Wisdom and Wonder: States of Knowledge in Chaucer's

“The Squire's Tale”

Geoffrey Chaucer's Squire in *The Canterbury Tales* embodies the reckless, romantic, noble youth of the twelfth century. He is beautiful, strong and "fresh as is the month of May" (Chaucer Prologue l. 90). With this status comes a certain amount of arrogance. The Squire likes to show off his skill, whether it be in playing the flute or in speech and rhetoric. His youth, however, also entails a certain amount of inexperience, and even uncertainty as to his own abilities. These attributes of the Squire are reflected in his tale, a grand romance with ambitious intentions, but also with abysmal ends.

The Squire begins his tale by introducing its audience to the family of the "noble kyng" who is "cleped Cambyuskan" or Genghis Khan. He speaks of the beauty of Canacee, the king's daughter, but he admits that he is unable to tell it well enough to do it justice:

A doghter hadde this worthy kyng also,
That youngest was, and highte Canacee.
But for to telle you al hir beautee,
It lyth nat in my tonge, n'yn my konnyng;
I dar not undertake so heigh a thyng.
Myn Englissh eek is insufficient. (Chaucer ll. 32-37)

While these lines could conventionally be termed an example of an inexpressibility or humility topos, the audience quickly comes under the impression that the Squire is not really exaggerating his lack of ability. He may hide behind literary convention, but in reality he is unable to express himself well. This is evidenced by the fact that throughout his tale, the Squire and the characters he creates are as concerned as much with the inability to know about things as they are with what they do in fact know. In addition, when the characters in “The Squire's Tale” do gain some knowledge, they tend to toss it aside, so that the possibilities of that knowledge are unfulfilled. This issue will be discussed more fully later in this paper.

“The Squire's Tale” is a member of the romance genre. The genre in and of itself is often hard to evaluate to any degree of certainty. Scholars are often baffled by the style of such poems. Morton Bloomfield is one of these. He states that

romance is not a simple genre but a highly complex one . . . . There are comic as well as serious, religious as well as amorous, psychological as well as objective, episodic as well as tightly organized romances. The romance genre is by no means a unified monolithic type. (17)

The Squire's story definitely fits this description; and the tale's chaotic state reflects the Squire's obvious lack of control. He seems to want his story to follow in the footsteps of his father, the Knight's, tale. He, like his father, demonstrates his knowledge of the elements of rhetoric: "It moste been a rethor excellent / That koude his colours longynge for that art . . . ." (Chaucer ll. 38-39). In fact, however, the Squire's knowledge of rhetoric
is unconvincing and is not so much "knowledge" as much as "bits" of information he may have gleaned from sitting at his father's knee or standing by his father's stirrup. He lacks that subtle nuance of taste that is so prominent among the really great rhetoricians of the medieval and Renaissance eras. Robert S. Haller believes, and this author agrees, that Chaucer puts the Squire in a position that allows him to expose the "uses and abuses of rhetoric poetry" (285). The Knight's son is not subtle in his practice of rhetoric, and he displays this accomplishment more as a peacock would than a practiced rhetorician. Indeed, when in the hands of the Squire, Augustine was correct when he said that rhetoric can become "a mere self-indulgent 'art,' serving carnalia cogitationum figmenta but devoid of truth" (Miller 265). The Squire's inexperience causes his speech to be "reduced to purely imaginative artifice ungrounded in either eloquence or learning, although he is made to profess both" (246).

The Squire also shows a passive comprehension of other learned topics, such as Greek mythology: ". . . And seyden it was lyk the Pegasee, / The hors that hadde wynges for to flee; / or elles it was the Grekes hors Synon, / That broghte Troie to destrucion" (Chaucer ll. 207-210); astronomy: "Phebus hath laft the angle meridional, / And yet ascendynge was the best roial, / The gentil Leon, with his Aldiran . . ." (ll. 263-265); medieval science: "They spoken of Alocen, and Vitulon, / And Aristotle, that written in hir lyves / Of queynte mirours and of perspectives, / As knowen they that han hir bookes herd" (ll. 232-235); and the East: "At Sarray, in the land of Tartarye / ther dwelte a king that werreyed Russye . . ." (ll. 9-10). The Squire's knowledge about these matters is also unconvincing. It seems to be based on acquaintance rather than true expertise. His books are "herd" rather than read. Again, he passes on to his audience what he has heard from
others instead of what he has studied himself. He may, in fact, have no first-hand knowledge of these things. In contrast to the fine, almost-too-perfect qualities of his father’s tale, the Squire’s story is clumsy.

Although “The Squire’s Tale” is in a haphazard state with sprawling plot lines by the time it is interrupted by the Franklin, it does have a promising beginning. In fact, as it commences it is reminiscent of one of its more laudable fellows, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The connection is substantiated by the fact that Gawain is mentioned directly in the tale: "That Gawayn, with his olde curteisye . . ." (Chaucer l. 95); also, the Squire glorifies the Green Knight's high style of speech (l. 106). In fact, the Squire cannot restrain himself from making a pun of the words "stile" and "style":


Accordant to his wordes was his cheere,

As techeth art of speche him that it leere.

Al be that I kan not sowne his stile,

Ne kan nat clymben over so heigh a style,

Yet seye I this, as to commune entente;

This muche amounteth al that evere he mente

If it so be that I have it in mynde. (ll.103-109)

Both “The Squire's Tale” and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* introduce a "strange knight" who enters the court during a special celebration. In “The Squire's Tale” it happened that

. . . when Cambyuskan

Hath twenty wynter born his diadem,

As he was wont fro yeer to yeer, I deme,
He leet the feeste of his nativitee
Doon cryen thurghout Sarray his cite,
The laste Idus of March, after the yeer. (Chaucer ll. 42-47)

The Green Knight enters King Arthur's court during the celebration of another nativity:
While the year was young as New Years can be
The dias was prepared for a double feast.
The king and his company came in together
When mass had been chanted; and the chapel emptied
As clergy and commons alike cried out,
"Noel! Noel! Again and again. (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight
I.4)

Each knight enters the court surrounded by magic and mystery; both courts are struck
with wonder at seeing them. In the Khan's court:
In at the halle dore al sodeynly
Ther cam a knight upon a steede of bras,
And in his hand a brood mirour of glas.
Upon his thombe he hadde of gold a ryng,
And by his side a naked swerd hangyng; . . .
In all the halle ne was ther spoken a word
For merveille of this knight . . . (Chaucer ll. 80-84, 86)

In Arthur's hall:
[T]he first course just served, and set before the court, when a horrible horseman hurtled through the doors, his body as brawn as any can be, . . .

Men sat there gaping, gasping
At his strange unearthly sheen,
As if a ghost were passing,

For every inch was green. (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* I.7).

It is here that the stories diverge. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* becomes a story worthy of the love and veneration of scholars and literary enthusiasts. “The Squire's Tale” becomes a haphazard hodgepodge of plot lines, each of which has tremendous narrative possibilities if followed; yet none of them are allowed to play themselves out. Instead, the Squire moves from one to the other, apparently with the intention of returning to tie up loose ends. This does not happen though, either because Chaucer never finished the story (as this author believes)—or because he realized that the audience would get frustrated at continuing in chaos and confusion. Whatever the circumstances, the Franklin "interrupts" the young and enthusiastic, though incompetent storyteller.

The strange knight in the Squire's story is a vassal of the King of "Arabe and Inde" (*Chaucer* l. 110). This reflects the medieval fascination with the East, which to the inhabitants of medieval Europe purported to be a region of magic and mystery. Beginning in the thirteenth century, Western Europeans became enamored of the tales, customs, and supposed beliefs of the East. This was prompted by the Crusades, begun at the end of the eleventh century, and the mystic appeal of the Holy Land. Additionally, travel narratives of the East, some more believable than others, began to circulate throughout western
Christendom. Two of these were Marco Polo's narrative of his sojourn to China and "Sir John Mandeville's" account of the Asian yet Christian emperor, Prester John (Halsall 1-5).

A number of medieval romances, both composite (as is the Squire's) and more sophisticated courtly romances, attest to this enthrallment with a little-known world. They are characterized by their obsession with oriental detail, as well as with the particulars of life at court. These are combined with an insatiable hunger for novelties and marvels (Goodman 129).

Not surprisingly, then, magical objects permeate “The Squire's Tale.” Each of these objects possesses inherent possibilities for knowledge from the world outside the Khan's court. In spite of this, the courtiers and the Khan himself are too overcome with "wonder" and the absorption with the newness of the unknown that they fail to see those possibilities. When they think they have figured out the power and manipulation of the mystical object, they return to their comfortable lives without exploring the gifts and potential wisdom that the strange knight has brought into their everyday world; they appear afraid to leave the confines of their own small and limited world (the palace) in order to exercise the knowledge that they are given.¹

As the strange knight enters the hall he presents a gift from the king he serves to the Khan:

. . . "The kyng of Arabe and of Inde,

¹ Although I do not want to go into detail here, because I am not certain how it plays out, it is interesting to note that the Khan's gifts have more to do with war and "wandering" or exploration and Canacee's gifts have more to do with healing, gaining insight, and nurturing. Could this be a statement about what the Squire thinks of gender roles?
My liege lord, on this solempe day
Saleweth yow, as he best kan and may,
And sendeth you, in honour of youre feeste
By me, that am al redy at youre hesste,
This steede of bras[.] (Chaucer ll. 110-115)

The brass horse is, of course, magical. It can bear a man (and probably a woman, too) into every place his heart wills him to go within the space of a day. There is an inherent promise with this mode of transportation: that the traveler will not be harmed. Imagine what this horse allows the Khan: general knowledge of the wide world outside of "Tartarie," not to mention specific information about the movements of an enemy's military, the possibility of alliances with kings and potentates who are otherwise too far away—the Great Wall of China would have been absolutely no protection to that country had Genghis Khan found the will to be duly interested in this gift.²

Initially, the horse cannot be easily manipulated. It is immovable until the knight teaches the court how to animate it because they "kan not the craft" (Chaucer l. 185). In the meantime, the court "mumureden as dooth a swarm of been" at the horse's meaning, "And maden skiles after hir fantasises" (ll. 204-205). The courtiers make conjectures as to the makeup and purpose of this thing that is "rather lyk / An apparence ymaad by som

² Beginning in 1211 Genghis Khan embarked upon a number of foreign conquests centered in the east. China built its great wall as a barrier against his oncoming armies. In spite of this, Genghis nearly breached the wall. Peace was purchased by the Chinese in return for the Khan's marriage to the Chinese emperor's daughter. Beijing, however was besieged and plundered in 1215, and all of North China was conquered by 1234. Think of what he might have done with the "hors of bras."
magyk" (ll. 217-218). They are fascinated and afraid of what it may contain or cause. They allude to Pegasus and Synon, the Greek gift to the Trojans. They can make nothing of it however, for as the Squire tells his audience,

Of sundry doutes thus they jangle and trete,
As lewed peple demeth comunly
Of thynges that been maad moor subtilly
Than they kan in hir lewednesse comprehende;
They demen gladly to the badder ende. (ll. 220-224)

They habitually judge or condemn what they do not understand to a bad end, though they are morbidly fascinated and awed with the danger of it:

Swich wondrying was ther on this hors of bras
That syn the grete sege of Troi was,
Theras men wondreden on an hors also,
Ne was ther swich a wondryng as was tho. (ll. 305-308)

This might also remind the reader of the Squire, who serves his father and is fascinated with battle, but is not yet committed to the fighting.

Eventually, the knight does teach the Khan how to animate and use the horse. The ruler does not put it to use, however. Once he thinks he has an understanding of it, he sends the "brydel" to his treasury and "[r]epeireth to his revel as biforn" (Chaucer ll.335-342). The Khan and his men are not interested in true knowledge; they are only enthusiastic toward novelty. The novelty soon wears away; the court simply returns to the Khan's birthday party.
The members of the court treat the magical mirror in a similar manner. This gift allows men to see when adversity will come to their reigns or to themselves. It will likewise show them who are their friends and who are their enemies. The mirror gives to women a singular, though unhappy, advantage. It allows them to see the treason of their false lovers "So openly that ther shal no thing hyde" (Chaucer l. 141). The mirror allows its holder to see into the hearts and minds of men, such that no guile could survive in the society that surrounds the bearer. The Squire tells his audience that it too, is an object of wonder for the ruler's entourage: "And somme of hem wondred on the mirour . . ." (l. 226). They imagine that it was produced as the result of some kind of combination between magic and medieval science. The mirror must be magic, because the natural world cannot read minds, but it might come about "Naturelly, by composiciouns / Of angles and of slye reflexiouns." They say that it is possible because "in Rome there was swich oon" (ll. 329-330).

They spek of Alocen, and Vitulon,
And Aristotle, that written in hir lyves
Of queynte mirours and of perspectives,
As knowen they that han hir bookes herd. (ll.232-235)

Again, the knowledge of the people, like the Squire, is not truly substantial. They "herd" the books, they did not read or study them. Of course this partial understanding only heightens their superficial fascination. However, the Khan and the court seem to take an "oh-how-nice" type of attitude toward it. It is not used or tried. Instead, it is taken away from the immediate vicinity of the court and seemingly hidden away inside the "maister-
tour" (I. 226). Perhaps they are frightened by it; or perhaps, as with the brass horse, the novelty of it has simply and quickly ebbed.

The sword that the knight brings to the ruler of Tartarye also inspires awe among his retinue. It has great power; it can wound, but it can also cause that wound to heal:

> Throughe his armure it wolde kerve and byte,
> 
> Were it as thikke as is a branched oke;
> 
> And what man that is wounded with the strook
> 
> Shal never be hool til that you list, of grace,
> 
> To stroke hym with the plat in thilke place
> 
> There he is hurt; this is as much to seyn,
> 
> Ye moote with the platte swerd ageyn
> 
> Stroke hym in the wunde, and it wol close. (Chaucer ll. 158-165)

The sword understandably produces wonder like "Achilles with his queynte spere, / For he koude with it bothe heel and dere . . ." (ll. 239-240). In the medieval world, swords symbolized raw power, victory, and the ability to imagine things keenly (and thus, the ability to reason). Likewise, it represented anxiety and perceived threats, and anxious thoughts as well as mental force (knowledge is power!), courage and justice. However, the mental force aspect of this sword is ignored. The knowledge of the body that it potentially may render in the hands of the mentors of the first anatomists is not even

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3 Evidence of this is found in medieval literature, especially those that include Celtic elements, such as Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur.*
thought of. Also, one must not overlook the possibility that the Khan could wield power over life and death. This is the ultimate knowledge—the ultimate power. Yet again he simply lays the sword aside and sends it away. It is hidden in his treasury and there is no indication that it will ever again see the light of day.

The Khan's household is likewise mesmerized by the attributes of the magical ring, which the knight gives to Canacee, the Khan's beautiful daughter. The knight tells Canacee,

"The vertu of the ryng, if ye wol heere,
is this: that if hire lust it for to were
Upon hir thombe or in hir purs it bere,
Ther is no fowel that fleeth under the hevene
That she ne shal wel understonde his stevene,
And know his menyng openly and pleyn,
And answere hym in his langage ageyn;
And every gras that growth upon the roote
She shall eek knowe, and whom it wol do boote,
All be his woundes never so depe and wyde” (Chaucer ll. 147-155).

Canacee is given the power, through the ring, to understand the language of birds and to know the herbs of healing. Both of these represent the natural world. The birds see the world from above, and so have the potential to enlighten Canacee about the world around

\[4\] Of course, real anatomy had only begun to be thought of, and illegally, in Chaucer's time, so we cannot hold the courtiers of the Khan's court, nor the Squire, responsible for not thinking of this possibility.
her. The grass or herbs symbolize the small world below and she has the potential to understand the minute workings of it.

As was stated, the court is mesmerized by the power of this ring. Like the brass horse, the mirror, the sword and the strange knight himself, it inspires wonder among the members of it. They

\[\ldots\] seyden alle that swich a wonder thing

Of craft of rynges herde they nevere noon,

Save that he moyses and kyng Salomon

Hadde a name of konnyng in swich art[.]

(Chaucer I. 248-251)

The ring undergoes an experience that differs from its fellow gifts, however. It is actually used and given a chance to fulfill its potential. As the rest of the royal household sleeps, Canacee awakens, both mentally and physically, and ventures "forth [in]to the park" (l.392). She is the only member of her father's court to leave the regal world of the palace; awe (or perhaps it is better described as mental numbness) leaves her. Likewise, in contrast to the rest of her father's household, she is awake to the power of her gift, the ring. She is also receptive to the knowledge that the ring offers and is willing to use it in order to serve her fellow creatures. The ring is the instrument "Thurgh which she understood well every thing" (l. 436). She does not send her gift away, as her father did. Instead, she embraces its power. With that power she embraces knowledge, even wisdom, and makes it her own.

Canacee uses the power of the ring to heal what is injured in a world that is now possible for her to understand. On this level, Canacee's encounter with the woeful, lovelorn falcon is ironic. The falcon, as part of the outside world, should be able to
enlighten the girl about the beauties of the world outside her own sphere. Instead, the bird is caught up in her own pain—and a narrower view of the world—because of a false lover. It is Canacee who possesses the instruments of knowledge that could have and/or can help the poor bird. The mirror that the knight brought to the princess, which shows the "tresoun" and "subtiltee" of a false love (l. 139) could have told the bird about the true "coloures" of the tercelet's love (l.511).\(^5\)

Additionally, Canacee finds the falcon in a piteous physical, as well as mental, state:

There sat a faucon over hire heed ful hye,
That with a pitous voys so gan to crye
That all the wode resounded of hire cry.
Ybeten hadde she hirself so pitously
With bothe hir wynges til the rede blood
Ran endlong the tree ther-as she stood.
And ever in oon she cryde alwey and shrighte,
And with her beek hirselven so she prighte[..] (ll. 411-418)

It is the princess who has the power to care for, and heal the bird. She is also the one member of the court who seems to look outside her own self-interest enough to take a compassionate interest in what is going on outside the inner-realm of the Khan's palace.

\(^5\) Perhaps the falcon is an example of what too much knowledge can accomplish. Knowledge can often be a double-edged sword--hence, the unenthusiastic courtiers. The lovelorn falcon may also signify that sometimes it is better for happiness's sake to remain in ignorance. Thus, she does not show the princess the birds'-eye view of the world--but this author does not quite believe this argument.
She is not interested in novelty, but in true understanding. It is interesting that in *The Squire's Tale*, the generational roles are opposite to what they are in the Squire's reality (the pilgrimage). In the tale, it is the young princess who "knows" and her father, the Khan, who is oblivious to wise possibility. On the pilgrimage it is the young squire who is lost in the chaos of partial knowledge, and his father, the Knight is the person who is truly wise.

The Squire of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is grandly pretentious and naive about proffering knowledge to his audience. His story reflects his own attitude toward learning. He (and the characters he presents as members of the Khan's retinue) is acquainted with the learning of his day, but he does nothing to make it useful. The fact that the story does not end emphasizes the impotent state of knowledge, because the audience is not given a chance to see if, eventually, the gifts of knowledge are made worthy of their potential. Like the members of the Khan's court we cannot actually know anything and can only wonder at what the outcome would have been. The Squire, whether because of lack of experience and knowledge, or because of the impatience of the Franklin (a representative of experience) is unable to bring his story into a coherent and complete end. The audience is left with loose ends, and thus, the Squire, though he seems to be familiar with learning, leaves the audience in question of the extent of his true understanding—he knows, and yet does not know. The exception to this is the insightful and caring Canacee who, though youthful like the Squire, is also sensible and so embraces her chances to gain more knowledge, and even wisdom. She, possibly with the strange knight, is the element of the story that begins to demonstrate the beauties of potential and possibility by putting her knowledge to work. In all other aspects of the story, the "wonder" that inhabits the
tale so frequently reflects the disorder (as do the tale and the youthfulness of the Squire) of the medieval world (Goodman 128), represented by the Khan's palace. In the end, the Squire gives his listeners/readers words, merely encased in pretended eloquence, which lack wisdom. "Straw for youre gentilesse" (l. 695) says Harry Bailey, perhaps because he believes that, at least where the Squire is concerned, it is all nothing.


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