

Gentilesse and 'The Franklin's Tale': Malcolm Hebron considers 'pitee', 'trouthe', 'fredom' and 'honour', all aspects of 'gentilesse'--an idea that lies at the heart of Chaucer's 'The Franklin's Tale'

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Chaucer was a courtly poet and his courtly audience was naturally interested in tales that reflected its own lives--not only the outer life of aristocratic pursuits such as jousts and writing love poetry, but also the inner life, with its aspirations to noble values and ideals. A general label for this code of idealised behaviour is 'gentilesse' and time and again Chaucer's writings touch on this concept. Like all complex notions, it raises many questions. What does it mean to be 'gentil'? Is it a condition restricted to the highborn? However desirable it may be in theory, is 'gentilesse' possible in practice, given the depravity of human nature and worldly corruption? Are the different attributes that go under the general heading of 'gentilesse' consistent, or could one sometimes contradict another? The more we engage with such issues, the closer we will get to entering Chaucer's creative world.

Social and moral gentilesse

Chaucer gives us a clear answer to the question of being highborn. In line with earlier writers like Boethius and Dante, he insists that you certainly do not have to be of noble birth to be of noble character. Indeed, the first may even hinder the second, by making you feel you are special when, from God's perspective, you are not. Nobility of character is not about who you are, but what you do: it comes from good actions, inspired by divine grace, and it has nothing to do with inherited privileges. The first verse of Chaucer's poem 'Gentilesse' states the case plainly:

The firste stok [stock, ancestor], fader of gentilesse--What man that
desireth gentil for to be Must folowe his trace [track, footsteps], and
alle his wittes dresse Vertu to love and vyces for to flee. For unto vertu
longeth dignitee And noght the revers, saufly dar I deme, Al were he
mytre, croune, or diaderne.

That is to say, the only source of true 'gentilesse' is the heavenly father. It is acquired by living the good life, by loving virtue and fleeing vice. True dignity, or importance, comes from being virtuous. Being a bigwig in this world is no indication at all that you are the genuine 'gentil' article: 'For unto vertu longeth dignitee/And noght the revers'.

There are two uses of 'gentil': in the worldly social sense (having 'Sir' before your name and so forth) and the true sense, which denotes moral excellence. The first is restricted to those of a certain rank; the second is open to all of us as descendants of Adam. And if we think that the first (social) sense implies the second (moral) one, then we are in serious error. As the old woman in 'The Wife of Bath's

Tale' puts it to an arrogant young knight in need of serious instruction on his duties: 'Thy gentillesse cometh fro God allone'. Nowhere does Chaucer deviate from this position and it seems likely that such lines represent his personal conviction on the matter.

Gentillesse in 'The Franklin's Tale'

But what does 'gentillesse' involve? It can be thought of as a large set that includes several smaller sets, some of them overlapping or forming subsets of their own. There is no way of summing it up with a modern equivalent word or phrase. We can best try to understand 'gentillesse' not by studying the word, but in feeling the way in which the idea emerges from whole tales. No tale could be better for this purpose than the Franklin's, which seems more than any other to be a concentrated study of 'gentillesse'. This intention is clearly signalled before the tale, in the words between the Franklin and the Squire:

In feith, Squier, thow hast thee wel yquit And gentilly...

The Franklin complains that his son is not pursuing 'gentillesse'--he gambles and would rather talk with a page than a 'gentil' person--and his tale explores this theme with great intensity. The opening lines take us into the various ingredients that make up the whole noble confection. We learn that the knight Arveragus 'many a labour ... wrought': he is admirably industrious in his calling as a knight. He further displays 'worthynesse' and 'meke obeysaunce' (meek submission). He promises Dorigen that in their marriage he 'Ne sholde upon hym take no maistrie' and this is echoed by Dorigen's 'humblesse'. This opening anatomy of 'gentillesse' is rounded off with the Franklin's own homily on the virtues of patience and moderation.

This list of ideals is confusing and no tale of this length could develop all of them. But as the tale progresses, some fundamental aspects of 'gentillesse' emerge that are important elsewhere in Chaucer and in medieval culture: 'pitee', 'trouthe', 'freedom' and 'honour'.

Pitee

'Pitee' is rather stronger than the modern word 'pity'. It includes also the idea of piety (or religious duty) and it is at home in the company of other religious words. This is where we find it early on in the tale, when Dorigen 'Hath swich a pitee caught of his penaunce' that she decides to accept Arveragus as a husband. Often when we say something like 'I pity her', we also suggest that we are bigger than her: pitying others can imply looking down on them. But in 'The Franklin's Tale', the opposite happens: characters who feel 'pitee' are not so much feeling sorry for someone as responding to some quality of greatness in them. Thus, Aurelius, when he learns that at Arveragus's behest Dorigen is actually going to keep her promise to him, 'hadde greet compassioun ... And in his herte he caughte of this greet routhe'. The italicised words denote the same quality of 'pitee' (the word Aurelius himself later uses to describe his reaction)--a nobility of spirit that recognises imaginatively, and responds generously to, another's nobility in a time of tribulation. Chaucer's attitude to this seems to be summed up in a line that he uses in more than one tale: 'For pitee renneth soon in gentil herte'.

Trouthe

When we are engaged to be married, we plight our troth--we promise to be true to our word. In 'The Franklin's Tale', this ideal is the principle about which the whole plot turns--Dorigen declares:

By thilke God that yaf me soule and lyf Ne shal I nevere been untrewe wyf

And Arveragus pronounces:

Trouthe is the hyste thyng that man may kepe

Chaucer tests this to the limit. If there were ever a promise that could be broken with impunity, it would be Dorigen's promise to Aurelius: she makes it under stress, in play and evidently with the intention of letting Aurelius down gently. Yet once the promise is made, she and Arveragus regard it as absolutely binding. How can we accept this? Chaucer himself is clearly aware that this is taking matters beyond the bounds of credibility. The Franklin anticipates that the audience will criticise the husband for forcing his wife to keep this undertaking and gives the ending away by assuring us that everything will be all right.

But this unlikely and unpleasant situation may be justified by the question it raises: what is it that makes me who I am? We may not be so unlike these Breton nobles as we first think. For we, too, like to approve of ourselves: 'I'm the sort of person you can trust. I won't let my friends down', we might say. Thus, we define ourselves by a certain quality--in this case, reliability--and strive to live up to it. If an occasion should arise in which we do let a friend down, we might then experience both social disgrace and inner remorse and with it a feeling that we have stopped being ourselves--a kind of spiritual death. This is the situation that Dorigen is in: her 'trouthe' is not just a value she has picked off the shelf, but a principle which defines her, which gives her a moral life. Of course, the fictional situation of a tale clarifies the issue by tidying it. In real life, we would hope that such adherence would be tempered by a sense of realism and flexibility. But realism and flexibility would kill 'The Franklin's Tale' stone-dead. To illuminate a moral crisis, you sometimes have to simplify it by depicting it in an extreme and memorable case. Such simplified dramatisations are called exempla and we get a long list of them in Dorigen's interminable lament.

Freedom

Next to 'trouthe', 'freedom' or 'franchise' (generosity) is the chief quality of 'gentillesse' celebrated in this tale. It denotes a giving spirit and involves the act of surrendering something valuable to the advantage of another. Arveragus's generosity leads him to put his wife's faithfulness above his own happiness. This act starts the chain of noble quitclaims (the legal action of letting someone off an obligation to you). When the Clerk surrenders his claim to money, 'gentillesse' spreads outwards from the noble classes:

But if a clerk koude doon a gentil dede As wel as any of yow, it is no

drede!

As Chaucer had written in 'Gentillesse', anyone can become noble in character by exercising virtue. However, this is not a ticket to the upper classes: at the end, the 'gentil' Clerk is still just a clerk. This aspect of noble character is uppermost in our minds, as the tale closes with the question 'Which was the mooste fre, as thynketh yow?'

Honour

Although morally 'gentil' behaviour is open to those outside the gentility, the characters who exemplify 'gentillesse' in Chaucer do tend to be knights living up to their position, rather than commoners leading a godly life. Being a knight necessarily involves a certain kind of behaviour and public reputation. Arveragus has to maintain the dignity of the office of knighthood and he must do this by keeping his honour:

That wolde he have for shame of his degree. To seke in armes worshipe and honour

Dorigen shares this deep need of good reputation:

But nathelees, yet have I levere to lese My lif than of my body to have a shame, Or knowe myselven fals, or lese my name

Some readers criticise Arveragus for this concern with worldly fame. But he is not pursuing honour for himself out of a selfish instinct. Rather, he is upholding the estate of knighthood, which is committed to ensuring justice and serving the Church. Honour is like a judge's robe worn not to glorify the wearer but to maintain the dignity of the justice system. Worldly honour may finally be less than inner spiritual qualities such as 'pitee', but it still plays a crucial part in preserving a just and ordered system that protects all. Odd though it sounds, in pursuing 'worship', Arveragus is actually submitting to something bigger than himself. Similarly, Dorigen seeks to do honour to her own vocation as a good wife and her good name is part of her moral identity.

The Franklin

I have argued that 'The Franklin's Tale' is a serious work of art concerned with a serious theme: the ideal code of behaviour known as 'gentillesse' and the problems it raises in an imperfect world. I do not find the argument that the Franklin is telling the tale as part of his personal social ambitions either convincing or interesting. At best, it seems to me a side-issue compared with the deep moral areas that the story explores. It may, though, be a rather inviting line to take today. In a climate of general uncertainty about the validity of ideals, we may be more comfortable finding dubious motives for telling a tale about goodness than considering the nature of goodness itself. Others think differently, of course. The tale ends with a question and its readers will be debating its message for a long while yet.

Malcolm Hebron teaches English at Winchester College.

Hebron, Malcolm

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