

# "STRAW FOR YOURE GENTILESSE": THE GENTLE FRANKLIN'S INTERRUPTION OF THE SQUIRE

by Charles F. Duncan, Jr.

Over a half century has passed since Grace Hadow suggested that the *Squire's Tale* is not unfinished, but is in fact interrupted by the Franklin to spare the Canterbury pilgrims from the loose, baggy monster of a romance which the tale threatens to prove.<sup>1</sup> This view has gathered considerable support in recent years,<sup>2</sup> especially from studies showing how the *Squire's Tale* reveals its teller's ineptitude and satirizes the conventions of courtly romance.<sup>3</sup> But if this is indeed the case—as it almost certainly is—it is strange that the Franklin, who acts in everyone's interest (the reader's included) in silencing the Squire, should earn for his pains such sharp words from the Host; and more strange that critics should so readily side with the Host in censuring the genial Franklin for a vulgar obsession with "gentilesse."<sup>4</sup>

1. *Chaucer and His Times* (New York, 1914), pp. 80-81. The idea has also been advanced independently by Nevill Coghill, *The Poet Chaucer* (London, 1949), p. 123.
2. See Raymond Preston, *Chaucer* (London, 1952), p. 273; D. S. Brewer, *Chaucer*, (London, 1953), pp. 169-70; F. E. Halliday, *Chaucer and His World* (London, 1966), p. 122; John Lawlor, *Chaucer* (London, 1968), pp. 133-34; and Trevor Whittock, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge, Eng., 1968), p. 163. A. C. Spearing, in the introduction to his edition of *The Franklin's Prologue and Tale* (Cambridge, Eng., 1966), pp. 5-11, discusses in detail the Franklin's interruption of the Squire but misinterprets, I feel, the words between the Host and the Franklin.
3. See particularly D. H. Pearsall, "The Squire as Story-Teller," *UTQ*, XXXIV (1964), 82-92; Robert S. Haller, "Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* and the Uses of Rhetoric," *MP*, LXII (1965), 285-95; and John P. McCall, "The Squire in Wonderland," *Chau R*, I (1966), 103-09. Behind these studies stands Gardiner Stillwell's "Chaucer in Tartary," *RES*, XXIV (1948), 177-88, a seminal discussion of the humorous and ironic touches in the *Squire's Tale*, and to a lesser extent, Marie Neville's "The Function of the *Squire's Tale* in the Canterbury Scheme," *JEGP*, L (1951), 167-79.
4. Haller's criticism of the Franklin as "a man whose only qualification for 'gentilesse' is self-indulgence" *MP*, LXII, 294) is harsh but not unusual; frequently such criticism is the *ad hominem* cutting edge of an ironic reading of the *Franklin's Tale*. Cf. D. W. Robertson, *A Preface to Chaucer* (Prince-

Such a needlessly uncharitable view misses not only the real drama of the situation but also the vital thematic significance of the Franklin's tactful interruption and his generous deference to the Host.

That the Squire must be stopped becomes painfully clear shortly before he launches into the third part of his tale:

But hennesforth I wol my proces holde  
 To speken of aventures and of batailles,  
 That nevere yet was herd so grete mervailles.  
 (F 658-60)<sup>5</sup>

We all at some time have gritted our teeth at that kind of inflated promise, the sure prelude to a bore; so must have the Canterbury pilgrims. It would, of course, fall to the Host to exercise the same authority here that he does in interrupting the mock-romance of *Sir Thopas*. But for an inn-keeper to interrupt a meek and lowly poet is one thing; to interrupt a young aristocrat, the second highest ranking member of the group, quite another. In the one case, there is rich Chaucerian irony; in the other there would be only painful embarrassment for all. And Harry Bailly, who can be so rude to the humbler members of the company but not to the "gentils" (and who apparently even shies from interrupting the Monk), is hardly likely to make such a breach of decorum. The Knight, who presumes upon his status to interrupt the *Monk's Tale*, might seem then the logical person to interrupt, but not upon reflection. He could do so only at the cost of his son's embarrassment and, more important, at the cost of his son's and his own class pride. Both he and the Squire have a common stake in keeping up the proprieties of hereditary rank (especially in an age of decaying chivalry)<sup>6</sup> and we may picture the Knight

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ton, 1962), p. 276; Alan T. Gaylord, "The Promises in the *Franklin's Tale*," *ELH*, XXXI (1964), 331-65; Bernard F. Huppé, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Albany, 1964), pp. 163-65; and Russell A. Peck, "Sovereignty and the Two Worlds of the *Franklin's Tale*," *Chau R*, I (1967), 253-71. An important vindication of the Franklin's "gentillesse" which has not been as influential as it should have is Gordon Hall Gerould's "The Social Status of Chaucer's Franklin," *PMLA*, XLI (1926), 262-79 (reprinted with revisions in Gerould, *Chaucerian Essays* [Princeton, 1952], pp. 33-54). Two excellent recent correctives are Lindsay A. Mann, "'Gentillesse' and the *Franklin's Tale*," *SP*, LXIII (1966), 10-29, and Harry Berger, "The F-Fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*," *Chau R*, I (1966-67), 88-102, 135-56.

5. Quotations from Chaucer are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957).

6. See G. G. Coulton, *Chaucer and His England* (London, 1909), pp. 90-201; and cf. Berger's interesting observation that in their respective tales, both Knight and Squire "betray a tendency toward escape, a nostalgia for ideals which are decayed or missing in the present time" (*Chau R*, I, 90-91).

amused at his son's floundering but determined nonetheless to see him sink or swim.

There is more than "roadside drama" here. With wonderful economy Chaucer has exploited the full ironic potential of the basic convention of *The Canterbury Tales*—the artifice by which class lines are relaxed so that the Host can dictate to all the pilgrims. In this dramatic fashion Chaucer is testing the structure of his work by deliberately subjecting it to the pressure of the real. It is through the good offices of his Franklin that Chaucer proves the flexibility of his structure—its ability to embrace not only the conventions of society but also the unruly data of human experience which resist assimilation into rigid social (or artistic) conventions.

While not a member of the knightly class, the Franklin possesses a comparable share of wealth and power; by virtue of that (and the dignity of his years) he enjoys among the pilgrims a prestige in some respects as high as, if not higher than the Squire's<sup>7</sup> (perhaps analogous to the deference accorded senior NCO's by junior officers today in military society). His social position thus bridges the gap between "cherl" and "gentil" which the situation has exposed; this, together with his sanguine disposition, uniquely suits him to interrupt the Squire without offense to anyone—except perhaps to Harry Bailly.

At the moment he senses his obligation to act, the Franklin, in the manner of the "burel man" he professes to be in his *Prologue*, interrupts in apparent ignorance of the Squire's intent to go on and begins a garrulous discourse on "gentillesse." His interruption is in fact, as a recent critic puts it, "a masterpiece of tact"<sup>8</sup> and his apparent garrulity actually a delaying tactic to prevent the Squire from resuming the tale. But even more important, by praising the Squire's "gentillesse" so fulsomely, the Franklin uses the mild irony of a polite fiction to mitigate the dangerous irony of a subverted ideal; for if "gentillesse" implies generosity, graciousness, and concern for the feelings of others, the young Squire has acted churlishly in subjecting his quite captive audience to boredom.

The Host's rude outburst to the Franklin now appears to have a sufficient motivation. In speaking harshly the Host first of all expresses personal pique at having been subjected to a situation which has invalidated his authority; but he also expresses (under cover of anger with the Franklin's garrulity) his desire that the Franklin begin his tale immediately so as to avoid an awkward hiatus which might be

7. See Gerould, *PMLA*, XLI, 262-79.

8. Spearing, p. 7.

impossible to gloss over. This was the opening the Franklin needed, since he may not begin a tale unbidden. He accepts the rebuke gracefully, and even has a bit of fun with the Host: his sweetly reasonable plea, "haveth me not in desdyn /Though to this man I speke a word or two" decoded says, "I hope you don't mind my having interrupted this wordy young aristocrat." Ruffled, but relieved that the crisis has been passed, the Host can only say "Telle on thy tale withouten wordes mo."

This brilliant dramatic vignette is not only delightful in itself but the key member of a structural triad of tale interruptions—each of which makes an ironic revelation of theme and character. In interrupting Chaucer, the Host demonstrates the churlishness which makes his leadership of the pilgrims so comically ironic (and which makes an interruption of the Squire by him unthinkable). In the Knight's rather peremptory interruption of the Monk, we hear the authentic command voice of a real Knight just returned from foreign service rather than the gentle tones of an idealized Knight who "nevere yet no vileyne ne sayde /In al his lyf unto no maner wight" (A 70-71).<sup>9</sup> The Franklin's interruption is the only really charitable one of the three—it is a model, in a word, of "gentillesse." The Franklin, so far from seeming uneasy for his social position, demonstrates the natural confidence and generosity of a man secure enough in his own esteem to respond freely to the needs of others. In doing so, he gives us a virtual exemplum of the kind of "gentillesse" which his tale presents as the solution of the marriage debate—and in a manner the author of the "Moral Balade of Gentillesse" could not fail to approve.<sup>10</sup>

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9. R. E. Kaske, "The Knight's Interruption of the *Monk's Tale*," *ELH*, XXIV (1957), p. 250 vigorously defends the Knight's interruption of the Monk from the charge of "vileinye" leveled by Kemp Malone, *Chapters on Chaucer* (Baltimore, 1951), pp. 169-70. However, it is not necessary to see the interruption as a piece of "vileinye" in order to appreciate its realistic (and welcome) qualification of the conventional (and assertive) praise of the Knight in the *General Prologue*.
  10. See Mann, *SP*, LXIII, 10-29, and Berger, *Chau R*, I, 135-56, for interpretations of the Franklin as an expositor of values central to the whole of the *Canterbury Tales*, not only the Kittredgian discussion of marriage. A somewhat more reserved interpretation of the Franklin's role is advanced by Donald R. Howard, "The Conclusion of the Marriage Group: Chaucer and the Human Condition," *MP*, LVII (1960), 223-32.