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Chaucer's gentils in their age

Part 3

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Chaucer may, notwithstanding his pronouncement which he makes concerning his intention of describing the living conditions of his pilgrims as he saw and heard them (I(A)37: 'Me thynketh it accordaunt to resoun / To telle yow al the condicioun / Of ech of hem, so as it semed me'), be supposed to have hardly put the pilgrims in the variable world of his day.¹⁰⁰ He never describes his Knight as having served as a mercenary knight for pay in the campaigns against the heathen; nor does he portray his Yeoman, although represents with a mighty bow, as having campaigned as an archer in France. Chaucer does not mention his Merchant's loan to the king and his *vavasour's* share of the military burden imposed on a knight. He does not say of the trade relations of the *Webbe* and the *Dyere* of his five Burgesses with the non-victualling guildsmen like a draper. He, again, never speaks of his Plowman's demand for higher wages as well as his active service as a foot man. He avoids an explicit reference to Wyclif's tenets and Wat Tyler's rebellion.

¹⁰⁰ Chaucer describes the character or array of almost every pilgrim, in general, as he saw and read it. For Chaucer's description relating to a character see J.M. Manly, 'Chaucer and the Rhetoricians' in *Chaucer Criticism*, pp. 277f.

Chaucer observes a silence on or is slow to refer to such subject as deteriorated chivalry, royal administration, economic development, both city and manorial, or Church doctrine. The poet's contemporaries, conservative or unorthodox in opinion, make much explicit and occasionally shrewd comments upon these subjects from the Church's or evangelical point of view. A homilist complains about the knights in wartime that 'they march, not at the king's expense or their own, but at the expense of the churches and the poor, whom they spoil in their path. And if they do happen to buy anything, they give nothing but tallies in payment. . . . Thus, while the English army was recently marching by against the enemy, in proud array. . . a certain worthy person remarked that they seemed to be going to a feast rather than to war!¹⁰¹' Gower, whom his friend Chaucer calls 'moral Gower,¹⁰²' though he is supposed to have been not so much attached to the court circle as Chaucer, treats with sententious affection the question about the royal authority: 'However much the royal power may be exalted in any way above the laws, it is nevertheless only proper that his royal highness be persevering in good behaviour, zealously govern himself under the laws of justice as if he were a free man, and his people, as if in the presence of the Almighty King,¹⁰³' about the sluggish peasants' reluctant performance of their manual obligation: '... they (i.e. the peasants) are sluggish, they are scarce, and they are grasping. For the very little they do they demand the highest pay. Yet a short time ago one man performed more

101 Quoted by Owst, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

102 Cf. V(F)1621-1622. See also VII(B²)3438-3443.

103 The Voice of One Crying, book 6, chapter 8.

service than three do now,¹⁰⁴ or about the royal administration :
 ...royal goodness brings the joys of peace to the people, for
 God looks with favour on the deeds of a pious king.¹⁰⁵ In his
 orthodox *Piers the Plowman* Langland refers to the doctrinal
 matters of dispute among important men as well as clerics : '...if
 thei carpen (dispute) of Cryst · this clerkis and this lewed, /
 Atte mete in her murthes · whan mynstralles ben stille, / Thanne
 telleth thei of the trinite · a tale other tweyne, / And bringen
 forth a balled resoun · and taken Bernard to witesse, / And
 putten forth presumpcioun · to preue the sothe.¹⁰⁶

Could Chaucer have failed to know such matters? Or was he so narrow-minded as to be unable to get these matters into perspective? Chaucer who accepted favour from his patrons appears to have stood and fallen with them. They struck at the opponents of their policies and succeeded in controlling the administration of affairs but the new administration stirred up its formidable opponents who demolished them as described in the *Monk's Tale* (VII(B²) 2723: Fortune was first freend, and sit the too). Chaucer's patron, John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, favoured by the duke's father, Edward III, was entrusted with the control of the government. A few years later or in 1374 Chaucer was appointed to the office of comptroller of the wool customs. Gaunt was supported by the lords and the propertied classes of the commons who wanted the continuation of the expensive war with France although he formed in his need of financial support a disreputable connection with wealthy London

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, book 5, chapter 9.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, book 6, chapter 7. Cf. *Lak of Stedfastnesse*.

¹⁰⁶ B-text, Passus X, 51-55.

merchants like Richard Lyons. This wealthy merchant profited over his office as farmer of the customs of Calais to embezzle from a levy of higher custom duty than had been authorized by parliament and to export his own wool without paying custom. Chaucer was then busy with discharging duties at the customs house of London. The eagle in the *House of Fame* says of the poet's habits: '...thou (i.e. Geoffrey) wilt make / A-nyght ful ofte thyn hed to ake / In thy studye, so thou writest— / / For when thy labour doon al ys, / And hast mad alle thy rekenynges, / In stede of reste and newe thynges, / Thou goost hom to thy hous anoon (ll. 631-633, 652-655).'

John of Gaunt, again, found his academic ally in Wyclif, as already said, who attacked on Church privileges and property. When in 1371 William Wykeham, Bishop of Winchester, had asked parliament to provide money for the war an opposition had been evoked by the clerical ministry, ecclesiastics having been the king's ministers and seldom consented to the clergy's share in the heavy expenses of the war. Gaunt had held with Wyclif, but after 1379, though the duke is said thenceforward to have supported those who professed Wyclif's doctrine,¹⁰⁷ dissociated himself from this unflinching reformer who depreciated the Eucharist, having taken the use of Transubstantiation by the priests as a cause of idolatry. Wyclif argues against the doctrine thus: '...think vpon Crist, for his body is the same brede that is the sacrament of the autere, and with alle clennes, alle deuocioun, and alle charite that God wolde gif him (i.e. a man), worschippe he Crist, and than he receyues God gostly more medefully than the prist that syngus the masse in lesse

107 McKisack, *op. cit.*, p. 518.

charite. For the bodely etyng ne profites nouth to soule but in als mykul (more) as the soule is fedde with charite.¹⁰⁸ Chaucer who enjoyed Gaunt's favour can hardly have failed to know Wyclif who aided by Chaucer's patron had temporarily preached at the royal court. Chaucer's Pardoner, deceitful, greedy, could hardly be a Wycliffite 'ecclesiaste,' but in his *Tale* refers to Wyclif's views on Transubstantiation. The Pardoner's reference in the lines to the Eucharist heresy is humorous. He transmutes Wyclif's doctrine into a cookery level (VI(C)538: These cookes, how they stampe, and streyne, and grynde, / And turnen substaunce into accident, / To fulfille al thy likerous talent (the grosser appetite of the belly!).

John of Gaunt's campaign of 1373 had ended in failure. A mere conjecture may be formed as to whether or not Chaucer made the French expedition under the duke. The duke's army, though adopted doubtless the favourite yeomen archers and men-at-arms tactics, had been exhausted by disease and with the French tactics used to avoid pitched battles while marching through France. Yet parliament asked for heavy taxes in 1380. The Commons, who had reluctantly supplied for the war which had stood no chance of success, resorted to poll taxes. The levy of the poll taxes of 1381, as has been said, pressed the poor peasants; they in sympathy with Wyclif's anti-clericalism¹⁰⁹ rose in revolt. The Savoy, Gaunt's residence, was burnt to the ground and Joan of Kent, who was regarded as an object of Chaucer's

¹⁰⁸ Printed by A. Hudson, *Selections from English Wycliffite Writings*, Cambridge, 1978, p. 17.

¹⁰⁹ The agitations often mingled ideas of religious reform with political grievances.

love, was dishonoured by the mob.¹¹⁰ The young king, Richard II, succeeded in appeasing the mob by 'fair words.' His pledged words to the rioters broken, the mob was put down. Gower unflinchingly inveighs against 'rascally bands of the common mob wandering destructively through fields in countless throngs.¹¹¹ 'God's curse,' says he, 'had changed them into irrational wild beasts.... They demanded greater delicacies...and imitated the style and dress of horses trying to aggrandize themselves....'¹¹² What sentiments Chaucer entertained concerning the tumult of 1381 is hardly indicated in his humorous reference to 'Jakke Straw and his meynee.' A year later Chaucer was appointed comptroller of the wine customs with permission to have a permanent deputy.

Richard II, eager for an assurance of the royal power, rallied those who supported him and formed his faction. Chaucer's customs associates, John Philipot, William Walworth, Nicholas Brembre, were knighted for their services during the revolt. King Richard, Chaucer's new patron, as already noted, came into antagonism with John of Gaunt, head of the king's councillors, as regards the problem concerning the control of the municipal administration of London. Northampton, who, though hardly taken to have been a lollard, had an antipathy against clerics in common with the duke, relied upon him for support. Without the sovereign armed intervention in the election of Brembre Northampton would have won the election of 1383. Gower describes the situation: '...the king, an undisciplined boy,

110 Loomis, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

111 *The Voice of One Crying*, book 1, chapter 2.

112 *Ibid.*

neglects the moral behaviour by which a man might grow up from a boy. Indeed, youthful company so sways the boy that he has a taste for nothing practical unless it be his whim. The young men associated with him want what he wants ; he enters upon a course of action and they follow him.... They abet the boy king in his childish behaviour whereby he wields the authority of virtue the less.¹¹³ Chaucer was then in the Aldgate house and in 1385 obtained permission to have a permanent deputy in his office as comptroller of the wool customs to which he had been appointed in 1374. In the same year, however, he was appointed justice of the peace for Kent and in the following year when his old patron Lancaster sailed for the Peninsula he, once for all, attended parliament after having been elected knight of the shire for Kent and two months later he surrendered two offices at the customs. It may be presumed that his appointment to the office of comptroller of the wine customs he was indebted to Richard's influence, viewed from the fact that he surrendered his offices as comptroller for the assumption of offices in Kent in the years when the capture of the Flemish fleet by the forces under the command of Thomas, Duke of Gloucester, Richard's opponent, earned popularity with the English. Gloucester's enmity may have worked to Chaucer's loss of the offices as comptroller. Chaucer, ill-acquainted with Gloucester, was regarded by him, though a less important courtier, as among the king's adherents. This supposition may, in fact, be proved from another fact that Chaucer was appointed clerk of the king's works shortly after the king came of age in 1389 and could reassure himself by repelling his undesirable

113 *Ibid.*, book 6, chapter 7.

appellants who in the parliament of 1388 had condemned and executed the chief members of his faction.

To restore the royal authority Richard made a truce with France, and reconciled London victuallers and non-victuallers to each other. Again, the king, desirous for a reconciliation of himself with the Pope (it resulted in success in 1398), persuaded by the bishops, suppressed the parliamentary Lollard knights. In Richard's reign the persecution of Wycliffites was partial because influential men still be friended the heretics on their estates. Chaucer's friend, Sir Richard Stury, Lollard knight, was compelled to forswear his heretical opinions in 1395. Sir Philip de la Vache, son-in-law to Sir Lewis Clifford, Lollard knight, who had fought against the infidel in Tunis in 1390 is advised by Chaucer to flee from the press and dwell with truth, control himself and beware of kicking against the pricks.¹¹⁴ Gower admonishes the king of his duty: 'O pious king, hear what your kingdom's rule should be, in harmony with the law and joined with God's justice.... It is better for you, O king, to govern yourself according to the law than to subjugate all the kingdoms of the world to yourself.'¹¹⁵

The circumstances were such as to be variable, lacking in steadfastness. It seems therefore probable that these necessarily rendered Chaucer cautious and descreet. Paradoxical as it might seem, Chaucer was in all probability slow to speak of these matters, having had ample knowledge of them, for they were the problems that his patrons or magnates did not expect him to

¹¹⁴ See *Gentillesse*.

¹¹⁵ *The Voice of One Crying*, book 6, chapter 8. See *Lak of Stedfastnesse*.

refer to. Of course, Chaucer for his part takes sides with the Church in these problems. Of all the pilgrims he portrays he describes his Knight, his Parson or his Plowman as each should be.

Those pilgrims portrayed thus are far from human, too ideal to take flesh and blood. The poet seems to describe in each pilgrim the character beloved for the Christian ideals of knight-hood, clergy or plowman he represents. Obviously the poet adapts himself to the ideals of the Church. The Knight's career as a champion of the Church offers an example of a 'worthy' knight whose expeditions the court bishops would with satisfaction have heard. As we have seen this 'parfit' Knight, seldom encountered in the real world, is identified by the details of his military career as three of the Scrope family. In the years 1390-1395 those militants fought the infidel for their 'feith' in 'hethenesse.'¹¹⁶ Fervent for the chivalrous ideas Edward III, as has been suggested, puffed the sham chivalry which manifested itself in the outward splendour.¹¹⁷ But on the other hand he in actuality made up the knight shortage by knighting the wealthier freeholders, by encouraging the yeomanry to practice archery and by raising his troops by the indenture system. Thus, many a knight, paid for his service, fought the French in 'his lordes werre' with the aid of the yeomen archers and foot men recruited, usually by newly knighted freeholders. In his *Tale* Chaucer's Knight refers to an indenture by which Palamon and Arcite serve as paid servants under the god of Love (I(A)1802: ...hath hir lord, the god of love, ypayed / Hir wages and hir fees for

¹¹⁶ See Loomis, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

¹¹⁷ See A. W. Ward, *Chaucer*, New York, 1968, pp. 21-24.

hir servyse!). So the Knight, who being called 'a verrey, parfit gentil knyght' came of a knight stock, is an ideal conception rather than a pattern of knights. His perfection may by a paradox be taken as designed to be unworthy of 'a bene.'

Chaucer's Parson represented with the Biblical characteristics of poverty and humility is also an idealized parish priest well worthy of respect. Yet if we assume that Chaucer did not qualify his Parson as an ideal parish priest what life may he be supposed to have lived? He may have left priesthood to a curate like a clerk of Oxford and secured an engagement with a guild. Or he may in sympathy with Wyclif's doctrines have referred with scorn or indignation church corruption to an absentee parish priest indulged in an easy livelihood. To be sure, he teaches the 'Cristes loore and his apostles twelve' characteristic of Wyclif's teaching regarding the Bible. In his *Tale* however, he says the opposite to the Lollard shibboleth on which he may have thrown an emphasis when talked with his fellow pilgrim Chaucer. He insists upon the effect of a confession as a penance performed by a curate which Wyclif depreciated: '...seith Seint Peter, "Humbleth yow under the myght of God." The hond of God is myghty in confessioun, for therby God foryeveth thee thy synnes, for he allone hath the power. / And this humylitee shall been in herte, and in signe outward; for right as he hath humylitee to God in his herte, right so sholde he humble his body outward to the preest, that sit in Goddes place. / For which in no manere, sith that Crist is sovereyn, and the preest meene and mediatour bitwixe Crist and the synnere, and the synnere is the laste by wey of resoun, / thanne sholde nat the synnere sitte as heighe as his confessour, but knele biforn hym or at his feet, but if maladie destourbe (hinder)

it.¹¹⁸

Ambiguous is likewise Chaucer's intention of depicting the Plowman, brother to the Parson, as an ideal peasant. The Plowman may, of course, have been intended by the poet as an embodiment of the ideal conception of a tiller at the plow, not as a living peasant of the day. Hence this idealized Plowman always threshes, makes ditches and digs, living in 'pees' and duly pays his tithes. He is supposed to be most probably a tenant farmer who can afford to pay his tithes 'ful faire and wel.' But a peasant of Chaucer's day did not always live in 'pees' and till the soil for 'Cristes sake.' A series of the onslaughts of the Black Death, as observed, hastened the peasants' commutation of labour services for money payments, and the Statute of Labourers which was enacted by the parliamentary lords of manors who tried to check the higher wages demanded by peasants increased the leasing of the lords' demesnes, which fostered the peasants rich enough to take up the leases and the peasants hired by those wealthy peasants or the lords as well. But the peasants were reluctant to pay their tithes to their absentee parish priests. John Myrc instructs a parish priest to tell his parishioners that 'Every mon hys tethynge schale paye / Both of smale and of grete, / Of schep and swyn and other nete (live cattle). / Teythe of huyre (wages) and of honde.¹¹⁹' Considering the relations of Chaucer's Plowman with his brother Parson who may be recognized as a Wycliffite priest he might, agitated by a revolt organizer, clerical or lay, have been implicated in the revolt of 1381. Yet the poet judges his Plowman upon the

¹¹⁸ X(I)988-991.

¹¹⁹ Quoted by Bowden, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

orthodox standards of fraternity and charity put forward by the Church. Most probably Chaucer did not wish to picture a Wycliffite plowman. Charity is highly desirable in the Church's scale of a tiller at the plow.¹²⁰ Faithful, charitable with a love for neighbours, in fact, the Plowman always loves God and His people, and grows food for his neighbours whether rich or poor, superior or fellow. In most of medieval writings, however, the peasants are few noticeable. Those writers' notice, when drawn to the peasants, is almost directed to their unfaithfulness, talkativeness or indiscretion. The peasants are quite under notice.¹²¹ Even Langland is appalled at the peasant who 'segge thinge that he neuere seigh · and for soth sweren it; / Of dedes that he neuere dyd · demen and bosten, / And of werkes that he wel dyd · witnesse and seggen.' The poet continues, 'Lo! if ye, leue me nought · or that I lye wenen, / Axeth at hym or at hym · and he yow can telle, / What I suffred and seighe · and some tymes hadde, / And what I couth and knewe · and what kynne I come of.'¹²² Chaucer's 'peple' present the features common with Langland's peasant. In the *Clerk's Tale* Chaucer describes his 'peple' as 'stormy,' 'unsad and evere untrewre' or 'undiscreet and chaungynge as a fane.' On the other hand, the peasants driven into economic servitude are extolled as poorer *and* virtuous as seen in the *Clerk's Tale* (IV(E)425: ...under low degree / Was ofte vertu hid). Or the peasants, poorer or wealthier, are described on the view of how ruler and ruled should stand with each other (X(I)762: ...I (i.e.the teller) rede, do right so with

120 Cf. Horrell, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

121 See *The Voice of One Crying*, book 5, chapter 9.

122 B-text, Passus XIII, 305-307, 308-311.

thy cherl, as thou woldest that thy lord dide with thee, if thou were in his plit (plight)).

A court poet was expected to adapt himself to the opinions and sentiments of the court audience for whom he primarily told or wrote. Certainly, Chaucer views from the Church's unattainable-ideal standpoint the political, religious or economic matters of his day. But he is implicit in the remarks on which he makes concerning how his three ideal pilgrims were practically concerned in and managed these matters. Accordingly, his remarks on those matters can be interpreted as having ironically been made when taken into consideration with relations to his patrons, royal or noble, who stuck at nothing to gain their ends and made no scruple of exploiting anything. It may thus be conjectured that Chaucer may be characterized as having been favourite to newfangled ideas. Chaucer's description of himself in the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Canterbury Tales* may be construed as proving him to have been something of a novelty hunter.

In the Prologue to the *Legend* Chaucer represents himself as humble slow-witted in a way that is accordant to the ideas of his audience and readers. The fictional Chaucer shows a timidity in the presence of the god of Love and quails when the god scolded him for having spoken amiss in the *Romauns* and *Crisseyde*. At the same time, Queen Alceste appeases her consort, the god of Love, by suggesting that the fictional Chaucer, so single-minded, faithfully devoted to the Love service, did not know what he did, and she speaks in jest of him that she is doubtful as to whether or not he became a love renegade. The *Legend* offers the poet's skeptical view of the traditional faith of the medieval church which bears a parallel to that of the

religion of the god of Love. Some doubt is expressed about the probability of an existence of an afterworld which no man can learn by experience. Chaucer says 'this wot...wel.../ That there ne is non that dwelleth in this contre, / That eyther hath in helle or hevene ybe, / Ne may of it non other weyes witten, / But as he hath herd seyde or founder it writen.¹²³' Such is a portrait of Chaucer who under the guise of a timid but affable civil servant reveals in jest or never reveals what he really means to say.¹²⁴ Chaucer the pilgrim, addressed by the Host as 'a popet in an arm t'enbrace,' tells in an answer to the Host's demand for a story the rhymed doggerel of *Sir Thopas*, in which he makes a jest of a deteriorated knight who is ridiculous in unchivalrous accomplishments, such as archery, wrestling. Chaucer's patrons might have imagined their opinions and sentiments were rightly guessed by him. He shares the practical modes of thought of Edward III which, as already noted, were represented in his adoption of the unchivalrous tactics used for a missile attack upon knights. Again, Chaucer shares the anti-clerical sentiment expressed by John of Gaunt in favour of Wyclif's views on the secularisation of Church property. The fictional Chaucer agrees to the Monk's opinion that he left 'olde thynges' alone and follows the ways of 'the newe world.' It is, however, unusual with the abstracted pilgrim Chaucer to interpose a comment. At times, Chaucer puts some matters into the mouths of the characters described by him. Queen Alceste in the *Legend* admonishes the god of Love of what a king should be. Humorous lines about the controversial problem of theology

¹²³ AG 4-8.

¹²⁴ Cf. D. S. Brewer, *Chaucer*, London, 1953, p. 19.

are given by the Pardoner, who in his *Tale* transmutes substance into accident. By the glimpse we took of his allusion to Wyclif's Consubstantiation depreciation problem we could presume that Chaucer, so sophisticated, not ardent for improvement, when referred to the question as to materialized objects of reverence may really have meant to say the opposite to what he said if he held with his patron. As has been seen he appears to have upheld the same side his patron took in anything no matter how bougeois or traditional it might have been. Any of his patrons was ready in exploiting the middle-class materialistic ways of thinking.¹²⁵ He was so expedient as to use his people or affairs for his purposes, both political and religious. Chaucer's words on the serious affairs may be recognized as indicative or suggestive of his patron's thought and sentiment. And Chaucer pretends to say by way of jest the unconventional and newfangled affairs yet may reveal 'in earnest' what he truly intends to say. The Wife of Bath says, 'If that I speke after my fantasye, / As taketh not agrief of that I seye; / For myn entente is not but for to pleye.'¹²⁶

¹²⁵ Cf. III(D)416.

¹²⁶ III(D)190-192.

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