, who begins in his imagination to "manace" (1752) his new wife, envisioning

\(^{18}\) Burrow, p. 207.
himself embracing her "harder than ever Parys dide Eleyne" but feeling a maudlin "pitee" for the "tendre creature" (who is doubtless less "tendre" than January supposes), finally so overcome that he thinks, "I wolde that al this peple were ago," and turns his attention to the problem of a tactful termination of the festivity.

Juxtaposition again adds to the ugliness of the scene with the introduction of Damyan, who falls in love to the point of madness instantly, thus inspiring the Merchant to high rhetoric (1783-92); but the epic apostrophe loses its power to dignify, for in the midst of the denunciation of the "naddre" of Damyan's treachery comes the image of the hero, "dronken in plesaunce / In marlage," a vision which considerably weakens the moral indignation of

Thyn owene squier and thy borne man,
   Entendeth for to do thee vileynye.
(1790-91)

The action resumes with January bustling off to bed, well fortified with aphrodisiacs; the revulsion of the lines which describe him is probably unsurpassed in English satire:

"For Goddes love, as soone as it may be,
   Lat voyden al this hous in curteys wys."
And they han doon right as he wol devyse.
Men drynken, and the travers drawe anon.
The bryde was broght abedde as stille as stoon
And whan the bed was with the preest yblessed. . .
(1814-19)
The passage is bearable until the priest is introduced, the holy nature of marriage implied, the horror of this marriage emphasized. A January giving himself to lasciviousness would be a laughable, perhaps a contemptible, vision; but a January in a properly blessed bed with a stony May, explaining quite mistakenly that nothing a married couple can do is sin, instructing his silent wife in the arts of love, is a portrait of unalleviated corruption.

It is, of course, understandable that Damyan should fall in love with May and she with him. But lest she should win our sympathy, she is straightway consigned to the "pryvee" to read his supplications, which she absorbs and casually casts therein. The narrator's delicacy in describing her feelings about the love-making that immediately follows this scene further precludes the possibility of sympathy for May. There has been no such reticence in consideration of "precious folk" (1962) in describing the lust of January. But to portray May's distaste would emphasize the justification for her actions.

Employing the attitudes of courtly love, the Merchant has the "fresshe May" take action against Damyan's conventional love-sickness out of conventional pity (1949), a desire to "doon hym ese": "lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!" May possesses a singularly small claim to gentilesse, but the Merchant chooses at this point to praise "franchise" in women, who are by no means all
"crueel." The pity motif is retained as May, "fulfilled of pitee," writes a response to Damyan's letter. The depth of the Merchant's bitterness can be measured by reference to use of the same materials in the story of Criseyde or the story of Dorigen, to both of whom the compassion of the lover is a very real quality.

Since love ennobles the lover, May's letter inspires Damyan to go, dutifully, to January—"as lowe / As evere dide a dogge for the bowe." The modesty and amiability which love evoked in Troilus rather lose their luster in Damyan, for the image of a dog—albeit a friendly one—pervades the remaining lines:

He is so plesant unto every man
(For craft is al, whoso that do it kan)
That every wight is fayn to speke hym good;
And fully In his lady grace he stood.

Meanwhile, January's garden is introduced and its purposes fully implied in the allusion to Priapus (2034), who was "the true patron saint of his old age and the proper tutelary deity of his garden."19

"But worldly joye may nat alwey dure," and January is struck blind. The presentation of this affliction without the evocation of some feeling for January is no small task, but the Merchant is fully competent; poor January "wepeth and he wayleth pitously," but we are not

allowed to lapse into pity:

And therewithal the fyr of jalousie,
Lest that his wyf sholde falle in some folye,
So brente his herte that he wolde fayn
That som man bothe hire and hym had slayn.

(2073-76)

He makes an adjustment to his affliction by keeping his hand at all times on his fresh wife, who has therefore to learn to make signals with one hand. Persistence and resourcefulness achieve her goal, but not before she has had to defend her honor with great indignation ("I am a gentil womman and no wenche"); but when her speech is completed,

with that word she saugh where Damyan
Sat in the bussh, and coughen she bigan.

(2207-08)

Damyan scampers into the pear tree, May follows, and the Merchant introduces the king and queen of "Fayerye" to provide a denouement. Their intervention brings the story to its happy ending. January now has cause to hope for an heir, although, as Miller says, a "dubious" one.

In his story of holy matrimony and courtly love, of the marriage of a knight and a girl of low degree, of the physical distress and moral depravity of a very old man, the perfidy of a very young woman, and the treachery of a squire, the Merchant has abused the values implicit

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in the discussion which he enters. He has propounded no positive values of his own, and worse, he has displayed a lack of humanity, a failing of tolerance and wise resignation which are essential to the Chaucerian view of life. Moreover, as Olson suggests, he has displayed a materialistic view of life. The evil of avarice is a theme frequently reiterated in the Canterbury Tales, and the Merchant's Tale is "told by the representative of the class commonly and possibly justly regarded as most guilty of the vice," yet he "says nothing directly concerning the subject." Olson argues, however, that to the medieval mind, "the acquisitive vices were essentially a matter of love," that January loves May not "as a person but as a thing" and virtually purchases her as "the last luxury of a prosperous lifetime." It seems likely, then, that "January's love of May reflects, in heightened colors, the face of his own commercial love of the world's goods."  

It would seem that the Merchant in more ways than one embodies the "bourgeois" influence at its destructive worst; if such is the case, the theme and conclusion of the Franklin's Tale and its assignment to a member of the bourgeoisie is a necessary antidote to the performance of the Merchant. He shows no respect for the traditional values: marriage and courtly love are acrimoniously

21Paul A. Olson, "Chaucer's Merchant and January's 'Hevene in Erthe Heere,'" ELH, XXVIII (1961), 205 and 204.
employed in a rejection of practically everything. He is hostile and malignant. Materialism of a sort and idealism of a high order oppose each other in Alisoun and the Clerk. But Chaucer knows that materialism is the negation of other values, and that Alisoun of Bath is not the Clerk's opposite. The Merchant is: January is cuckolded because he desires a wife for the wrong reasons. But to the Merchant, it is all a matter of youth and age and human depravity.

Among the pilgrims in quest of the gentil way of life, the Merchant's role is analogous to that of the Pardoner among those in search of the holy way. The Pardoner is essentially destructive in his approach to life; in utter cynicism he rejects and abuses the ideals which give substance to his sermon and tale. Similarly, the Merchant rejects and abuses the values upon which he constructs his tale. He enters into the debate on gentilesse, using, as have the Wife and the Clerk, the vehicle of marriage. But where each of them affirms the human capacity for true nobility, the Merchant impugns the efficacy of reason (in Justinus) against innate folly and portrays moral irresponsibility in the high-born and the low, the old and the young. Using the institutions of chivalry, of courtly love, and of marriage, each of which implies a standard, the Merchant affirms nothing. In his rejection of values for which he offers no substitute, he
damns himself. By telling a tale "impregnated . . . with a mordant venom," lacking mirth and mercy, the Merchant reveals a character devoid of generosity or resignation. His contribution to the debate is a jarring note indeed; although the Wife of Bath is hardly a gentil woman, she respects the pattern of conduct which she attempts to define. The Merchant is not even a seeker.
G. The Squire's Tale

Until recently, the Squire's Tale has been unjustly neglected. It has been regarded as an interlude between the last two tales of the "Marriage Group," and, since it is unfinished, it has been allowed to remain there scarcely noticed. And of the modest deluge of criticism which the tale has enjoyed during the last few years, not all results are particularly felicitous. In examining the uses of rhetoric in the tale, \(^1\) Robert Haller suggests that Chaucer "is making fun of his Squire" (285), who self-consciously attempts to show his gentilesse by the employment of rhetorical devices which he uses awkwardly. Haller further perceives in the Squire a "moral obtuseness" (293) which he shares with the Franklin, who is impressed by his performance. In his discussion of the Squire as story-teller, Pearsall draws much the same conclusions; \(^2\) the Squire is a "nervous, immature, and self-conscious speaker" (84) in telling a rather negligible tale. There is, according to Pearsall, "more than a

\(^{1}\) Robert S. Haller, "Chaucer's Squire's Tale and the Uses of Rhetoric," MP, LXII (1965), 283-293.

tinge of fatuously admiring self-regard" (87) in the Squire's modest disclaimers of rhetorical facility; in one such passage, he comments that no man could "devyse" the scene "but Launcelot, and he is deed," and Pearsall sees satire in the "implicit comparison between the Squire and Lancelot" (87). He feels, further, that the Squire's intellect is limited, that "he has the non-intellectual's distaste for things that cannot be neatly explained" and a snobbish "anti-intellectualism . . . in the contemptuous dismissal of speculation about the tempering of metal."
The Squire's "arrogant attitude, like John the carpenter's, is based on ignorance" (88). His tale is clumsy and dull, and surely, says Pearsall, "neither Chaucer nor anyone else in his senses could ever take this story seriously in itself" (90). Perhaps, he suggests, the whole performance has been a test of the young pilgrim; he has been "showing what he can do, and . . . his tale is regarded by everyone, including himself (at first, anyway), as an experimental opportunity to show his paces" (91). The Franklin, if this is the case, actually interrupts the Squire, but his interruption is like the "guillotine in a debate or a public speaking competition" (91).

It has seemed appropriate to comment at some length about the articles of Haller and Pearsall, for they have applied to the Squire's Tale the kind of criticism that makes of Chaucer a more subtle and less tolerant
But it is not likely that Chaucer was so devious in his portrayal of the Squire as their interpretations suggest. More acceptable is the view proposed by Marie Neville, who finds in the tale not a "chasm in the Marriage Group but a bridge . . . also to be related to the Canterbury scheme as a whole" (168). She shows that the Squire is probably imitating his father, whose tale of chivalry introduced the story-telling competition, and that he also offers "preparation for the theme of gentilesse in the Franklin's Tale" (173). It is, according to Neville, in its "attention to the niceties of the chivalric code, in its insistence on seemliness, compassion, and the other obligations of the gently born" that the Squire's Tale "is in sharpest contrast to the tales of the Wife of Bath and the Merchant" (177), and it is in the same qualities that it is in harmony with the tales of the Knight and the Franklin. "Theseus and Canacee are alike in that sensibility typical of the gentilesse in which the Franklin delights and of which, as he says, he finds so much in the tale of the Squire" (173).

Certainly the Squire's Tale belongs to the debate. Its position, the probable lateness of its date of composition, the explicit link between it and the generally

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accepted culmination of the debate\textsuperscript{4} all point to a de-
liberate inclusion of the tale at a crucial moment in the
debate.

Probably one reason for the neglect of the tale is
its clumsiness. It is awkwardly and verbosely told, and
it has a rather remarkable way of boring people. Still-
well explains this quality by suggesting that Chaucer is
"not altogether at home in Tartary" because "so intellectual
and realistic and humorous is he by temperament that his
patience cannot last out the long recital of marvellous
deeds, the long succession of improbable events caused
chiefly by the presence of various enchanted gadgets."\textsuperscript{5}
Stillwell, however, searches for evidence of sly wit to
indicate Chaucer's sense of the ridiculousness of the
traditional romance.

It does not seem unlikely that Chaucer was aware,
in the composition of the story, of the extreme youth of
its teller and of the necessity of avoiding the violation
of realism involved in assigning him a story so polished
as to compete with his father's performance. But for an
artist such as Chaucer to imitate the style of an

\textsuperscript{4}But see Donald R. Howard, "The Conclusion of the
Marriage Group," MF, LVII (1960), 223-232, for an argument
that the "Marriage Group" continues beyond the Franklin's
Tale to conclude with a story exalting either virginity
or abstinence in marriage (the Physician's or the Second
Nun's Tale).

\textsuperscript{5}Gardiner Stillwell, "Chaucer in Tartary," RES,
XXIV (1948), 177-88.
inexperienced youth would yield results undeserving of the effort. Chaucer was no doubt bored in Tartary but largely because of the style in which he chose to go there. He almost certainly did not intend to ridicule his Squire in any but the mildest fashion, that of an older man tolerating the bumbling but earnest efforts of a younger ("my wyl is good, and lo, my tale is this," the Squire has begun).

The story of Cambyuskan is perfectly suited to an idealistic young knight. The hero is "excellent...in alle thyng"; he lacks "noght that longeth to a kyng"
(V, 15-16):

he was hardy, wys, and riche,  
And pitous and just, alwey yliche;  
Sooth of his word, benigne, and honurable;  
Of his corage as any centre stable;  
Yong, fressh, and strong, in armes desirous  
As any bachelor of al his hous.  
A fair persone he was and fortunat,  
And kepte alwey so wel roial estat  
That ther was nowher swich another man.  
(19-27)

The virtues are conventional, but they are constant in the poetry of Chaucer: compassion, truth to his word, stability. The young Squire can hardly be the object of more than a very kindly satire if he shares his creator's ideals, unless, of course, he somehow misunderstands or fails to honor them. But the Squire has been tried in battle and has "born hym weel, as of so litel space" (I, 87); if he is proficient in the accomplishments of the typical young lover, he is also "curteis," "lowely," and "servysable."
And it is of him that Chaucer wrote the line "He was as fresh as is the month of May"—surely the poet did not create such a figure only to slyly undercut him in describing his participation in the story-telling game. Schofield remarks that he has "evidently taken to heart the idealistic precepts of the order of chivalry, which he was later to adorn."\(^6\)

Since the story is incomplete, Cambyuskan is not given the opportunity to exercise his gentilesse, but his daughter is. The birthday feast is interrupted by the appearance of a knight on a brass horse, bearing a mirror, a gold ring, and a sword. These magic objects, including the horse, are gifts for the royal family. Of them Haller remarks that "because the Squire takes romances as mirrors of gentilesse, he assumes that such wonders are a way of separating the noble from the vulgar heart. It would seem that they do not have to be used in the story (only the ring comes into play) in order to accomplish this purpose."\(^7\) The validity of the second sentence is doubtful, since the tale is unfinished; the other objects might have been employed had the story been completed. As the fragment stands, however, only Canacee's gifts are employed, although the horse presents the occasion for much discussion among


\(^7\)Haller, p. 290.
The Squire has thus far established that he has a high regard for the traditional values and that he intends to display it in the loftiest context of a never-never-land of romantic action and splendid heroes and heroines. The episode of the second part of his tale shows gentilesse in action. As a true knight, the young pilgrim offers in his portrait of the falcon from a "fremde land" a defense of women, who are not all like May or the Wife of Bath. She has been abandoned most treacherously by her lover, although her conduct has been impeccable:

And I so loved hym for his obeisaunce,
And for the trouthe I demed in his herte,
That if so were that any thyng hym smerte,
Al were it never so lite, and I it wiste,
Me thoughte I felt deeth myn herte twiste.
And shortly, so ferforth this thyng is went,
That my wyl was his willes instrument;
That is to seyn, my wyl obeyed his wyl
In alle thyng, as fer as reson fil . . .

(562-570)

Canacee, a "kynges doghter" (465), is overcome by the "routhe" which she feels for the falcon, and the repetition of the line "pitee renneth soone in gentil herte" (479), now applied to her, restores proper perspective.

The sensitivity of some readers to what appears to be snobbishness on the part of the Squire seems unwarranted. The common people in the Clerk's Tale are treated no more affectionately, and in Troilus and Criseyde (IV, 183-186) there is an unattractive picture of a mob. Regardless of individual gentilesse, lower class or excited people en masse are frequently and unfortunately realistically portrayed in unpleasant terms.
In the Knight's and the Franklin's tales "nobility of heart is the source of a compassion almost quixotic. . . . This kind of compassion is utterly lacking in the Wife's and the Merchant's tales precisely in those persons whose obligation of pity was greatest." This "nobility of heart" is the essence of the Squire's Tale.

Although the romance is incomplete, Chaucer has accomplished with it what he intended. The Squire, as Hodge says, "probably disgusted at the picture and attitude presented in the preceding tale, and dismayed at hearing his father's courtly tale indirectly ridiculed," is himself too gentil to denounce the Merchant in his own terms. But his revulsion is implicit in his swift flight into the "world of fable, in which all ideals may be realized."

"In his allusions to the knightly paragons Gawain and Lancelot, the Squire shows his allegiance to the 'olde curteisy' and loyalty, which the Wife has distorted and the Merchant denied." Most cherished of the values in the Squire's Tale are the fidelity which includes faithfulness to one's word as well as to one's lover, and compassion which Corsa so aptly describes as

9Neville, p. 174.
10Hodge, p. 291.
11Ibid., p. 292.
12Neville, p. 177.
"the gift of an imagination that will project into the unhappiness of others."\(^{13}\)

But the Squire, with youthful exuberance, has presented his view of life in the land of Tartary where brass horses can perform illimitable services at the turn of a pin and in his inexperience has begun a dull and inept tale. Moreover, he is himself *gentil* and may perhaps be biased, especially since his ideals are those of chivalry and he expects to become a perfect, gentle knight. Finally, he is young and cannot be expected to understand the ways of the world. It remains, then, for the Franklin to retrieve the threads of the discussion and transform them into the lovely story of Dorigen and her two lovers.

\(^{13}\)Corsa, p. 178.
H. The Franklin's Tale

"Epicurus owene sone," the Franklin is a "worthy vavasour," in his "contree" the consummate symbol of hospitality. In the debate on gentilesse, he speaks for his creator.

Like Chaucer, the Franklin occupies an ambiguous position on the social scale. Although Gerould argues that the Franklin is a member of the nobility, his rank is not undisputed. He is of the highest order of the bourgeoisie or of the lowest order of the nobility, at any rate. Chaucer, uncontestably a member of the bourgeoisie, in the conduct of his life apparently transcended his own class. Like Chaucer, the Franklin is active in public life: each has served as knight of his shire. It is, of course, the Franklin's epicureanism that is most prominent in the General Prologue, and whether or not this quality is one that he shares with the poet it is impossible to say, although one might point to the rotundity of the poet as a not entirely irrelevant factor.

In the telling of his tale the Franklin clearly and fully characterizes himself. His observations about

the Squire's Tale are tactful and generous:

"In feith, Squier, thow hast thee wel 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,
If that thou lyve; God yeve thee good chaunce,
And in vertu sende thee continaunce!"

(V, 673-680)

The praise is genuine. The Squire is inexperienced and his tale has not been artistically good (indeed, it is possible that the Franklin has actually interrupted the performance to spare the company the boredom of hearing everything the Squire has promised); and the Franklin does not over-praise and thus invalidate the compliment. For his age the Squire has done very well. The Franklin admires particularly the "gentil" and "feeling" qualities of the achievement, implying a contrast between the tales of Cambyuskan and of January and adumbrating the values of his own tale. He is generous enough to praise the Squire to the discredit of his own son and serene enough to be gracious in face of the Host's rudeness: "Straw for youre gentilesse!"

As the Squire has done, the Franklin prefaces his tale with a statement of good will (715). With fitting modesty, since in telling a romance he is following the examples of the Knight and the Squire, he protests that he is a "burel man" and begs to be excused for "rude
The disclaimer of erudition and rhetorical ability is conventional: the churls have no such doubts of their ability and aspire to no serious aims, but the Clerk proclaims a belief in narrative simplicity, Chaucer himself declares that he knows no other tale than a rhyme he once learned, and the Monk apologizes for ignorance—before telling a learned series of tragedies. The length and earnestness of the Franklin's protest is unusual among the pilgrims, but they are necessary lest he should seem presumptuous in telling an ambitious story and in attempting to resolve the debate which began four tales ago. The circumstances demand a display of modesty.

The theme of the tale is implicit in its conclusion:

Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?
Now telleth me, er that ye ferther wende.
I kan namoore; my tale is at an ende.

(1622-24)

If the narrative had been ambiguous, the question would nonetheless have brought it to focus on the central issue: gentilesse. In a discussion of the Marriage Group, Howard proposes that Chaucer intended to follow the Franklin's Tale with either the Physician's Tale or the Second Nun's Tale, but that he wavered in the decision.

We are left with a tale of virginity and a tale involving a chaste marriage—either one a possible Christian ending for the Marriage Group. . . .

But from an artistic point of view it seems impossible that the high art of the Marriage Group should end in a pedestrian treatment of the theme virginity—or-death, or with a mere
Howard finds that the marriage in the Franklin’s Tale has as its purpose "the establishment of earthly concord" but that the vow in the Second Nun’s Tale is a subjugation of human to divine will, "and its end is an eternal reward for the worldly toil and trouble to which they submit themselves." The tales of chastity, in or out of marriage, depict a degree of perfection unattainable in normal marriage.

But what if the Franklin’s Tale is, after all, the conclusion of the debate, the subject not marriage but gentilesse? In a Christian culture, gentilesse takes on Christian qualities; but it is essentially a secular concept in the poetry of Chaucer and need not embrace religious perfection. It is invalid to find the Franklin’s kind of gentilesse inadequate because it is not sufficiently mystical. The frame of reference in the romance is secular; the virtues illustrated are lay virtues. And not only the speaker, but the poet, applauds them. It is reasonable that the story center about a marriage because marriage is a human relationship; celibacy is a mystical condition.


3 Ibid., p. 229.
And like the Wife, the Clerk, the Merchant, and the Squire, the Franklin is dealing with practical conduct, not with otherworldly perfection.

The tale opens with a brief account of the courtship of Dorigen and Arveragus. Gray finds an attempted "synthesis of courtly and marriage ideals" in the tale; they are irreconcilable dogmas, he argues, because one demands service to man, the other to God. Moreover, in the marriage, the knight retains only the "name of soverainety," a position "essentially incompatible with responsibilities" of a husband. Dorigen "selects marriage over adultery, a courtly relationship over a marriage relationship, and the courtly virtue of impatience over the heavenly virtue of patience." The gentilesse of the tale is as illusory as the removal of the rocks, he feels, because Dorigen, in her distress over her obligation to honor her promise to Aurelius, neglects consideration of her marriage vows, which should take precedence.

But there is nothing amiss about the wooing of Dorigen by Arveragus. It is true that it is conventional, for Arveragus attempted

To serve a lady in his beste wise;
And many a laboure, many a greet emprise
He for his lady wroghte, er she were wonne,

(731-733)

and he suffered woe, pain, and distress (737); Dorigen took pity on him, however, and

pryvely she fil of his accord
To take hym for hir housbonde and hir lord,
Of swich lordshippe as men han over hir wyves.  
(741-743)

But in the marriage both of them yield sovereignty:

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 maistrle
Agayn hir wyl, ne kithe hire jalousie.  
(745-748)

And Dorigen promises to be a "humble trewe wyf" (758).

The terms describing Arveragus' feeling for Dorigen belong to the conventions of courtly love, to be sure; but so pervasive has been the influence of that tradition that even the twentieth century is not convinced that love is genuine unless it is accompanied by a reasonable semblance of pining, and probably to Chaucer's audience courtly love was simply romantic love, at least in some contexts. If Arveragus loved Dorigen, he had to act as if he did. The object of his love was marriage. The relationship between him and Dorigen is not adversely criticized in the story.

The Franklin interrupts his story with a moral discussion:

For o thynge, sires, saufly dar I seye,  
That freendes everych oother moot obeye,  
If they wol longe holden compaignye.  
Love wol nat be constreyned by maistrye.  
Whan 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 kynge, desirn libertee,
And nat to been constreyned as a thral;
And so doon men, if sooth seyen shal.
Looke who that is moost pacient in love.
He is at his avantage al above.
Pacience is an heigh vertu, certeyn,
For it venquysseth, as thise clerkes seyn,
Thynge that rigour should nevere atteyne.
For every word men may nat chide or pleyne.
Lerneth to suffre, or elles, so moot I goon,
Ye shul it lerne, wher so ye wol or noon;
For in this world, certein, ther no wight is
That he ne dooth or seith somtym amys.
Ire, siknesse, or constellaucioun,
Syn, wo, or chaungynge of complexioun
Causeth ful ofte to doon amys or spoken,
On every wrong a man may nat be wreken.
After the tyme moste be temperaunce
To every wight that kan on governaunce.
And therfore hath this wise, worthy knyght,
To lyve in ese, suffranee hire bihight,
And she to hym ful wisly gan to swere
That nevere sholde ther be defaute in here.

(761-790)

The passage contains themes often repeated in Chaucer's poetry. The discourse on "maistrie" is related to his distrust of tyranny in any form ("The Former Age"). Patience, one of the virtues exercised by Griselda, is also central in the ballade, "Truth": "Suffyce unto thy good, though it be smal," and "Reule wel thyself, that other folk canst rede." The necessity for learning to suffer, for refraining from the impulse to "be wreken" for every wrong, also appears in "Truth":

Tempest thee noght al croked to redresse
In trust of hir that turneth as a ball.

And of course the exhortation to recognize that "ther no wight is / That he ne dooth or seith somtym amys" is thoroughly Chaucerian.
The ideas are not unusual, but the fact that they are favorite themes of Chaucer supports the contention that the Franklin's resolution to the debate may also be his author's.

The marriage of Dorigen and Arveragus is "blisful" for "a yeer and moore" (806) until it is necessary for Arveragus to be away for "a yeer or tweyne." Dorigen remains in Armorik and "For his absence wepeth . . . and siketh"; "She moorneth, waketh, wayleth, fasteth, pley-neth" (819) and is so near despair that her friends attempt to comfort her and finally succeed, "For wel she saugh that it was for the beste" (836). In her lack of resignation she errs, for the gentil person is, like Griselda, disposed to accept whatever misfortunes life offers, and remains cheerful and constant in spite of them. Dorigen's complaint against the "grisly feendly rokkes blake" (868) is further evidence of her lack of resignation, but

in this world, certein, ther no wight is
That he ne dooth or seith somtym amys.

Moreover, the grief of Dorigen is dramatically functional, for her love of Arveragus must be beyond question lest her dilemma should seem to stem from lack of devotion rather than from a jest.

From the grief of Dorigen the Franklin moves to the portrayal of another grief, that of Aurelius. He is an excellent squire:
Oon of the beste farynge man on lyve;  
Yong, strong, right vertuous, and riche,  
and wys,  
And wel biloved, and holden in greet prys.  

(932-934)

For two years he has loved Dorigen secretly. She is com-  
pletely ignorant of his feelings (959). Aurelius acts in  
accordance with the rules of love, but when he declares  
himself to her, her response is highly critical of the  
convention:

She gan to looke upon Aurelius:  
"Is this youre wyl," quod she, "and sey ye  
thus?  
Never erst," quod she, "ne wiste I what ye  
mente.  
But now, Aurelie, I knowe youre entente,  
By thilke God that yaf me soule and lyf,  
Ne shal I nevere been untrewy wyf  
In word ne werk, as fer as I have wit;  
I wol been his to whom that I am knyt.  
Taak this for fynal answere as of me."  

(979-987)

Her tone is astonished and severe, and her message unequivo-  
cal. Small wonder that she softens the answer "in pley":

"Aurelie," quod she, "by heighe God above,  
Yet wolde I graunte yow to been youre love,  
Syn I yow se so pitously complayne.  
Looke what day that endelong Britayne  
Ye remoeve alle the rokkes, stoon by stoon,  
. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .  
Thanne wol I love yow best of any man.  

(989-997)

Gray believes that, misunderstanding, Aurelius  
grieves, not at Dorigen's refusal, which he does not recog-  
nize as such, but at the difficulty of the task set for him.  
The squire's conduct, however, does not substantiate that

5Gray, p. 222.
view: "Is ther noon oother grace in yow?" he asks; and lest there should remain any ambiguity, Dorigen answers,

"No, by that Lord," quod she, "that maked me!"
For wel I woot that it shal never bityde.
Lat swiche folies out of youre herte slyde.
What deyntee sholde a man han in his lyf
For to go love another mannes wyf,
That hath hir body whan so that hym liketh?"
(1000-05)

Aurelius responds as one rejected:

"Madame," quod he, "this were an impossible!
Thanne moot I dye of sodeyn deth horrible."
(1009-10)

In his prayer to Apollo he admits that

my lady hath my deeth ysworn
Withoute gilt, but thy benignytee
Upon my dedly herte have some pitee.
(1038-40)

The task is one for a god, not for a lover, to accomplish.

The Franklin leaves the lovesick Aurelius in the care of his brother (1082-86) and turns to Arveragus, who has now come home, and Dorigen:

O blisful artow now, thou Dorigen,
That hast thy lusty housbonde in thyne armes,
The fresshe knyght, the worthy man of armes,
That loveth thee as his owene hertes lyf.
(1090-93)

Unlike the Wife of Bath and the Merchant, the Franklin will have nothing to do with jealousy:

No thyng list hym to been ymaginatyf,
If any wight hadde spoke, whil he was oute,
To hire of love; he hadde of it no doute.
He noght entendeth to no swich mateere,
But daunceth, justeth, maketh hire good cheere.
(1094-98)
Aurelius has meanwhile turned to magic; "swich folye / As in oure dayes is nat worth a flye" (1131-32), the Franklin calls it, suggesting, in the next two lines--

For hooly chirches feith in oure bileve
He suffreth noon illusioun us to greve--

(1133-34)

that the milieu of the story is not that of the hearer and implying an excuse for Dorigen's deception by illusion. Reluctant to comply with Aurelius' request, the philosopher sets a price of a thousand pounds (1223-24), but the joyful lover recklessly cries, "Fy on a thousand pounds!" Although paying the sum will work a hardship on him, he is in a condition to count the world well lost for love; and he waits anxiously for the disappearance of the rocks:

Aurelius, which that yet despeired is
Wher he shal han his love or fare amys,
Awaiteth nyght and day on this myracle;
And whan he knew that ther was noon obstacle,
That voyded were thise rokkes everychon,
Doun to his maistres feet he fil anon,
And seyde, "I woful wrecche, Aurelius,
Thanke yow, lord, and lady myn Venus,
That me han holpen fro my cares colde."

(1297-1305)

In reporting the "myracle" to Dorigen, he appeals to her pity and to her honor:

Nere it that I for yow have swich disease
That I moste dyen heere at youre foot anoon,
Noght wolde I telle how me is wo bigon.
But certes outhere moste I dye or pleyne,
Ye sle me gilteles for verray peyne.
But of my deeth thogh that ye have no routhe,
Avyseth yow er that ye breke youre trouthe.

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...
But in a garden yond, at swich a place,
Ye woot right wel what he bighiten me;
And in myn hand youre trouth plighten ye
To love me best—God woot, ye seyde so,

Madame, I speke it for the honour of yow
Moore than to save myn hertes lyf right now,—

Dooth as yow list; have youre biheste in mynde.

(1314-35)

But he emphasizes the fact that she has given her word.

As Mann argues,

It is "trouthe," with its most nearly related
values within "gentilesse," that is at the center
of the poem. The knot at the core of the plot
depends upon an apparently irreconcilable con­
FLICT between two different demands of "trouthe":
fidelity to the marriage agreement or fidelity
to one's word. If Arveragus does not act fool­
ishly by sending Dorigen to Aurelius, that can
only be because fidelity to one's spoken word
is in the poem the highest moral principle that
natural man can know, and because Arveragus
sees that only through tenacious, self-sacrificing,
and heroic adherence to this principle can this
natural virtue operate to resolve the conflict
which it occasions. The conflict arises be­
cause Dorigen spoke "sometime amys" in her
promise to Aurelius, which is couched in the
language of a formal oath; without the moral
sophistication of Roman law or Christianity,
she incurs in the poem a real obligation. All
of the figures in the poem recognize her as
bound to her spoken promise. 6

Confronted with the fact that she is in a trap, Dorigen
"astoned stood; / In al hir face nas a drope of blood"
(1339-40). Her long lament, like her complaint against
the rocks, demonstrates a lack of patience, but it is to
her credit that she chooses, rather than suicide, the

6Lindsay A. Mann, ""Gentilesse' and the Franklin's
Tale," SP, LXII (1966), 21. The footnote to this passage
is omitted since it is not directly relevant to my point.
alternative which was implicit in her marriage compromise, and takes the matter to her husband. Arveragus is the touchstone of gentilesse in the poem: with compassion he,

\[
\text{with glad chiere, in freendly wyse,}
\]
\[
\text{Answerde and seyde as I shal yow devyse:}
\]
\[
\text{"Is ther oght elles, Dorigen, but this?"}
\]

(1467-69)

Mann's assertion that truth is the "moral center" of the poem is verified by Arveragus' reaction to Dorigen's confession. What is, is, he tells her:

\[
\text{lat slepen that is stille,}
\]
\[
\text{It may be wel, paraventure, yet to day.}
\]

(1471-72)

In spite of the fact that Dorigen would prefer death to adultery, and that Arveragus "hadde wel levere ystiked for to be" (1476), "Trouthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe" (1479). Although "with that word he brast anon to wepe," he dispatches Dorigen in secret to fulfill her promise.

Arveragus' faith is justified. Dorigen, half mad with grief (1511), arouses the gentilesse in Aurelius' heart: he "hadde great compassioun" (1515) to see her and to think of Arveragus' sacrifice. Instantly love with a selfish purpose is replaced by the unselfish impulse which enables Arveragus to renounce his claim to Dorigen. His callow demands of pity from her have become meaningless in the face of her greater distress, and in a moment he has matured:
I yow relese, madame, into youre hond
Quyt every serement and every bond
That yehan maad to me as heerbiforn,
Sith thilke tyme which that ye were born.

As Aurelius has thanked his gods, Dorigen thanks the
squire who can "doon a gentil dede" (1543) and returns to
her husband; and "nevere eft ne was ther angre hem bi-
twene" (1553).

The squire is left with a debt of a thousand
pounds, for which he has not received what he expected;
but "I failled nevere of my trouthe as yit" (1577), he
tells the clerk, asking for a period of two or three years
in which to pay the balance of the debt. To the clerk this
is a questionable demand: "Have I nat holden covenant
unto thee?" (1587), he asks, emphasizing the centrality
of truth to one's word in the poem. But upon learning
that, although Arveragus has "removed" the rocks for his
lady he has not enjoyed her, the philosopher, like Aurelius,
experiences compassion and feels respect for virtue:

Everich of yow did 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!

The clerk releases the squire from his financial obligation;
"It is ynogh, and farewel, have good day!" (1619)

Thus the Franklin has defined gentilesse. It is a
multifaceted concept, but the Franklin finds the most impor-

7For an examination of eight qualities comprising
gentilesse and employed in the Franklin's Tale, see Mann.
tant components to be truth to one's word, the compassion that exercises sympathetic identification with the suffering of others, tolerance for the actions of others, a firm commitment to principles in the face of the severest trials, unerring tact and delicacy in conduct. Jealousy, shrewishness, indiscretion, and rationalization in the style of the Wife of Bath have no place in the poem; bitterness and vengefulness like the Merchant's are discredited; and in an elaboration on a humanly attainable level of the ideas suggested in the Clerk's and the Squire's tales, the Franklin brings the debate to a conclusion.

For convenience, the term "Marriage Group" will continue, in this discussion, to designate the group of tales which have been examined, but it is suggested that the term is inadequate. Howard finds in the tales, as in the Chaucer canon, the dilemma "which underlies the period of secularization during which Chaucer lived—that while one must acknowledge the imperfection of the transitory world and work to make it more nearly perfect, one must at the same time remember the futility of seeking in the world that perfection which can exist only in a world beyond."^8

It is the contention of this discussion that the ideal of secular perfection, gentilesse, is the subject

^8 Howard, p. 232.
of the debate at the heart of the Canterbury Tales. In speculating that Chaucer intended to follow the Franklin's Tale with a "Christian ending, the counsel of perfection in or out of marriage," Howard remarks that the "Franklin's middle-class compromise springs in a natural, unified way from the tales before it." Since the Tales, "taken as an integrated work, is far from secular in its theme and emphasis, it would be the more surprising if, in the Marriage Group, Chaucer had really advocated and approved the Franklin's highly secular attitude." But the Marriage Group is secular. A Christian writer, Chaucer did not deny the validity of the celibate ideal; but a humanist, he is more vitally interested in man in his imperfect condition and in his strivings to assert his dignity and his worthiness on earth. In the Marriage Group Chaucer is a moral poet, but not an ascetic one. If the Franklin's position is a "middle-class compromise," it springs from his creator's recognition of the necessity and the efficacy of compromise in life. The characters in the tales of the Marriage Group are married only incidentally, because marriage is part of the human condition and because the marriage relationship offers an excellent opportunity for the observation of the best and the worst of human nature; and it is the practical responsibility of human life that is the focal point of the discussion.
CHAPTER VII
CHAUCER THE HUMANIST

It would be futile to attempt, in a limited study, to cover exhaustively the uses of gentilesse in Chaucer's poetry. There are infinite possibilities for the study of his satiric employment of the concept, but the satire will be regretfully ignored as nonessential to a presentation of the concept as an ideal of secular conduct.¹ It has been the purpose of this discussion to show that Chaucer's mature poetry is marked by a tension between the ideals of gentilesse and hoolynesse; although the latter embraces the former, the gentil heart may lack the spirituality which frees the hooly one from things of this world. The ideal which Chaucer most feelingly recommends in his best poetry is clearly secular; the

¹For an excellent interpretation of a satiric use of the gentilesse theme, see Earle Birney, "Chaucer's 'Gentil' Manciple and his 'Gentil' Tale," Neophilologische Mitteilungen, LXI (1960), 257-267. Birney says that the Manciple's Tale has "all the earmarks of an unsuccessful attempt at a 'gentil' tale by a fundamentally 'lewed' man," pointing out that the lack of sympathy for the lovers and the lack of emotional response to the murder are unique to Chaucer's version of the story.
one which he as a Christian acknowledges as supreme is religious. He consistently rejects neither, but it is the inadequacy of gentilesse from the religious point of view which has given rise to a common belief that Chaucer must be ironic in the poems that "sownen" into gentilesse.

The Retraction to the Canterbury Tales and the Epilogue of Troilus and Criseyde, in their revocations of poems that advance standards not exclusively Christian, stand as stumbling blocks to interpretation. In a quest of the governing intention of the Tales and a desire to discern complete artistic unity in the Troilus, there have been attempts to find that both poems throughout imply the religious convictions of their creator. The only alternative is an admission of disunity both in Chaucer's poetry and in his view of life. His magnificence as a poet is, however, sufficiently well established so that there is no need to insist upon his perfection. The works exempt from the Retraction are those that "sownen" into hoolynesse; included among them is the Book of the Duchess, which can surely be guilty of no offenses other than those against austerest orthodoxy, for it depicts secular love and courtly virtue uncritically. It is, however, a poem of gentilesse, as the concept has been traced through Chaucer's poetry, although the word itself is not used in it. Chaucer rejects poetry that is undeniably moral in intention; he does so in earnest acknowledgment of the
exclusive validity of the Parson's "wey" of life. But he has been no less serious in his presentations of morality in secular terms. The dichotomy of his view of life cannot be explained away.

Gentilesse as defined by Dante and Boethius—as well as the "democratic" view of character which makes, in Piers Plowman, the bones of a churl indistinguishable from those of a king—is an abstraction. Gentilesse in Chaucer's poetry is concrete. The God-given nobility of which Dante and Boethius write is a spiritual quality which has as its basis a desire "to enjoy the final blessedness of the contemplation of God, the highest good" (see above, p. 11). True nobility as Chaucer actually employs it, however, is human rather than divine. The "Marriage Group," which is the touchstone of gentilesse in his poetry, emphasizes, not the renunciation of worldly things in favor of heavenly ones, but practical human conduct. An "allegorical" reading of the Clerk's Tale, which is the austerest of the group, would give it a religious implication, but, as has been shown, such a reading would alienate the tale from its context. The debate moves toward a definition of gentilesse, which is the Franklin's. After praising the gentilesse of the Squire, that "worthy vavasour" tells a story which he attributes to "thise olde gentil Britouns" (V, 709). All of the most important qualities of the gentil person figure in
his tale; in Dorigen's serenely dignified response to her courtly lover in what seemed to be a final refusal based on both love and loyalty for her husband and pity for the squire; in Arveragus' sympathetic restraint in the face of her desperate confession; in their decision that regardless of cost, she must keep her word; in the spontaneous generosity of the love-sick squire in renouncing his right to assuage his grief at the expense of Dorigen; in the magnanimous gesture of the philosopher in relinquishing his claim to a large fee. These are the actions of human beings with a deep awareness of their responsibility, not only to maintain their own dignity and "rightwisnesse," but also to understand and respond to the needs of other human beings. The Franklin's conclusion--"Which was the mooste free, as thynketh yow?"--reaffirms that his contribution to the debate has embraced a broader subject than marriage.

Although it is not practical to follow the argument in detail to the conclusion that "in . . . exposing the real and apparent motives of this representative of the gentry, Chaucer is one of the few who holds up for recognition a concrete example of the decline of the old ways and old words," it is appropriate to note that Gaylord presents an excellent case against the Franklin as Chaucer's spokesman on the subject of gentilesse. Referring to the Parson's

2Gaylord, Seed of Felicity, p. 541.
disquisition on Gluttony, he remarks that "from Chaucer's Prologue it would appear that at least the first four fingers of the devil are wrapped around the Franklin, in his endeavors to achieve a country magnificence" (503), and adds that "the Franklin's excessive devotion to his table indicates his own restricted conception of the area of good manners" (504). Of his son's preference of conversation with a page to the company of a gentil person, Gaylord observes that had the young man "played the game like his father" he would have gotten closer to those of higher rank (510). Gaylord finds the Franklin too materialistic to be himself gentil: "Fy on possessioun, / But if a man be vertuous withal!" (V, 686-687), cries the Franklin. The diction perhaps reflects a preoccupation with worldly goods, but even granting that it does, it must inevitably also reflect devotion to virtue. In the same vein, Gaylord sees materialism implicit in the Franklin's attitude toward his son's wastefulness, the suggestion that this is the "most heinous crime" (511); but as a fault representative of youthful extravagance, profligacy has good scriptural authority in the parable of the prodigal son. Even in his response to Harry Bailley's rudeness Gaylord believes that the Franklin "leans too far backwards" (514). In short, he is too much concerned with the superficial manifestations of gentilesse, too little with true gentilesse.
And to begin with, the Franklin is traveling in questionable company: the Sergeant of the Law is "another of those who have grasped the outer surfaces of things and have made a profession of the technical, the mechanical, and the literal" (497). It is admittedly unfair to wonder whether one should approach the tale of Constance, then, with the intention of finding in it, too, a confusion of values; and it is perhaps irrelevant to point to the Physician's Tale as an example of Chaucer's willingness to assign a tale of "moralitee" to a morally flawed speaker, or to the Pardoner's Tale as an example of his willingness to assign an excellent tale with a moral burden to a thoroughly reprehensible pilgrim.

A defense of the Franklin as an exponent of true nobility may rest upon a defense of his character—he is, after all, both generous and amiable, and he is guilty of none of the Merchant's bitterness or the Pardoner's cruelty. But it can be further maintained that the argumentum ad hominem is an insecure foundation upon which to build a case against the premises of the tale.

Gaylord does not, however, allow his argument that the Franklin's gentilesse is superficial to depend solely upon his character as portrayed in the General Prologue and the link between the tales of Canacee and Dorigen. The analysis presented above (pp. 186-200) advances a reading of the story which is not ironic, but it is relevant
to point out here that one of the flaws of the Franklin's philosophy according to Gaylord is the attempt of Arveragus and Dorigen to realize, in their marriage, the reconciliation of two contradictory ideals: the Christian marriage ideal and the courtly love ideal. Christianity clearly names the husband as the "sovereign" member of the marriage relationship; courtly love deifies the woman. In marriage Dorigen and Arveragus effect a compromise. There will be no question of sovereignty. "What reaction," asks Gaylord, "could we expect a reasonably informed layman of the later medieval period to have of such a solution?" (520) It is the argument of this discussion that a "reasonably informed layman" would have regarded the arrangement sympathetically. Courtly love was an accepted and honored literary tradition. It is frequently observed that courtly love is not in harmony with Christian doctrine; but it is not impossible for two conflicting ideals to exist in a society. It is a fairly common opinion that a cause of much neuroticism in the twentieth century United States is the existence in an essentially materialistic society of the ideals of the same Christianity which Chaucer embraced. School children are exposed on the one hand to the acquisitive philosophy of Poor Richard—"A penny saved is a penny earned"—and on the other to the idealism of Christ—"Give no thought to the morrow." It
is not difficult to conceive of an audience which can accept both the ideals of Christianity and those of courtly love; nor is it easy to imagine a more satisfactory resolution of the resultant conflict than that proposed by the Franklin in his description of the marriage of Arveragus and Dorigen. Although Chaucer was an occasional critic of courtly love—even in the story under consideration—no criticism is directed toward the love of these people, whose marriage is an ideal one because of the efforts of both to realize gentilesse.

Also crucial in the arguments against the Franklin's Tale as a dramatization of gentilesse is the dual obligation of Dorigen. She is in a true dilemma; Gray is only one of many critics who complain that she is at fault in disregarding her marriage vows. There is no final answer to the question thus posed: which vow should be honored, the one to her husband or the one to the squire? It is true that the one to Arveragus was serious and meaningful, that the one to the squire was playful and ironical. The appeal to context can again be made, but it doubtlessly wears thin: the poem clearly admits the validity of the frivolous vow. Perhaps the best answer to the question is the imaginary picture of Dorigen laughing off her "obligation" to the squire. "Truthe is the hyeste thyng that man may kepe"—it is witness to the depth of under-

\[^3\text{Gray, p. 223.}\]
standing between Dorigen and her husband that she turns to him to make her decision, that together they honor the obligation which affects them both. She could have killed herself; she could have honored her promise to Aurelius in secret; she could have explained to him that she didn't really mean it. But these hardly seem the actions of a gentil woman. Gaylord remarks that the Franklin relies on "the machinations of the plot" to "settle the inner predicaments of the characters." There is validity in the opinion, to be sure. Yet is it not equally true that Arveragus is in a desperate situation? To use a prosaic analogy, Goren suggests that the best strategy for a seemingly hopeless bridge hand is to assume that the cards are ideally distributed; if there is a way out, the player should ignore adverse possibilities and dispense with routine cautionary measures which might interfere with the winning of the hand if the cards are right. Ordinarily, of course, play proceeds tentatively, and a predetermined course of action can be abandoned in favor of another one if the order of play seems to require it. But occasionally a hand can be won only if the cards occupy certain positions. Such is the one Arveragus holds. If the analogy seems inappropriate in the discussion of such a serious game, it may be remarked that Arveragus "gambles," not on the chance distribution

4Gaylord, p. 537.
of cards, but on the impulse to generosity which may be inspired by the exercise of gentilesse. He relies on human nobility, in short. And he wins. Had he and Dorigen conspired to evade the consequences of her rash promise, he might have lost less than he risks; yet only by the course of action which he chooses could he have preserved intact all of the virtues which he values.

There is a compromise involved, and the attitude of the tale is, as Howard expresses it, "highly secular." The marriage vow was a holy one. The efforts of Dorigen and Aurelius to realize a compromise could not be applauded by the Parson; but by Chaucer himself, they are. Chaucer's "rejection" of the Franklin's gentilesse is not a part of the conception of his character or of his tale. The same principle applies to Troilus and Criseyde. The values of the poem are not precisely those of Christianity. But the resolution of the implied conflict is outside the poem again, essentially, for the Epilogue is an acknowledgment from the Christian point of view of the priority of doctrine over the secular ideal of conduct which is gentilesse.

It is interesting that of the three poets considered in this dissertation, Chaucer is the only one whose social position was ambiguous. Both Griffith and Howard find

Howard, p. 231.
significance in this fact. Griffith connects it with Chaucer's emphasis on gentilesse: he "belonged to the class of burgesses who were sufficiently favored, rich, and powerful to advance themselves into the nobleman's way of life. As a result, it was natural for him to give careful consideration to those things that make a gentleman." And Howard defines the poet's role as that "of a bourgeois addressing his social betters"—one who, conscious of his status, chose to exaggerate middle-class traits in himself as a means of preventing "discomfort." But by allowing the Franklin, an untitled and "burel" man, to define gentilesse, Chaucer indicates a nobility not bound to social class. It is not necessary to make too much of Chaucer's "democratic" tendencies or lack thereof. But not insignificant is the fact that Griselda, an exemplar of gentilesse, is of humble birth and that in her performance as "markysesse" she helps to weaken the argument of Stillwell that in idealizing the Plowman by emphasizing his "economic contentment," Chaucer is expressing disapproval of the "general reality." In the portrait, according to


7 Donald R. Howard, "Chaucer the Man," PMLA, LXXX (1965), 342.

8 Gardiner Stillwell, "Chaucer's Plowman and the Contemporary English Peasant," ELH, VI (1949), 285.
Stillwell, he is "re-expressing the conservative, medieval ideal of the proper order of society, that ideal according to which each individual had his God-given niche to fill." Chaucer doubtless opposed revolution by violence; certainly his concept of gentilesse is related to that opposition in that it demands patient resignation. But surely Griselda is ample demonstration of his willingness to permit flexibility in the social hierarchy, sufficient answer to the suggestion that a peasant displays his gentilesse merely by remaining a peasant.

The distinctiveness of Chaucer's uses of gentilesse is evident by contrast to those of Langland and the Gawain-poet. Langland lived among the common people; the aristocracy were beyond his experience. He had no social ambitions of his own, no particular concern with society. His poem is primarily about the man-God relationship, and he has the attitude that is sometimes too facilely referred to as the "essence" of medievalism: that this earth is but a necessary period of preparation for heaven, that the first purpose of humanity is to discover its salvation. Such an attitude makes gentilesse in Chaucer's sense of the word unimportant to him. A man's secular responsibility in Langland's view is the performance of his duties: a weaver should weave, just as a circle should be "truly a circle" in order to deserve to be called a "noble circle" (see above, p. 11). Langland is in no way
interested in describing anything that might be termed "manners"; the perfection of social conduct pales in comparison to the quest for salvation which to him is the meaning of life. Langland and Chaucer's Parson share the same ideal.

The Gawain-poet, inhabiting an aristocratic society, takes as a theme an ideal of conduct, and, like Chaucer, relies upon the standards of chivalry; truth to one's word is to both poets important. But, in the final analysis, the Gawain-poet is less social in his ideal of conduct than Chaucer is. The shame of Gawain, the moral awareness which is his finest quality, is closely related to the theological ideal of repentance, which outside the Parson's Tale receives little attention from Chaucer. And Gawain is most ashamed, not of having betrayed his word—"the hyeste thyng that man may kepe"—but of having succumbed to cowardice and covetousness which have caused him to forsake his nature, "pat is larges & lewte pat longe to kny3te3" (2381). "If ye look to your beginning and your author, which is God," Philosophy has asked Boethius, "is any man degenerate or base but he who by his own vices cherishes base things and leaves that beginning which was his?" Like Boethius, the Gawain-poet emphasizes the necessity of rejecting false values and embracing the true. Gawain's morality is—and not in a derogatory sense of the word—self-centered. The preservation of his own purity
is central to it; he is concerned with "semly" behavior throughout the poem, and he strives to maintain his claim to moral excellence for its own sake. The man-directed impulse to compassion is not an element of the poem. Human relationships receive no emphasis. In Chaucer's poetry, they are central.

Gentilesse is a broad and elusive concept, the manifestations of which are necessarily dependent upon situations. No cataloging of its components could be complete; Mann points out that in the Middle Ages there was "a ritual of greeting" which "required that one be the first to greet, whenever possible," and there is no reason to suppose that Chaucer's Franklin rejected this requirement, although the tale offers its principal characters no opportunity to display this external refinement. But the goal of this study has been, not an application of prescribed rules of conduct to Chaucer's fictional creations, but a recognition of gentilesse as it functions in his poetry. And what Chaucer demands of man in relationship to man is clearly defined and consistently bodied forth in his poems.

Gentilesse, to Chaucer, is in part an outgrowth of the courtly love code. In his early poetry the trite plea of a lover for mercy, which is given traditional form in "A Complaint to his Lady," has little significance as a

9Mann, p. 12.
means by which the poet expresses his criticism of life. But in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the same emotion provides a very real motive for the conduct of the heroine; and paradoxically, her "pitee," not stabilized by constancy, allows her to yield to Diomedes as well as to Troilus. The two qualities in balance prompt Dorigen to reply to her suitor with a kindly jest, a more human if less traditional reaction than disdain. The faithfulness demanded of lovers is, obviously, related to the fidelity to one's word which Chaucer values highly throughout his poetic career.

There is no Christian virtue which can be categorically excluded from Chaucerian gentilesse. It can be remarked that the truth of Dorigen, the constancy or steadfastness of Griselda, the compassion of Theseus or of the Prioress, and the submissiveness to authority of Palamon are the qualities which Chaucer most consistently emphasizes as gentil, but it can also be pointed out that he values humility in the Franklin and the Squire and reverence in the Prioress. The direction of the morality of Chaucer's greatest poetry, however, is earthward, not heavenward.

The fact that gentilesse figures most prominently in poems in which the Christian elements are either absent or subordinate—the *Knight's Tale*, the *Franklin's Tale*, *Troilus* and *Criseyde*—helps to support the contention
that gentilesse is Chaucer's private secular ideal whose province is man's relationship to man. Chaucer was essentially a secular poet. He was moral; he was Christian. But he was also a humanist. His commitment to humanity is an impulse which he as a Christian twice retracts. In absolute terms both the Retraction to the Canterbury Tales and the Epilogue to the Troilus admit the inefficacy of human efforts and the sinful nature of man and acknowledge the grace of God as the only saving agent. But in the Canterbury Tales, although he admires those pilgrims who affirm "the life of the spirit," his most genuine sympathies are with those who affirm the life of man on earth—a life led in accordance with a social standard. The breadth of sympathy which has become a cliché in reference to Chaucer embraces everything but the unnatural--

But certeinly no word ne writeth he
Of thilke wikke ensample of Canacee,
That loved hir owene brother synfully--
(I, 77-79)

of the cynical—the Merchant enjoys little of his creator's affection. Both anathemas are embodied in the "one lost soul" among the pilgrims, the Pardoner.

The Canterbury Tales treat a flawed humanity which accept or reject ideals both secular and religious. Both the inadequacy of gentilesse and Chaucer's own attitude toward it are reflected in the Retraction, which applies,
not only to the tales that obviously "sownen into synne," but to works such as the *Book of the Duchess*, the *Parliament of Fowls*, and *Troilus and Criseyde*, thus almost certainly to the *Franklin's Tale*, the *Squire's Tale*, and all other works that, however pervaded with moral awareness, fail to renounce worldly affections in favor of heavenly ones. He retracts such works in all earnestness; if the whole of the *Canterbury Tales* had been conceived with a "hooly" intention, all of them used to that end, there would have been no need for retraction.

But the validity of *gentilesse* as a human ideal is in the *Tales* themselves immune from attack. In retrospect, not as participant in a fictional pilgrimage, but as pilgrim to the celestial city, Chaucer the man—not Chaucer the poet or Chaucer the elvish pilgrim—acknowledges its inadequacy.
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APPENDIX

On these pages are reproduced the original texts of quotations cited in translation in Chapter I. They are arranged in the order in which they appear in the text. Editions used are that of Rvdolfvs Peiper for the Consolation of Philosophy, that of Valentino Piccoli for the Convivio, and that of Langlois for the Romance of the Rose.

Consolation of Philosophy

Omnis mortalium cura quam multiplicium studiorum labor exercet, diverso quidem calle procedit, sed ad unum tamen beatitudinis finem nititur peruenire. Id autem est bonum quo quis adepto nihil ulterior desiderare queat. Quod quidem est omnium summum bonorum cunctaque intra se bona continens, cui si quid aforet, summum esse non posset, quoniam relinquueretur extrinsecus, quod posset optari. Liqueat igitur esse beatitudinem statum bonorum omnium congregatione perfectum. Hunc, uti diximus, diverso tramite mortales omnes conantur adipisci. Est enim mentibus hominum ueri boni naturaliter inserta cupiditas, sed ad falsa deiuus error abducit. (III, ii, pp. 51-52)

Iam uero quam sit inane quam futtile nobilitatis nomen, quis non uideat? quae si ad claritutinem refertur, aliena est. uidetur namque esse nobilitas quaedam de meritis ueniens laus parentum. Quod si claritudinem praedicat facit, illi sint clari necesse est qui praedicantur. quare splendidum te, si tuam non habes, aliena claritudo non efficit. Quod si quid est in nobilitate bonum, id esse arbitror solum, ut inposita nobilitibus,
Il Convivio

Trattato Quarto, Canzone Terza

Dico ch'ogni vertù principalmente
vien da una radice;
vertute, dico, che fa l'uom felice
in sua operazione.
Questo è, secondo che l'Etica dice,
un abito eleglente
lo qual dimora ni mezzo solamente,
e tali parole pone.
Dico che nobilitate in sua ragione
importa sempre ben del suo subietto,
come viltate importa sempre male. (81-91)

È gentilezza dovunque'è vertute,
ma non vertute ov'ella;
sì com'è 'l cielo dovunque'è la stella,
ma ciò non e converso. (101-104)

chè solo Iddio a l'anima la dona
che vede in sua persona
perfettamente star: sì ch'ad alquanti
ch'è 'l seme di felicità s'accosta,
presso da Dio nel'anima ben posta.

L'anima cui adorna esta bontate
non la si tiene ascosa,
chè dal principio ch'al corpo si sposa
la mostra infìn la morte.
Ubidente, soave e vergognosa
è ne la primera etate,
e sua persona adorna di bieltate
con le sue parti accorte;
in giovinezza, temperata e forte,
piena d'amore e di cortese lode,
e solo in lealtà far si diletta;
è ne la sua senetta
prudente e giusta, e larghezza se n'ode,
e 'n se medesma gode
d'udire e ragionar de l'altrui prode;
poi ne la quarta parte de la vita
a Dio si rimarita,
contemplando la fine che l'aspetta,
e benedice li tempi passati.
Vedete omai quanti son l'ingannati! (116-140)

**Le Roman de la Rose**

Ne li prince ne sont pas digne
Qui le cors dou ciel doignent signe
De leur mort plus que d'un autre ome,
Car leur cors ne vaut une pome
Outre le cors d'un charriuer,
Ou d'un clerc, ou d'un escuier;
Car je faz tous semblables estre. (18589-95)

**nus n'est gentis**
S'il n'est a vertuz ententis,
Ne n'est vilains fors pour ses vices,
Don il pert outrageus e nices. (18615-18)

Si ront clerc plus grant advantage
D'estre gentill, courtois e sage,
E la raison vous en lirai,
Que n'ont li prince ne li rei,
Qui ne sevent de letreiire. (18635-39)

Par pluseurs le vous prouverai,
Qui furent né de bas lignages,
E plus orent nobles courages
Que maint fille de reis ne de contes,
Qui pour gentis furent tenuz. (18734-38)

Car je faz a touz a saveir
Que gentillece aus gens ne done
Nule autre chose qui seid bone
Fors que ce fait tant seulement. (18802-05)
VITA

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