

- Prowesse of man, for God of his prowesse.
 1130 Wole that of him we claime oure gentillesse.[?]
 For of oure eldres may we no thing claime
 But temporel thing that man may hurte and maime.^o
 "Eek every wight woot this as well as I.
 If gentillesse were planted naturelly
 1135 Unto a certeyn linage doun the line,
 Privee and apert, thanne wolde they nevere fine
 To doon of gentillesse the faire office.
 They mighte do no vileynye or vice.
 "Taak fire and ber it in the derkeste hous
 1140 Bitwix this and the mount of Kaukasous,^o
 And lat men shette the dores and go thenne,
 Yet wole the fire as faire lie and brenne
 As twenty thousand men mighte it biholde.
 His office naturel ay wol it holde,
 1145 Up peril of my lif, til that it dye.^o
 Heere may ye see well how that gentyrye
 Is not annexed to possessioun,
 Sith folk ne doon hir operacioun
 Alwey, as dooth the fire, lo, in his kinde.^o
 1150 "For, God it woot, men may well often finde
 A lordes sone do shame and vileynye.
 And he that wole han pris of his gentyrye
 For he was boren of a gentil hous
 And hadde his eldres noble and vertuous
 1155 And nil himselven do no gentil dedis
 Ne folwen his gentil auncestre that deed is,
 He nis not gentil, be he duc or erl,
 For vileyns sinful dedes make a cheryl.^o
 "For 'gentillesse' nis but renomee

*strength, excellence**Wants**every person knows
transmitted genetically**stop (finish)
Doing gentle deeds**thence**As if**gentility
connected with**by its own nature**be praised for**Just because he was born
had virtuous ancestors**will not himself**reputation*

1131-32. For of . . . maime: From our ancestors we can lay claim only to temporary things that can be harmed or taken away by other men.

1140. Kaukasous: A mountain in Russia. Its only importance seems to be that this mountain is a long way off, making "the darkest house" really dark.

1139-45. Taak fire . . . dye: The point seems to be that just as a fire glows naturally whether or not anyone sees it, so gentility shines forth whether or not anyone recognizes it. The old woman suggests that even though she is so old and ugly and poor that no one recognizes her virtue, she nevertheless, like the fire in that darkest of houses, might glitter with virtues.

1146-49. Heere may . . . kinde: The idea in this difficult passage seems to be that, unlike the fire that burns bright all the time, wealthy people only sometimes do gentle deeds, thus proving that virtue is not a function of wealth.

1152-58. And he . . . cheryl: When a lord's son commits vicious acts, he is a churl, his noble ancestry being no guarantee that he can act gently.

- 1160 Of thine auncestres for hir hye bountee,
 Which is a strange thing for thy persone.
 Thy gentillesse cometh fro God allone.^o
 Thanne comth oure verray gentillesse of grace.
 It was no thing biquethe us with oure place.
 1165 Thenketh hou noble, as seith Valerius,^o
 Was thilke Tullius Hostillius
 That out of poverte roos to heigh noblese.
 Reed Senek, and redeth eek Boece.^o
 There shul ye seen expres that no drede is
 1170 That he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis.
 And therfore, leeve housbonde, I thus conclude:
 Al were it that mine auncestres were rude,
 Yet may the hye God, and so hope I,
 Graunte me grace to liven vertuously.
 1175 Thanne am I gentil whan that I biginne
 To liven vertuously and weyve sinne.
 "And there as ye of poverte me repreve,
 The hye God, on whom that we bileve,
 In wilful poverte chees to live his lif.
 1180 And certes every man, maiden, or wif,
 May understonde that Jhesus, hevене-king,
 Ne wolde not chese a vicious living.
 Glad poverte is an honeste thing, certeyn.
 This wole Senek and othere clerkes sayn.
 1185 Whoso that halt him paid of his poverte,
 I holde him riche al hadde he not a sherte.
 He that coveteth is a povre wight,
 For he wolde han that is not in his might.^o
 But he that noght hath, ne coveteth have,
 1190 Is riche, although ye holde him but a knave.
 "Verray poverte, it singeth proprely.
 Juvenal^o seith of poverte, 'Myrily

*not part of your character**the grace (of God)
with our rank**there is no doubt about it**dear husband
Although / of low birth**abandon sin
reprove me for poverty**deliberate poverty chose**king of heaven
would not**Voluntary poverty
say**satisfied with his poverty
although he had not even**neither has nor covets
peasant**True poverty sings
Merrily*

1159-62. For 'gentillesse' . . . allone: "Gentility" as it is usually (but wrongly) referred to is based only on the reputation of your ancestors, but that has nothing to do with your own gentility, which comes from God.

1165. Valerius: Valerius Maximus described in *Facta et dicta memorabilia* 3:4 how Tullius Hostillius rose from the peasantry to be the third king of Rome and came to enjoy great honor.

1168. Senek, and . . . Boece: Seneca, Roman philosopher (4 B.C.-A.D. 65). See his *Epistolae* 17. Boethius, a sixth-century philosopher whose *Consolation of Philosophy* Chaucer admired so much that he translated it into Middle English.

1187-88. He that . . . might: He who covets is a poor man because he wants what is not in his power to get.

1192. Juvenal: Roman poet (c. A.D. 60-140). See his *Satires* 10, 21-22.