

The Squire's Tale

Subsistence (Land and Food) in the *Squire's Tale*

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When the Squire attempts to tell his long, elaborate tale, set in Tartary under the reign of Genghis Khan, he is interrupted by the Franklin, who praises his “gentillesse.” The Franklin adds that he would trade £20 worth of land to make his own son more like the Squire. The Host, apparently exhausted with listening to the Franklin discuss this topic, says “straw for your gentillesse!” and insists the Franklin tell a tale. The rest of the *Squire's Tale* remains forever untold. The Franklin's interruption encourages us to go back to the *Squire's Tale* and wonder: what does this tale have to do with land and its value? Why, in response to this tale in particular, is the Franklin thinking about these things?

The existing *Squire's Tale* comprises two complete parts, the very beginning of a third, and the promise of many more. The tale is filled with an array of items and adventures and suggested adventures: a set of gifts that include a mechanical teleporting horse and a ring that makes birds understandable; a long, classical literature-laden struggle to operate the aforementioned horse; a soliloquy by a heartbroken falcon; a promise of an almost infinite set of forthcoming plot points. The Squire's genre, romance, is primarily a genre by and for landed elites, and even when they have a more diverse audience, romances tend to espouse and reinforce aristocratic values. Classically landholding, literate knights like the Squire's father were often the heroes of romance, and they were also often the audiences of these texts. Elites' estates, which generally included the household of the lord (the manor), a village, and agricultural fields, needed to be profitable—they needed to produce more than enough food. The worth *per annum* of an estate like the Franklin's or the Knight's depended primarily on the estate's production of an agricultural surplus, once the lord's household was fed, to sell (typically in addition to income from tenants' rents).

With his interruption, the Franklin shifts our attention to the strange relationship between the value of land and aristocratic virtue, or *gentillesse*. *Gentillesse* is a term for the multiple performances of self that entail not needing to work for your food, or at least *seeming* like you do not need to work for your food. The pace of the Squire's tale is leisurely—not slow and deliberate, but meandering and perhaps even *unproductive*. When the Franklin ascribes a monetary value to having a *gentil* son, he illuminates the integral importance of an agricultural economy—a productive one—to the project of telling stories. The constant production of these surpluses by agricultural laborers, primarily free or unfree (bound to the land) peasants, is what

enabled their lords to be part of the class who knew how to read and write, who could potentially commission and own literary manuscripts, and who had the *time* and access to education to hear and know stories like the Squire's or the Franklin's.

The social status of a "Squire" and that of a "Franklin" invert one another and also overlap. The title of the "Franklin" means that he was a non-noble landholder, that is, a wealthy man with property but no aristocratic status. The Squire, on the other hand, is a young man with aristocratic status who probably has no property but rather the promise of future property he will inherit from his father, the Knight. By setting the Squire and Franklin against one another, as two characters who compete for story-telling space, Chaucer illuminates how central land and food are to the very possibility of telling stories, even when the storyteller seeks to push them to the periphery.

Tools

Land, status, and mobility

The everyday struggles to stay alive that fourteenth-century people dealt with were not *gentil*. This was the first full century of what is called the Little Ice Age, when cooling temperatures caused crop failures including an enormous famine in 1315-17 and major grain shortages in 1321, 1324, 1328, and 1331 (Campbell 191). The Black Death (c. 1346-1353) drastically reduced the number of agricultural laborers, especially the large population of unfree peasants, called *villeins*, who were tied to the land. A chronicle from Rochester in southeastern England, translated by Alixe Bovey, describes some of the social effects of the Black Death: "there was such a shortage of servants, craftsmen, and workmen, and of agricultural workers and labourers...[that] churchmen, knights and other worthies have been forced to thresh their corn, plough the land and perform every other unskilled task if they are to make their own bread."[\[i\]](#)

While it is unlikely that any of these labors would have been required of the Squire, we can imagine him growing up aware—at least in the corners of his consciousness—that his social position was more tenuous than a squire from a century earlier might have imagined his to be. The smaller supply of labor meant that laborers could demand higher wages and better treatment, and that they could begin to move from estate to estate, looking for better employment. In response, Parliament enacted legislation to restrict the rights, mobility, and wages of agricultural laborers, which led to major uprisings in 1381.[\[ii\]](#) Meanwhile, people like the Franklin experienced a less rigidly policed form of social mobility, acquiring forms of wealth and status once exclusive to the those born into lordship and those engaging in military service.

Esquires

The social structures that make the Squire, as the son of the Knight, *gentil* revolve around the relationship between land-ownership and military service. In medieval England, all land belonged, ultimately, to the king.[\[iii\]](#) The knight class held land from either the king or an intermediary lord in exchange for military service, although by the late Middle Ages knightly service was increasingly administrative. Starting in the eleventh century, knights were given *fees*, allotments of land, in exchange for military service. In the thirteenth century, "it was expected

that knights would have income from land of at least £20 per annum, and by the later thirteenth century £40; we know this because the government attempted to insist that all those with such incomes or above should be dubbed knights” (Dyer 149). It is primarily agriculture that makes possible land values, like these, that translate into social meaning and obligation. The way both medieval and modern people discuss medieval land’s monetary value and social meaning effaces what it is that land is primarily *used for* in medieval England—the cultivation of plants and raising of animals for food.

Many readers of the *Canterbury Tales* have seen the Franklin as having pretensions to the Squire’s social status. But the word “squire” or “esquire,” by the fourteenth century, was used not only for young men who had not yet attained the status of knighthood, but also for gentlemen whose social status was not high enough to ever allow entry to knighthood (Taylor 64). Indeed, the poet Chaucer himself was an “esquire” (Strohm 10). In other words, our Squire and our Franklin might, reasonably and legally, be referred to by the same term, even as their respective social and financial positions are, in fact, inversions of one another. As the language of the time conflated these two forms of *esquire*, the *Canterbury Tales* sees the Franklin take over the Squire’s place in the storytelling competition.

The Franklin may have been part of the emerging “squirarchy” of esquires (Heng 131) who both held property traditionally held by the nobility and took over the juridical roles traditionally held by the nobility. He is a “lord and sire” at “sessiouns” (GP 355), meaning that he served either as a justice of the peace or that he presided over his own manorial court, which dealt with matters in his jurisdiction as the lord of a manor (Coss 236). He was also a “knyght of the shire” (GP 356), which means he was a member of Parliament—but also that he was, indeed, a *knight* in a sense. The Franklin has also been a sheriff, his description says, and a “contour” (GP 359) (possibly an auditor, a tax collector, or a pleader in court).

Of the twenty-nine lines that make up Chaucer’s description of the Franklin in the *General Prologue*, only five describe his administrative and legal labor. The Franklin loves to feast. He is hospitable and eager to feed any guests and serve them wine. Being a generous host has long been a key signifier of gentility: “it snewed in his hous of mete and drynke” (GP 345). The Squire, we learn, “carf biforn his fader at the table” (GP 100). It was a traditional function of the squire to serve the nobles at the table (Huey 17), but it is of note that the only scene we see of the Squire interacting with food, in contrast to the Franklin’s prolific feasting, is a ceremonial one that exists almost purely to reinforce social hierarchies: he is neither producing nor consuming food. The Squire’s treatment of food in his tale strikes a similar tone.

Finally, the Franklin is also described as a “worthy vavasour” (GP 331-60). “Vavasour” was an obsolete feudal rank during Chaucer’s time, but vavasours frequently appeared in French-language romance and comedic dialogue (Coss 238-9). By the late fourteenth century, knighthood was a vexed, albeit still very existent, social category for a number of reasons, including other emerging secular wealthy classes and new forms of landholding. Classically, a *vavasour* was a feudal subvassal—that is, someone who held land of someone who held land of a lord. This was often used, according to the Middle English Dictionary, in contrast with a knight or squire. Were the term not obsolete by Chaucer’s time, it would be an indication that the Franklin’s landholding status was lower than that of the nobility. But by using an obsolete term

torn from *literature*, Chaucer points toward the archaic fictions that undergird the organization of both social life and land at the end of the fourteenth century.

Text

Swans and Heronsewes

In the *Squire's Tale* itself, labor is rare and never agricultural, and land is exotic rather than cultivable. Unlike his father the Knight, the Squire never even deploys an agricultural metaphor.^[iv] If the Squire's Tartary has an agricultural economy, the Squire is not interested in it; the only foods that we find out are consumed are stews, swans, and herons. In the Squire's Tartary, food, too beautiful and strange to fully describe, appears on tables and is consumed with no attention to the natural world whence it came or the labor through which it is prepared. When Canacee receives a ring that allows her to talk to birds, no explicit mention is made of the fact that the assembled crowd has just been eating the subjects with whom she can now engage in dialogue. When the Franklin points our attention toward the land economy of fourteenth-century England, these details emerge as conspicuous. In the world of the *Squire's Tale* food is consumed *and* conversed with; it does not require labor to acquire or prepare. The one specific food item mentioned by the Squire as being consumed at Cambyuskan's feast—wild birds (specifically swans and herons)—is translated into the speaking subjects of romantic travails in the next section (specifically a falcon and a tercelet). Although the Squire uses the rhetorical device of *occupatio* (discussing something by saying you will not discuss it) many times throughout his tale, this instance is particularly telling.

Of which if I shal tellen al th'array,
Thanne wolde it occupie a someres day,
And eek it nedeth nat for to devyse
At every cours the ordre of hire servyse.
I wol nat tellen of hir strange sewes,
Ne of hir swannes, ne of hire heronsewes. (SqT 62-68)

If the Squire were to fully discuss the contents of the feast, it would take a whole summer day (i.e., one of the longest days of the year). Besides, he says, it is not necessary to discuss the order of service at every course (and who would argue that it is?). Furthermore, he will not discuss the exotic stews that were served—or the swans, or the herons. Not only does the Squire efface the labor with which food is prepared; he outsources his own storytelling labor to food. This delicate poultry is precisely the kind of creature the ring will enable to discuss *love*, precisely the topic the Host asked the Squire to tell a story about. (The Host, you will recall, has asked the Squire to “sey somewhat of love” [SqT 2]). Despite demurring, the Squire does tell such a story, but he does so from the perspective of a falcon.

The falcon is marked in ways that have to do with both the performance of chivalry and food. First, as discussed above, *birds* are the very creatures we see being served at the feast. Had she received the ring a few days prior, Canacee would have been able to converse with the swans and the herons her father serves just as she converses with the falcon. Second, falcons are an integral part of the one truly aristocratic method of food acquisition: hunting wild game. But this bird,

this falcon, sits in a tree, crying over her lost tercelet, who has abandoned her for a kite. This falcon—part food, part hunting accessory—becomes the speaking subject of the longest part of the *Tale*.^[v] Thanks to the Franklin's interruption, more than two-fifths of the *Squire's Tale* is taken up by the falcon's monologue. The manner in which the Franklin edits the *Squire's Tale* by interrupting it makes the falcon's lament the climax of the tale.

This is not the only instance where the Squire chooses a creature with a number of material, real-life meanings for medieval people and renders it magical. The mechanical horse, which flies when you turn a pin in its ear, descends when you turn a second pin, and does something else unexplained when you turn a third pin, is the same kind of creature for which chivalry is named (*cheval* is French for "horse"), as well as a creature frequently used as a draught animal for agricultural labor. The Squire locates his slow, talky magic in these creatures that straddle the line between food items/food producers and aspects of the performance of *gentillesse*. Food animals become heartbroken subjects; labor animals become stationary, with the murmuring possibility of extraordinary mobility. The *Squire's Tale* not only ignores the possibility of labor and land—it transplants them halfway across the world and, once they are there, transfigures them. The Franklin forcibly brings him back to the English countryside.

The Interruption

Cambyuskan and his court are interrupted by a mysterious stranger after the third course of their anniversary feast (SqT 74). Like Cambyuskan's feast, the Squire's tale is interrupted by an ambiguous tribute. The Squire has just zoomed out to an Olympian perspective, describing Apollo whirling in his chariot, when the Franklin steps in to praise how well—considering his age—he has acquitted himself, and to praise his wit. The Franklin goes on to esteem how "feelyngly" the Squire speaks, his eloquence, and the great pleasure that the Franklin has taken from his speech. He wishes for God to send the Squire good luck and "continuaunce" (SqT 680) (that is, perseverance), perhaps a joking reference to the fact that he has in fact just cut the Squire off. Then he brings up his son.

I have a sone, and by the Trinitee,
I hadde levere than twenty pound worth lond,
Though it right now were fallen in myn hond,
He were a man of swich discrecioun
As that ye been! (SqT 682-6)

The Franklin would give up land worth £20 annually, were it to fall "into his hand," to make his son's "discretion" equal to that of the Squire. "Fy on possessioun!" he says,

But if a man be vertuous withal!
I have my sone snybbed, and yet shal
For he to vertu listeth nat endende;
But for to pleye at dees, and to despende
And lese al that he hath is his usage.
And he hath levere talken with a page

Than to commune with any gentil wight
Where he myghte lerne gentillesse aright. (SqT 686-95)

Phooley toward possessions, he says: they're meaningless unless a man is *virtuous*. The question of whether *virtue*, or *gentillesse*, is an inborn characteristic of certain socio-economic classes is one that Chaucer takes up throughout the *Canterbury Tales* and elsewhere, such as at the conclusion to the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and in an early short poem on *gentillesse* that discusses the non-inheritability of *gentillesse*.^[vi] At the same time, it is the Franklin's *possessions* that enable his performances of *gentillesse*, such as the over-the-top hospitality described in the *General Prologue*. As D. Vance Smith has pointed out, the Franklin's house as described there is a space of aristocratic excess (41). According to the *General Prologue*, the Franklin holds the opinion that "pleyn delit / was verray felicitee parfit" (GP 337-38); it "snows" meat and drink in his house (GP 345). Among the available "deyntees" (GP 346) are fish, meat, partridge, bream, and luce. Both pleasure and over-the-top hospitality—hospitality as a performance of wealth—are priorities for the Franklin. And the primary problem with his son, as he describes him, is that he mismanages his possessions: he plays dice, spends, and loses all that he has. Estate management treatises like the *Husbandry* of Walter of Henley, written from the perspective of the lord of a manor speaking to his son, posit living within one's means and managing one's lands profitably as continuous with living wisely and well in both men's eyes and God's (Oschinsky 154).^[vii] *Possessioun* and inherent *gentillesse* are much more bound up with one another than the Franklin's "Fy!" allows.

Specifically, the Franklin wishes for his son to have the Squire's *discrecioun*, which he evaluates as worth £20 of land. Like the Modern English word *discretion*, this Middle English word primarily meant moral or practical judgment, prudence, the practice of being, in Modern English, *discreet*. But it also carried the sense of being *discrete*, or separate. The Franklin is wishing away the ever-blurrier class distinction between the Squire and his own phantasmic son, even as he reinforces these kinds of distinctions by castigating his son for associating with a page. The Squire will inherit his father's land and has already inherited his aristocratic status, but knighthood is non-hereditary and needed to be earned or bought.

The amount of land at which the Franklin evaluates the Squire's *discrecioun* is a conspicuous sum. The evolving policy of *distrain*, instituted in the thirteenth century, required secular landholders with sufficient wealth to become knights (and therefore be available for military service). Until the mid-fourteenth century, an individual with lands that generated £20 or more annual income was compelled to become a knight. Whereas prior to the thirteenth century knights were given knights' fees (parcels of land granted by the king or one of the king's tenants-in-chief, in exchange for the knight's military services), in the thirteenth century the order of things was reversed: wealthy landholders—even if their land had never been a knights' fee—were required to become knights (Storm 164). In the mid-fourteenth century, the *distrain* amount was increased to £40. Because knighthood was burdensome and meant military or administrative labor, many individuals chose to pay a fine instead of becoming knights (Johnston 83, Gorski 96). Indeed, in the fourteenth century it is exactly the kind of labor the Franklin is described in the *General Prologue* as doing (sheriff, contour) that knights were often required to do. Given the description of the Franklin's wealth and social position in the *General Prologue*, he probably has well over £20 of land. When the Franklin takes over the Squire's tale, we see a

new model of property emerge. The Squire's *discrecioun* may be worth £20 of land, but, in proposing this trade, the Franklin initiates another. He trades his praise of the Squire for the remainder of the Squire's tale. Like land, *gentillesse* can be mismanaged, *despended*, and squandered in a wasteful tale. Ultimately, rather than trading £20 of land for a son more like the Squire, the Franklin himself supplants the Squire in the storytelling economy of the *Canterbury Tales*.

The Franklin's interruption might appear, on the surface, to have little to do with the tale it cuts short, aside from their shared interest in *gentillesse*; the Franklin says nothing about the tale itself, reserving his "praise" for its teller. But the Franklin gushes about the Squire's *gentillesse* in order to shut him up; he is drawing attention to the aspects of the Squire that make it impossible for him to sustain his tale, to make it profitable, to make it worth grain—something a squire never thinks about—rather than the straw that it is. The Squire has already inherited the aspects of *gentillesse* that are heritable, since he will, upon his father's death, inherit the Knight's land and possessions. However, he has not attained to the military position of a knight and he may never. He is in a state of suspension, of unrealized or yet-to-be-realized promise, and so, upon the Franklin's interruption, is his tale. When the Franklin interrupts the Squire, he ensures that the Squire will have, in the storytelling game, only a fraction of his father's grand real estate (the *Knight's Tale* is 3,108 lines long; the *Squire's Tale* is just 672).

As the Squire is interrupted by the Franklin, so the Franklin is interrupted by the Host: "Straw for your gentillesse!" (SqT 695). Following so soon after the Franklin's "Fy on possessioun," this sentiment, with its similar sentence structure, recalls it. But unlike "fy on possessioun," which simply dismisses property, "straw for your gentillesse" suggests exchange (trading straw for gentillesse). Where the Franklin would exchange £20 land for a *gentil* son (which seems to be defined as a son who knows how to run a profitable property), the Host would exchange the whole notion of *gentillesse* for "straw." Straw is an agricultural byproduct of grain, suitable for lining birdcages (SqT 613). It is not as useful or valuable as the grain, the part that feeds people, but it is also just *what is produced* when grain is made. I argued above that agriculture was necessary for the maintenance of *gentil* populations. *Gentillesse*, the Host's curse suggests, is the useless byproduct of a system of landholding and labor that produces food. "Your gentillesse," according to the Host, is unproductive (SqT 695); it does not provide sustenance, *sentence*, or *solaas* (GP 798). The winner of the never-to-be-completed tale-telling contest is to win a supper. Storytelling comes around to questions of feeding and being fed. [\[viii\]](#)

Transformation

Questions for thinking

1. Do you think the Franklin means it when he tells the Squire that he has taken great pleasure in his tale (SqT 681)? Why or why not?
2. In the prologue to the *Franklin's Tale*, the Franklin calls himself an unlearned man who never learned rhetoric; he asks to be excused for his "rude speche" and says the things he will speak will be "bare and pleyn" (FranT 716-720). He goes on to use the rhetorical device of *occupatio* much more artfully and self-consciously than the Squire: he uses classical allusions to claim he cannot make classical allusions and rhetorical device to

claim he cannot use rhetoric (FranT 721-26). Does this fit with his claims about *gentillesse* in his interruption? How about his *Tale* itself?

3. What are the effects of setting the Squire's Tale in turn-of-the-thirteenth-century Tartary (modern-day central Asia), in the Mongol Empire among Genghis Khan's royal family? Why do you think the character of the Squire might have made this choice?
4. The above reading of the *Squire's Tale* and the Franklin's interruption of that tale relies on the idea that there is a legible relationship between a text and the moment in which it is written. Can you define what that relationship is? The *Canterbury Tales* offers a particularly fertile ground for thinking through these difficult questions. Not only can we think about the relationship between the *Canterbury Tales* and late fourteenth century England, but we can also think about the relationship between the tales themselves and the frame narrative. The *Canterbury Tales* demonstrates, time and time again, how fiction operates inside of a social universe, even as that social universe is itself a fiction!
5. The two pilgrims who have explicit ties to food production, the Cook and the Plowman, do not get complete tales. The Cook's is truncated very early on, and the Plowman's never happens. What is going on here? Why might food producers get a limited voice, or no voice at all?
6. In the *Summoner's Tale*, [\[ix\]](#) the lord's squire ("that karf his mete" [SumT 2244]), just like the Squire on the pilgrimage) provides an ingenious solution for how to divide a fart equally among the twelve members of the friar's convent. How does that squire compare to this one? Do you think we are meant to compare them?
7. The sixteenth-century poet Edmund Spenser continued the *Squire's Tale* inside his (very long) poem *The Faerie Queene*. You can see Spenser's continuation here: <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/canttales/squiret/spens-sq.html>. Would you ever consider completing the tale? Do you think it is possible? How would you go about doing it?
8. Is there a 21st-century value that reminds you of *gentillesse*? How would you apply this term to art, literature, music, lifestyle, and/or economics?

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Notes:

[i] See <https://www.bl.uk/the-middle-ages/articles/peasants-and-their-role-in-rural-life#authorBlock1>. MS quoted is William de la Dene, *Historia Roffensis* (1315-1350), British Library Cotton MS Faustina B V. You can view an image from this manuscript online at <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/a-firsthand-account-of-the-black-death-written-at-the-cathedral-of-rochester>.

[ii] See Noelle Phillips, "English Life and Society 1340-1400: Reform and Resistance," *OACCT*.

[iii] See this illuminating ongoing research project on medieval English real estate: <http://www.icmacentre.ac.uk/medieval-england-land-prices-and-rents/>.

[iv] “I have, God woot, a large feeld to ere, / And wayke been the oxen in my plough” (KnT 886–87), quoted in Archer, et al., p. 10.

[v] Love between birds, in itself, is not particularly odd; animal fables and exempla were common in the Middle Ages, and we need only to look to the *Parliament of Fowls* for evidence of Chaucer’s interest in the love lives of birds.

[vi] “Gentilesse: Moral Balade of Chaucer,” in *Riverside Chaucer*, ed Larry D. Benson (Houghton-Mifflin, 1987), p. 654

[vii] The *Husbandry* of Walter of Henley was written in the thirteenth century but in frequent circulation in the fourteenth.

[viii] Archer, et al. call the *Canterbury Tales* a “game of food” (3). See also William Rhodes, “Wages, Work, Wealth, and Inequality: *The Reeve’s Tale*,” *OACCT*.

[ix] See Ruth Evans, “*The Summoner’s Prologue and Tale: Gendered and Sexual Identities*,” *OACCT*.



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