

The word *gentilesse* is employed frequently by Chaucer throughout his works, mainly in reference to a sense of aristocracy or nobility, but also in reference to a state of mind that reflects an honorable way of living. The literal definition of the word, “the quality of being gentle,” is only one part of the meaning the word encompasses, which carry connotations of being a member of the upper class or of being “from good stock,” or of being “courteous and polite” (Oxford English Dictionary). In *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale* and *The Parliament of Fowls*, we see Chaucer connect the idea of *gentilesse* with “heigh parage” or upper-class birth, and then demolish that idea later in the story in favor of a sense of *gentilesse* that is earned rather than inherited (Benson 1120). In both stories, we get a lesson on what really constitutes a *gentil* person and why it is better to be respected for your merits rather than your birth.

In *The Parliament of Fowls*, a poet travels through an inspiring dreamland and finds himself in a mysterious garden amongst gods and goddesses. The presence of these divine beings, one goddess of which is named *Gentilesse* herself, hint at the idea of high rank and *gentilesse* that is present throughout this story. When the poet is brought to the goddess Nature, who is the controller of all the animals and plants on earth, the idea of a hierarchy and a gentry is already established. Nature is the leader of the assembly, along smaller delegations of birds permitted to represent their own delegation, with leaders chosen depending on their status. “The foules of ravine,” or the carnivorous birds, are set as the upper class gentry within the birds, while “water foule sat lowest”, representing the lower caste of birds (324-327). This “parliament of fowls” for which the story is named creates a sort of government based on the status of the birds, until it runs into a problem in governance while picking mates for all the birds.

“A formel egle, of shap the gentileste,” wishes to find a mate like all of the other birds, yet her beauty, nobility and virtues make her wanted by three other eagles (373-4). The formal eagle is at the top of the hierarchy, as a beautiful and perfectly bred bird. Nature, in keeping with the order of

things, recommends that the formel take for her a partner with the same amount of royal *gentilesse* that she herself has. “The tersel egle ... the foul royal, above yow in degree ... He shal first chese and speken in his gyse.” Nature remarks (393-395). Nature, since she prefers the higher-bred, royal, gentil faucon over the lower-bred tercel, thinks that she is merely supporting the natural order of things when she allows the royal tercel to lay claim to the female eagle before the others (337). He get the first choice naturally because he is at the top of the hierarchy.

Similar to the royal tersel, the old lady in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is given the choice to marry the knight whose life she saved, with the difference being that the Wife of Bath earned her choice despite her low status and the royal tercel got his choice by default because of rank. Despite being poor and ugly and certainly not from a *gentil* family, the promise the old hag requested from the knight guarantees that she will be able to choose to become the knight's wife, as knights are too noble to ever break a promise. The way the old woman saved the knight's life ensures that she has the right to request him to fulfill his promise to her for her goodness, underscoring the idea of *gentil* virtues belonging to lowly folk. She reminds him that just because she is not part of the gentry, it doesn't mean she has no *gentil* virtues. “Looke who that is moost virteous alway / Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay / To do the gentil dedes that he kan / Taak hym for the grettest gentil man,” the lowly hag advises the knight, who is horrified at the prospect of marrying a lowly, ugly old lady (1113-1116). True gentility shows itself in your actions and behaviors, not in “old richesse” or “hir heritage,” she says (1110, 1119). You can tell whether a person is good from their actions, not the way they look or how much money they have, the old hag hints, but the knight still cannot get past her hideous appearance once they are married.

Appearances are duplicitous in both stories, as we see when the royal tercel reveals his true colors as he is vying with the lower birds in competition for the formel. As the royal tersel speaks, he declares that if he is ever caught being “untrewe, disobeyaunt, or willful necligent,” then he will

allow all the birds of the flock to tear his flesh apart (428-430). This image of untruthfulness, disobedience and negligence accompanied by a punishment of dismemberment, if only in hypothetical terms, is in direct contrast to the *gentil* qualities the royal tersel is supposed to possess. His speech of love to the formel hints at the possibility of him ever becoming suspected of doing such things, which is certainly not in keeping with the idea of a *gentil*, royal bird. The second bird, an eagle of a lower rank, speaks next, claiming to the other birds that he “at the leste . . . love hir as wel as ye,” saying that if he can’t claim to love her *more* than the other two birds, he can at least claim to love her *equally*.

These two unsatisfactory answers is followed by the speech of the lowest eagle in the gentry, the eagle who was allowed to speak last because of his lower birth. Apologizing modestly for keeping all the birds here so long out of this argument over the formel, and admitting that he has not admired the formel for as long as the other eagles, the third tercel still insists that he is the rightful pair for the formel because “I wol ben here, whether I wake or wynke.” (483). He vows he will be hers no matter which tersel she ends up with. His gentle tone and dedicated, chivalric oath of love is the last and most powerful declaration.

“So gentil plee in love or other thin, / ne herde nevere no man me biforn,” the poet writes after the third tersel’s declaration of love (485-6). The tercel is *gentil* in his plea, if not “royal” like the higher-bred tersel. While the Goddess reiterates her preference for the royal tersel by claiming that the most worthy of the three is the “most of estate, of blod the gentilleste,” and that it should be obvious to the formel whom she means, she gives the formel the ability to decide which tersel she would like to marry for herself (55). Nature prods the formel into choosing the royal tersel again, as the “gentilesste and most worthi” (635). However, the formel seems to disagree. Wisely, she grants each of the “gentil egles” a year to prove to her whom loves her best, based on their qualities and servitude rather than their rank in nature.

This wise move of the formel teaches us that the true meaning of “gentillesse” is from the virtues you possess and the “gentil dedes” that you perform, and not what station you were born to. The formel luckily realizes this before being paired up with any of the other eagles, while the knight is given no option in which lady he gets to marry. Forced into marriage with the “loothly,” poverty-stricken hag, the knight overlooks her good deeds and gentle demeanor and bemoans the day he was cursed into marrying her. However, the old hag gives the knight a lesson similar to the formel’s: that gentillesse is not a natural characteristic you are born with, but something you earn through respect. “If gentillesse were planted naturally / un-to a certeyn linage, dount the lyne / Privee ne apert, than wold the never fine / To doon of gentillesse the fair offyce,” she tells him, reminding him that many people of noble rank are caught doing very un-gentlemanly like deeds, like the knight was when he was arrested for raping the maiden (1134-7). After she chides the knight for judging her by her rank instead of her character, the old hag asks the knight if he would trade her noble qualities for a higher rank and more beauty, or if he would prefer her to stay virtuous and ugly. The knight allows the old woman to choose for herself, much like the formel is allowed her choice; and the old lady transforms into a beautiful maiden that is young, noble and loyal.

The idea of “gentillesse” posed by Chaucer invokes not only the idea of the gentry and belonging to the upper class, but also of being noble and virtuous and worthy of respect. The feeling of being gentle and kind is reiterated in Chaucer’s uses of gentillesse, and an important part of being a *gentil* character is being chivalric and respectful to females. This is shown in the formel’s ability to fly free for a year before committing to her choice of mate and in the knight’s discovery that all women wish to have “soveraynetee” and liberty. The idea of being fair and just to someone and judging them based on their character rather than their birth is shown in both stories, with the royal tercel having to compete with the lower eagles for possession of the formel, and the knight from King Arthur’s court who falls from grace after committing a heinous act. In both stories, the

character of the higher rank is not always the one with the most *gentilesse*, and their actions eventually uncover them.

Bibliography

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