<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>項目</th>
<th>内容</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>記事名</td>
<td>Chaucer's gentils in their age Part 2</td>
</tr>
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<td>著者</td>
<td>Hira, Toshinori</td>
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<td>引用</td>
<td>長崎大学教養部紀要 人文科学篇 1987, 27(2), p.1-17</td>
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<tr>
<td>発行日</td>
<td>1987-01</td>
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<td>URL</td>
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Chaucer's gentils in their age

Part 2

Toshinori Hira

As has been suggested, many of the gentle-born and well-bred pilgrims of the knightly class and the clerical order almost do not render their primary obligations. The failure in their feudal duties spells a gradual decline in the power of the leading classes to which they belong. Some of these classes might be represented, presumably by a group of people who throngs into Chaucer's House of Fame to ask Fame for worldly renown. These suppliants claim to obtain worldly renown but she resists their claim (1615: As thryve I (i.e. Fame) ... ye (i.e. good folk) shal faylle! / Good werkes shal yow noght availle / To have of me good fame as now. / But wite ye what? Y graunte yow / That ye shal have a shrewed fame, / And wikkyd loos (praise), and worse name, / Though ye good loos have wel deserved. / Now goo your wey, for ye be served). The successful men of the new classes were achieving social, political, economic prominence; they, unqualified for gentility, were raised to knighthood. These newly risen men also might be represented, possibly by a group of Chaucer's folk who, having rightfully deserved fame, beseeches Lady Fame that 'hit (i.e. fame) mote be knowe, / Ryght as hit is (1663–1664).' She grants the suppliants' request and says: '...for me list (pleases) / That now your goode werkes be wiste, / And yet ye shul han better
loos, / Right in dispit of alle your foos, / Than worthy is, and
that anoon (1665-1669).

Explanations of the decline of those of gentle birth and the rise of the new men can be sought in the extension of the royal power and the king's use of the commoners for public offices. This Edward III did by developing the military, police and administrative systems. The immense increase of the royal power and the support of the commoners were needed for his wars with France as the knights, eager for wool production, were reluctant to perform knight service, civil and military, to the king.

Edward III, who, after having failed to subjugate Scotland, waged war against France, an ally of the Scots, for the crown of France, relied for the raising of an army on the indenture system64 which Edward I had already employed. The great war with France required a large army. On this system the king and magnates made contracts with the commanders who were lesser lords for various conditions—the number and type of knights or soldiers, the length of service and the rate of wages. The indenture of a retainer is seen by reference to a contract which John of Gaunt made with Symkin the squire. Under the contract it is provided that: '...Symkyn shall be bound to serve our ...lord as well in time of peace as of war in whatsoever parts it shall please our ...lord, well and fitly arrayed. And he shall be boarded .... And he shall take for his fees by the year ...ten marks sterling from the issue of the Duchy of Lancaster by the hands of the receiver there who now is or shall be in time to come, at the terms of Easter and Michaelmas by even

64 See McKisack, op. cit., pp. 234f.
portions yearly for the whole of his life. And, moreover our lord has granted to him by the year in time of war five marks sterling by the hands of the treasurer of war for the time being . . . ."65 The indentured troops, for as long as were paid, readily fought in France, their duties being not limited to forty days, whereas the knight service by the feudal tenure was limited to forty days.66 Chaucer's allusion to the method of service by the indenture is distant. The Knight's Tale contains a humorous allusion to the god of Love's contract with his love servants (I(A)1802: ...hath hir lord, the god of Love, ypayed / Hir wages and hir fees for hir servyse!). The king's forces so organized comprised men of all ranks; his forces were the heterogeneous crowd of magnates, lesser lords, knights, yeomen and soldiers. Laurence Minot's lines enable us to get a glimpse of the main class constituents of Edward III's indentured troops, ready to fight against the French at the Flamengerie: 'The felde hat (named) Flemangrye / That king Edward was in, / With princes that war (were) stif ande bolde, / And dukes that war doghty (brave) tolde (estimated) / In batayle to bigin. / The princes that war riche (ready) on raw (battle line) / Gert (Made) nakers (kettle-drums) strike and trumpes blaw, / And made mirth at thaire might; / Both alblast (cross bow) and many a bow / War redy railed (placed) opon a row, / And ful frek (hardy) for to fight ('Song of Edward,' ll. 74-84)."67 Edward

65 Compiled by E. Rickert, op. cit., p. 139.
66 In 1385 the feudal army was levied for the last time. For the primary duties of enfeoffed knights see F. M. Stenton, The First Century of English Feudalism 1066-1166, Oxford, 1961, pp. 174-176.
67 F. Mossè, A Handbook of Middle English, tr. J. A. Walker, Baltimore,
III, chivalric in his taste, with an ardour for fighting, found his belief in the principles of chivalry in its embellishments. Jean Froissart in his *Chronicles* echoes the king's chivalric belief and describes his intention of founding the knights of the Blue Garter: 'King Edward's intention was to found an order of knights, made up of himself and his sons and the bravest and noblest in England and other countries too. There would be forty of them in all and they would be called the Knights of the Blue Garter and their feast was to be held every year at Windsor on St George's Day. To institute the feast, the King called together the earls, barons and knights of the whole country and told them of his intentions and of his great desire to see them carried out.'68 At the same time, contrary to his liking for chivalrous pageantry did the king make up for the dearth of feudal knights by raising soldiers from freemen and constraining yeomen to archery.69 The archer and men-at-arms tactics which the king used to make up for the numerical inferiority of English knights gained an overwhelming victory over the French chivalry at Crécy in 1346 and at Poitiers in 1356 as well. The yeomen archers as not fighting, though in concert with the knights, according to the accepted science of chivalrous warfare against the French and their Genoese allies at Crécy are described in Froissart's *Chronicles*: '...the English archers took one pace forwards and poured out their arrows on the Genoese so thickly and evenly that they fell like snow. When they felt those arrows

1952, p. 237. See also Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, I(A) 2501-2503, 2509-2510.


piercing their arms, their heads, their faces, the Genoese, who had never met such archers before, were thrown into confusion.... Between them and the main body of the French there was a hedge of knights, splendidly mounted and armed, who had been watching their discomfiture and now cut off their retreat...the mounted men began to strike out at them on all sides and many staggered and fell, never to rise again. The English continued to shoot into the thickest part of the crowd, wasting none of their arrows. In the portrait of his Yeoman Chaucer refers to the Yeoman’s bow as ‘a myghty bowe,’ not as a long bow, but in the Tale of Sir Thopas uses the flying weapon for satirizing the degraded knight who is skillful with a bow and arrow: Sir Thopas, says Chaucer, is ‘a good archeer.’ Archery did not count among martial accomplishments of a knight. The feudal levy had almost given place to the raising of troops by indenture. The discrepancy between both methods of raising troops was appalling. By the early fourteenth century, in actuality, many knights had already ceased to render knight service in person or by scutage and retired from military service, and from civil service as well. They had been occupied with country business. Some conducted their lords’ business. They served as seneschals of their lords’ manors although lesser officials, reeves or provosts (the position of whom the tenant

70 Froissart, op. cit., pp. 88-89.
71 I(A)108; see also III(D)1381.
72 VII(B2) 739.
73 See Robinson, op. cit., p. 738.
75 See Poole, op. cit., pp. 53-56.
farmers had taken) were virtually filling the manorial post. Chaucer’s Oswald, who ‘was of carpenteris craft,’ serves as a reeve in some lord’s manor (I(A)597: His lordes sheep, his neet (cattle) his dayerye, / His swyn, his hors, his stoor (stock) and his pultrye / Was hoolly in this Reves governynge). The lords had prompted a sheep-farming industry, there having been in an increasing demand for wool.76 So, peasant farmers kept one or two sheep in arable areas. Chaucer’s ‘poure wydwe’ keeps ‘a sheep that highte Malle.’77

Edward III, straitened for a numerical weakness of knights,78 resorted the means of using the freeholders, the franklins, for governmental offices, both military and civil, as Edward I had done in 1278. Edward III assigned the knightly duties to all franklins, wealthy in landed properties, who in 1345 held land worth £25 a year or more.79 Property incomes which distinguished those who could be knighted from those of inferior ranks often varied with the king’s issues of the writs for distraint of knighthood. From Chaucer’s reference to his Franklin’s land of £20 worth (V(F)684: it right now were fallen in myn hond) we can derive an insidious suggestion as to the rank of knight the Franklin holds. Before the beginning of the French war many franklins were created knights by the king. An anonymous poet in his Simonie probably written early in Edward III’s

76 See Power, Wool Trade, pp. 24f.
77 VII(B2) 4021.
78 At the battle of Crécy the French men-at-arms attained to 12,000 whereas the English knights numbered less than 2,400. See K. H. Vickers, England in the Later Middle Ages, London, 1950, p. 224.
reign complains of the king’s knightings of commoners: ‘Thus is the ordre of kniht turned up-so doun / .... / Knihtshipe is acloied (debased) ... / .... / Kunne a boy nu breke a spere, he shal be mad a kniht. / And thus ben knihtes gadered of unkinde blod, / And envenimeth that ordre that sholde be so god and hende (II. 259, 265-268).’

In the course of the king’s wars the number of those franklins who took over the knightly duties increased as the king was in need of the help from them. Gower’s complaint is directed against the degraded knights whom ‘the sake of gain moves to enter into battle.’ He says, ‘I see the honour is now neglected for gold .... The number of knights increases but their activity decreases. Their honour is empty, since it is without responsibility (The Voice of One Crying, book 5, chapter 8).’

The franklins thus knighted extensively exercised the royal authority as justices of the peace, sheriffs, commissioners of array and tax-collectors. Justices of the peace, who combined extensive functions, police, judicial and administrative, assisted itinerant judges in administering civil and criminal justice. The itinerant judges, the trained officials, whom the king had sent out carried the common law into the sessions held by justices of the peace in every county. Those judges exercised the royal jurisdiction under a commission from the king as did Chaucer’s Sergeant of the Law (I(A)314: Justice he was ful often in assise, / By patente and by pleyn commissioun. / 323: In termes hadde he caas and doomes alle / That

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from the tyme of kyng William were falle). Chaucer's Franklin who accompanies the Sergeant of the Law combines a freeholder and an official career. Yet Chaucer never tells us his Franklin's commissionership as a commander and collectorship.

Edward III again needed financial help from the new classes, the wealthy franklins, the burgesses and the merchants. The indenture system demanded vast sums. The king leaned on taxation for his war expenditure. The Commons, who were the paramentary knights and franklins, together with the burgesses, gave financial support to the king. In the Model Parliament of Edward I the Commons had been represented but had given merely their assent to the collection of taxes. The king had wanted financial help from them. In the Parliament of 1378, however, the Commons, though scarcely capacitated to advise with the king on the government, grew to plead with him for it.82 Pressed for a subsidy for expenses of the war they pleaded indigence and asked the king to render account for the great sums of money spent. The king consented to what they asked. The merchants who were pursuing their wool trade with success supplied the king's financial needs. The king negotiated with them about control of customs duties and could levy a heavy duty on profits. Some secured a monopoly of the wool trade to the Low Countries in reward for their aid to the king who was ever short of money. Edward III raised loan from them; his borrowings of money sent many merchants into bankrupt. Gower, conservative in an opinion about religious and political matters, does not criticize the merchants who were connected to the magnates: 'The law ordains and it is right / That one who puts himself

82 See Coleman, op. cit., pp. 298-299.
in danger of loss should also win when his good fortune procures it. Therefore I say to you that he who ventures to trade and risks his silver is not to be blamed if he gains, if he does so in measure without fraud (Mirour de l'Omme, ll. 25201f.).

Also, the tradesmen, supported by the king or magnate, grew to take their share in municipal government in the late years of Edward III's reign and the early years of Richard II's. After the renewal of the French war of 1369 Edward III became unpopular largely because of the unsuccessful war. John of Gaunt, Edward III's fourth son, exerted his influence upon the government as the king grew to sink into his dotage, and the royal power was weakened. The next king Richard II, though not yet of age, in hopes of removing his powerful uncle Gaunt's control and restoring the royal power formed a faction soon after he had been married to Anne of Bohemia in 1382. The king found the support he needed in some lords, and the victuallers of London, who got into rivalry with the non-victuallers supported by Gaunt, the king's opponent, such as the grocers, the fishmongers. The leaders of these victualling companies, Nicholas Brembre and William Walworth, stood for the king. On the other hand, the leader of the non-victualling companies was John of Northampton, draper. The victuallers attempted to enjoy a monopoly of the import of victuals whereas the non-victuallers wanted cheap victuals to be imported. The non-victuallers won popular support. Nevertheless the king supported Walworth and Brembre against Northampton who had relied on Gaunt. Backed up by the king in his mayoralty candidature Brembre was elected

83 Quoted by Coleman, op. cit., p. 131.
mayor of London in 1383 and re-elected every year until 1385. The next year when the king's power began to be overthrown by his opponents, the so-called Lords Appellant, the mercers petition to 'the moost noble and Worthiest Lordes' for 'the eleccion of Mairaltee' in the Parliament of 1386: '...where the eleccion of Mairaltee is to be to (belongs to) the fre men of the Citee bi gode and paisible avys (vote) of the wysest and trewest at o day in the yere frelich,—there, noughtwithstandyng the same fredam or fraunchise, Nichol Brembre wyth his upberers (supporters) purposed hym (proposed himself as a candidate), the yere next after John Northampton, Mair of the same Citee with stronge honde, as it is ful knowen, and thourgh debate and strenger partye ayeins the pees bifeore purveyde (provided) was chosen Mair, in destruccion of many ryght.... The next yere after, the same Nichol, ayeins the forsaide fredam and trewe comunes, did crye openlich (caused to be publicly proclaimed) that noman sholde come to chese her Mair but such as were sompned (summoned); and tho that were sompned were of his ordynaunce (of his party) and after his avys ....'84 Chaucer keeps himself out of the struggle between the victuallers and the non-victuallers for the control of London in which the king and his uncle were mixed up. The poet selects five burgesses from the neutral companies but takes note of the property which each of his Burgesses holds and by which he is qualified as an alderman. Opinions of the king and the lords like John of Gaunt were divided on the question of the continuation of the expensive but fruitless expeditions to France. The lords wanted still the commercial advantages in producing wool to be procured; they had

84 Mossé, op. cit., p. 283.
Chaucer’s gentils in their age

profited so much from their wool production. On the contrary, did the king and his favourites oppose the disadvantageous war with France which weakened the monarchy.

The Commons who could increasingly make a demand upon control over paramentary taxation toward the end of Edward III’s reign did not refuse to supply for the war with the needs to keep the continental wool market as with the lords temporal who had practised sheep farming. Wool was the most important of England’s exports as Lydgate’s Horse, Goose, and Sheep\(^{85}\) succinctly puts it: ‘Off Brutis Albion…wolle is cheeff richesse, / In prys surmountyng euery othir thyng / …marchauntis al expresse, / Wolle is cheeff tresoure in this lond growyng (II. 351-354).’ In the Parliament of 1382 the Commons tried in vain to accept the application which the Government made for a loan from the merchants on wool. A committee of the merchants who feared to raise the loan to the king refused to accept the application.\(^{86}\) Chaucer knew most probably of the ruling-class wool production or of the middle-class wool trade, but he was silent about wool matters. The Commons were unfavourably disposed toward the clergy, English and alien alike, who had taken little share in the expenses of the king’s wars, yet in support of the papal exactions provided money, for instance, for Pope Gregory XI’s Tuscan war. Gower makes a complaint about the churchman who ‘wars even against Christians for

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worldly goods' and about the 'pope' who 'fights.' The French clergy, who held English benefices gave financial assistance to the French army. In 1379 and 1380 the Commons succeeded to make those clergy pay the poll tax; the taxation was popular with the anti-clerical nobles, but resulted in the suppression of the humbler people. Here is an anonymous poet's advice as to taxes; in a translation from French it reads: 'It does not hurt the great...to make the king a grant; the lowly have to give all, against the will of God. This measure is in no wise good but tainted with vice. It is wrong to ordain that those who make a grant pay nothing.... Thou who art rich enough, live not thus on the poor man!' Notwithstanding their strong dislike for the clergy, however, the Commons only for commercial reasons supplied paramenary taxes for a Despenser's crusade against the French Clementists in 1383, when the crusade was undertaken in favour of the Church. Wyclif protests the raising of the crusading army as being against the use of the papal bulls. He says: '....out of the nest of Antecrist is come an hard maundement, and seith to men in sentence, that hoso confermeth Antecristis ordeynaunce in dowynge of the Chirche, and lettith Cristis ordynaunce, he is fully soylled, and wendith stright to hevene, withouten ony peyne her or in purgatorie .... And sithe Crist was maad man I herde nevere more blasfemye.' Bishop Despenser who had received a paramenary grant for the

87 See The Voice of One Crying, book 3, chapters 6, 8.
88 Trevelyan, op. cit., pp. 98f.
89 Against the King's Taxes, II. 41-44, 50. Quoted by Coleman, op. cit., p. 81.
recovery of Ghent attacked the Flemish Urbanists as heretics, the crusaders under the bishop being levied by Pope Urban VI's bulls. This crusade furthered by the Commons and John of Gaunt's opponents ended in the defeat of the English army. It seems likely that this affair did not impress Chaucer at all.

The Church endowment the clergy had enjoyed grew to creat dislike among people as the clerical misuses of it were increasingly being revealed. Wyclif disputes as to whether an ecclesiastic should retain his property or not. He argues in favour of the temporal lords' possession of their property: 'Also lordis han power of mennis bodies and catel in resonable maner and temperale swerd and worldly power bi goddis lawe to compelle men to do here seruyce and paie rentis, but bi the gospel and cristis lif and his apostlis, prestis han not siche power to constreyne men to paie hem dymes (taxes) and principaly whanne they don not here gostly (spiritual) office, but harmes here sugestis in fals techynge and evyl ensaumple of lif.'\textsuperscript{91} Wyclif was supported by John of Gaunt for his anti-clericalism. His views on 'dominion' were influential among almost every class although his attacks on the doctrine of transubstantiation were to alienate the Lancastrian protection. The unsuccessful war with France and the Black Death encouraged Wyclif's views; the calamities helped the spread of Lollardry. His views again found among the Commons their adherents known as the Lollard Knights, some of whom were intimately connected with Chaucer. In his Monk Chaucer might ironically have portrayed the opulence and dignity of some manorial lord in a character disreputable for being worldly. While the Lollard movement was being active

\textsuperscript{91} Matthew, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 228.
the lords' leasing of their demesne lands for rents which was facilitated by the plague calamity and the financial burdens imposed by the indenture system was increasing the incongruity among the peasantry. Attacked with the epidemic of the plague of 1349 England's population sunk. Thus, the agrarian population was badly damaged and the plague revived in 1361, 1362 and 1369. Consequently the old feudal agriculture broke up. Labour became scarce and the lords hired the husbandmen for their demesne lands in an effort to ensure a supply of labour for farming, arable or sheep. As a demand for labour was increasing the peasants' wages became higher. Gower writes of the labour conditions after the first onslaught of the plague: 'Little was their labour but great the wages / three times more than their work / that they wanted without deserving. / So goes the world from bad to worse / when they who guard the sheep / or the herdsmen in their places, / demand to be rewarded / more for their labours than / the master bailiff used to be ... / the labourer is so expensive / that whoever wants anything done / must pay five or six shillings / for what formerly cost two (Mirour 26434f.).' The lords of the manors, alarmed at the husbandmen's demands for higher wages, attempted to check the rise in the price of labour. In 1350 both Houses of Parliament proceeded to convert to a statute an Ordinance, which the king had issued in the previous year, regarding the regulation against demanding for higher wages. This Statute of Labourers was to depress the peasants who were not rich enough to take up stock-and-land leases and cultivated

92 Quoted by Coleman, op. cit., p. 132.
arable lands or pastured the flocks at daily wages. Chaucer's gentils in their age

Piers the Plowman describes how the peasant 'greueth hym (becomes angry) ageines god... and gruccheth ageines resoun, / And thanne curseth he the kynge... and al his conseille after, / Suche lawes to loke (enforce)... laboreres to greue (B-text, Passus VI, 317-319).’ But labour scarcity reduced the lords to payments of higher wages than the regulations allowed. Thus the lords were to move to lease their demesne lands, arable or pasture, to the tenants of the manors. The larger, richer tenants could hire many peasants. The one-manor tenants could afford to retain a few peasants. During the years of the plague the doctors of physic had a large practice and made an unreasonable profit. Frequent mention is made of their greed of gain. In his Doctor of Physic Chaucer portrays the marked fondness for gold of a physician in a character generally known as agnostic for his meagre knowledge of the Bible. Pressed on the poor the poll-taxes to which the Commons had resorted, the propertied classes having been unwilling to provide money for the fruitless war with France. The poll-taxes of 1381 helped to produce the peasants’ rising. Some poor parsons, influenced by Wyclif’s views on the abuses of clerical property, took part in the rebellion. However those poor parsons and people who had sympathized with them in their preachings could not discern Wyclif’s opposition to an endowment of a corrupt Church from his support of the temporal lords’ possession of property. The rebels, when met the king at Smithfield, were overwhelmed by his courage, persuaded and dispersed.
Chaucer compares the shout of the pursuers accompanied by their barking dogs after the fox to the shriek the Flemings had uttered when they had been slaughtered by Tyler’s rebels. After the rebellion quelled Wyclif’s views were to be condemned, but Wycliffites succeeded them. What Wyclif had emphasized was a religious faith based on an individual spiritual authority instead of on an old Church tradition. He wanted each individual to base his faith on the Scripture. He says that ‘...Frenshe men... han the Bible and othere bokis of deuocioun and of exposicioun translatid in here modir langage. Whi shulden not English men haue the same in here modir langage? I can not wite, no but for falsnesse and necligence of clerkis, either for oure puple is not worthi to haue so greet grace and gifte of God, in payne of here olde synnes (‘Prologue to Wycliffite Bible,’ Chapter 15).’

But by the time when Wyclif argued that the Bible should be available in the English translation some men, rich and influential, had had English translations of the Scriptures which the bishops had given license to possess. In the course of 1380’s the whole Bible was rendered into English by the Wycliffites. It may be regarded as certain that Wyclif himself, having repeatedly urged the necessity for a religion based on the Bible, translated some parts of the Scriptures into English. The Church was opposed to a dissemination of a knowledge of the Scriptures among the populace or people prone to a heretical view. Chaucer’s Parson,

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97 Coleman, *op. cit.*, p. 185.
98 Trevelyan, *op. cit.*
'a lerned man,' who is 'riche of hooly thoght and werk,' is represented as what a parson should be. There is at the same time a touch of a Wycliffite about him; the Host says to him, 'I smelle a Lollere in the wynd (II (B²) 1173).' And Chaucer repeats three times that his Parson truly preaches 'Cristes gospel' to his parishioners. Many a parson of Chaucer's age, however, could not preach his parishioners properly, his 'studie' being 'but litel' on the Latin Bible. Such being applicable to the Parson's case, it seems likely that Chaucer's true intentions of satirizing the parsons the Wycliffites attacked were concealed in an ideal portraiture of the Parson. A Lollard says that '...fewe curatis nan the bible and exposiciouns of the gospelis, and litel studien on hem.'

99 Matthew, op. cit., p. 145. The orthodox preachers also urged the necessity for priests to be learned.