The Book of the Knight of the Tower

Manners for Young Medieval Women

Rebecca Barnhouse

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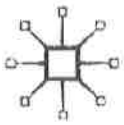

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Unlike his modesty, Caxton's piety probably isn't in question. Like Sir Geoffrey's, Caxton's is real. Although he asks readers to pray for the long life of his patron, in the same sentence he acknowledges that even a long life on earth is short in comparison with the eternal afterlife.

Before turning to Sir Geoffrey's prologue, Caxton prints a long table of contents, itself entitled, "Here follows the table of the rubrics and the chapters of the book of precepts and instructions that the Knight of the Tower made for his daughters." I've left it out. Since the book has *C xliiij*, or 144 chapters, each with its own title, I've only included the titles within the text—Caxton prints them there, too. After the table of contents comes Caxton's translation of *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, beginning with Sir Geoffrey's prologue. Compared to Caxton's prologue, it has a more literary, less commercial tone. Unlike Caxton, who needed to sell this book to make a living, Sir Geoffrey's living came from his birth into the landed aristocracy. He wrote with only his daughters, not profit making, in mind.

Blame, Shame, and Defame—Sir Geoffrey's Prologue

Here begynneth the book whiche the knyght of the toure made. And speketh of many fayre ensamples and thensygnementys and techyng of his doughters

(Here begins the book which the Knight of the Tower made. It contains many fair examples to teach his daughters)

Prologue

In the year of our Lord 1371, at the end of April, I sat in a garden under a shadow, all mourning and pensive. But I rejoiced a little in the music of the wild birds, who sang in their own language—the blackbird, the song thrush, the throstle and the nightingale, who were happy and joyful. This sweet song gave me spirit and made my heart enjoy everything, so that I started to remember the times that passed during my youth. Then love held me firmly in his great service so that for hours I would be glad and happy, and many other times full of sorrow, like many a lover. But I have been compensated for my sufferings, since the fair and good lady has been given to me—she who knows everything about honor, goodness, and conduct. The beautiful lady seemed to me the flower of all that's good. I delighted in her so much that I made songs and lays, roundels, ballads, virelays, and new songs in the best way I knew how. But death, who spares no one, has taken her, and I have suffered sorrow and heaviness for more than twenty years. The heart of a true lover shall in no time nor day forget love, but will remember it forever.

And then, while I was pensive, I saw my daughters coming towards me. I wanted them to turn to honor above all other things, for they are young and small and lacking wisdom and reason. And therefore they ought to be taught and courteously chastised by good examples, as did a queen—a queen of Hungary, I think—who fairly and sweetly chastised her own daughters and taught them (it's told in a book she wrote).

When I saw my own daughters coming toward me, I thought about when I was young and rode with my fellow soldiers in Poitou and in other places. I remembered the things the soldiers said about their encounters with ladies and damsels, whose love they asked for. If one lady wouldn't listen to their prayer, another soldier would ask for her love without even waiting. And the men didn't care what answer the ladies gave them, because they had neither fear nor shame, being so hardened and accustomed to acting this way. They spoke well, using fine language to deceive the ladies and damsels. They brought them news, sometimes true, sometimes lies. Because of them, many ladies were dishonored—and all for no cause or reason.

In all the world there is no greater treason than to deceive gentlewomen or to cause them dishonor. Yet many gentlewomen have been deceived by the great oaths the men use and so I often argued with them, saying, "You over-false men, how may the gods allow you to live when you forswear yourselves and hold no faith?" But none of them amended their ways.

I fear that some men are still like this now. Therefore I concluded that I would have a little book made wherein I would have written the lives, manners, and deeds of reputable women who are honored for their virtues and bounty. After their deaths they will be renowned and praised until the end of the world, and people will take good example of them. By way of contrast I would have included in the book the vices and wrongdoings of evil women so that the evils they are guilty of may be avoided by those who might err but who are not yet blamed, shamed, and defamed.

I thought about my beloved daughters, who seemed so young and small, and I wanted to make them a little book to read so they might learn and study and understand the good and evil that has already happened, in order to keep them from that which is yet to come. For there are those who laugh with you, but mock and lie about you behind your back. It's a hard thing to know the present world.

Thus I left the garden and found two of my priests and two clerics. I told them I wanted to make an exemplar for my daughters to learn from, to read and understand how they ought to govern themselves, and to keep themselves from evil. I had the priests and clerics read to me the Bible, stories of kings, chronicles of France and England, and many other strange histories, and from them I made this book. I didn't want it in rhyme, but in prose in order to condense it, and also so it

> would be easier to understand. The book is for the great love that I have for my daughters, whom I love as a father ought to love them. My heart will have perfect joy if they turn to good and honor, serve and love God, and have the love and the grace of their neighbors and of the world. And because, according to God and nature, every father and mother ought to teach their children in order to turn them from the evil way and to show them the right way both for the salvation of their souls and the honor of their earthly bodies, I have made two books, one for my sons and the other for my daughters. As they read, they will retain some good example about fleeing from evil and retaining the good. For it may happen that sometime a good example will come to their minds when they are with others who are speaking of these things.

In his prologue, Sir Geoffrey mingles fact with fiction in confusing ways. In the opening paragraph he says he mourns a dead lady, which has led some readers to assume that his wife has died, leaving behind motherless daughters in need of advice. It may make a compelling story, but Jeanne de Rougé, the mother of Jeanne, Anne, and Marie, was alive and well in 1371, when the book was begun, not dying until some time after 1383. Then who is the dead woman? Perhaps Sir Geoffrey refers to a lady he idealized in his youth. Perhaps there's no lady at all, and he's merely echoing the kind of literature he knows in order to make a start—after all, many fourteenth-century works begin with prologues set in springtime gardens. While birds sing joyously, the narrator—like Sir Geoffrey—suffers from love-longing or feels melancholy over a lady's death.

However, the meeting with his daughters in the second paragraph need not have been fictional. One of the most common forms of recreation for medieval ladies and gentlemen was to walk in the gardens of manor houses and castles. Full-time gardeners looked to the upkeep of sweet-smelling herbs, flowering fruit trees, and carefully placed seats, some of them benches made of grassy earth constructed around small trees where young men and women could have the kinds of intimate conversations that Sir Geoffrey worries about his daughters having. In one miniature painting in a manuscript of his book (reproduced on the cover of this book), Sir Geoffrey is shown sitting on just such a bench, pointing his index finger at his wife and daughters as he reads to them from a scroll in his lap. A low garden wall surrounds all four family members.[6]

Nor need we doubt the existence of the queen of Hungary who wrote a courtesy book for her daughters, the one Sir Geoffrey mentions in the second paragraph of his prologue. Although it doesn't survive

way dates were remembered to the intricacies of local politics. And always, the promise of eternal bliss and the fear of eternal damnation were present, and devils were real and walked abroad.

Nevertheless, Sir Geoffrey's spirituality has a certain mercantile quality. He gives to God and therefore he expects certain things in return—prayers answered a hundredfold, he often says. As befits their station as his daughters, Jeanne, Anne, and Marie can also take part in this quid pro quo arrangement: I pray, therefore I get. What they get, according to their father, is not just spiritual rewards. His fifteenth-century London counterpart, Robert Goodwyn, had a similar stance toward his religion. As a modern scholar says of a family of London woolmerchants, "They took it for granted that the deity had a benevolent interest in their daily affairs, crediting [for example] their opportune withdrawal of money from Bruges bankers to divine prompting."[1] Often, Sir Geoffrey's stories emphasize the worldly, material rewards prayer can bring, and this emphasis would also have appealed to Robert Goodwyn and his daughters, Katherine and Elizabeth. The sincerity of Sir Geoffrey's devotion isn't in doubt, but the depth of his spiritual understanding is, despite the two priests and two clerics who were assisting him in compiling his book.

Like Sir Geoffrey, both Christine de Pizan and the Householder of Paris begin their books with chapters about a lady's relationship to God. According to Christine, we should love God because of his goodness and his blessings, and we should fear his justice, "which leaves nothing unpunished."[2] Punishments are a large part of Sir Geoffrey's world. Throughout *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*, both spiritual and worldly concerns result in gruesome punishments as well as pleasant rewards, as we see in the stories in this chapter.

Here foloweth the book of thensygnemens and techynges of the knyght of the Toure. And first how god ought to be honoured aboue all thynges.

(Here follow the lessons and teachings of the Knight of the Tower. And first, how God must be honored above all things.)

It's a right and noble thing to see the old stories about our predecessors which were written to give us good examples, and to instruct us about their good deeds and how to avoid the evil that they avoided.

My very dear daughters, I am much older than you and have seen the world longer than you have, so I'll teach you about the world according to my own knowledge, which isn't large. Because of my great love for you, I want you to turn your hearts and your thoughts to God, to fear and serve him. Doing so will bring you happiness and honor

in this world as well as in that other world, for certainly all the true happiness, honor, and all of a person's good name comes from God and from the grace of his holy spirit. All things happen according to his pleasure and rule, and he returns a hundredfold all the service done to him. Therefore, my dear daughters, it is good to serve such a Lord.

In his insistence that his age and experience make him much more knowledgeable than his daughters, Sir Geoffrey sounds like a modern father. But he seems to undercut his own claims to authority with the same kind of traditional medieval modesty formula that Caxton uses in his Prologue when, in the same sentence, he says his knowledge isn't large. He doesn't necessarily think that, but it was what you said in the Middle Ages. Besides, compared to God, humans and human knowledge were minuscule, and humans needed to acknowledge that in their daily prayers.

How the matyns and houres ought to be said
(How matins and hours ought to be said)

Because the first work that man and woman must do is to adore and worship our Lord and to say his service, as soon as you wake up you ought to acknowledge him as your Lord and maker and remember that you are his creature. Say your matins, hours, and prayers, and give thanks and praise him. Those who are in holy orders should say *laudate dominum omnes gentes Benedicamus patrem et filium cum sancto spiritu*, or something similar which praises God. It is better to thank and bless our Lord God than to ask him for things. The requesting, the demanding, and the giving of rewards and praise is the office of the angels, who always give thanks, honor, and praise to God. We should thank God instead of asking things of him because he knows better than we do what is good for a man or woman.

Before going to sleep, we ought to pray for those who are dead. Also, we should pray for those who pray for dead men. And don't forget the blessed and sweet Virgin Mary, who prays for us night and day. Commend yourself to the holy saints of heaven, and when that is done, then you may go to sleep.

It may appear from the Knight's advice that his older daughters, Jeanne and Anne, spent a great deal of their time praying. This would be true in an ideal world; monks and nuns, for example, spent the major part of their day in prayer. Formally, they participated in services seven times a day, during the canonical hours of matins, prime, terce, sext, nones, vespers, and compline, and at other times they might engage in private devotions. Some of them might have other

How we ought to praye for them that ben dede
(How we ought to pray for those who are dead)

Similarly, there was once a damsel whom a great lord spied upon. He wanted to have her in order to accomplish his foul pleasure and delight, but the damsel hid herself for fear of him and said vigils for dead men. When the lord found her, it seemed to him that he saw more than ten thousand buried prisoners protecting her. He ran in terror and sent her word that he would leave her alone. Afterwards, he asked her who that great company of people was who was with her. She told him she knew nothing about it, except that when he pursued her, she had said the vigil for the dead. Then the lord knew it was the dead who protected her—and this is a good example to always pray for those who have departed from this world.

In the medieval West, death was much more a part of life than it is in developed countries nowadays. The Black Death ravaged Europe in 1348–50, while Sir Geoffrey was a young man, and during his lifetime, recurring epidemics reduced Europe's population by almost a third. Giovanni Boccaccio describes the horrors of the pestilence in Florence in the beginning of his *Decameron*. Attributing the disease to either the stars or God's punishment, Boccaccio tells of the egg-sized swellings in people's armpits and groins and the black spots on their bodies that signaled almost certain death by the third day. Even more terrifying than the pestilence itself was the way people responded to it, abandoning neighbors, spouses, and even their own children to save themselves. No funeral processions accompanied the dead to the churchyard for burial; in fact, people often died on the streets or alone in their houses, their bodies discovered only when they began to stink. There were so many bodies that gravediggers dumped hundreds of them, of all social classes, in huge trenches "like a ship's cargo." Boccaccio says that over a hundred thousand people died in Florence alone, leaving empty the palaces and homes that noble ladies and gentlemen and their servants had formerly filled.[10] Even Laura, the woman who inspired the Florentine poet laureate Francesco Petrarch to write his love sonnets, the *Canzoniere*, fell victim to the Black Death that Boccaccio describes.

Some form of plague struck England and the Low Countries in the late fifteenth century. The Goodwyn family would have left London for their country estate in Essex to protect themselves and sent their servants into London to conduct business. Alice Goodwyn would have worried about her sons, Richard, who was in Calais, and John, at Oxford, and they might have written letters in which they mentioned

out of her own, as she headed for the stairs. We can picture her stopping to look down at her still-sleeping daughters, perhaps smoothing a tendril of brown hair out of Anne's face, before assuming her duties of running the household. The girls probably went with her to morning Mass and saw her at meals. On most days, they would have joined her when the ladies gathered for needlework and entertainment. When Jeanne, Anne, and Marie each turned five or six, their mother would have listened to them reciting the prayers a nurse had taught them—*Ave Maria* and *Paternoster*—and she might have helped them memorize a favorite prayer of hers, or shown them a miniature she liked to meditate on in her book of hours.

The girls would have seen their father much less frequently since he was often away at war. Even when he was home, he would have been busy with the business of being a wealthy landowner: talking to his estate managers, entertaining visiting noblemen, making sure his sergeants were keeping his men-at-arms in fighting trim. But at meals he might see his daughters, and during times of recreation, such as the garden encounter he mentions in his prologue, when his daughters came walking toward him.

Sir Geoffrey doesn't mention young children often, but even his short treatment of the subject gives the lie to Ariès and his followers by indicating that he thinks of childhood as a separate stage of life. As is often the case, the focus of his stories about children is appropriate Christian behavior. For example, within a chapter about "the Valyaunt lady Rebecca the wyf of ysaac,"[5] the Knight includes a story about an unnamed couple who, like Rebecca and Isaac, were long unable to have children.

> Because they prayed for it, God sent them a handsome boy, and shortly after that, another son who was ugly and lame. Truly, they should have given their first child to the Church; but when they saw how deformed their second son was, they decided to send him instead, keeping the first son to be their heir. This angered God so much that he took both sons from them, and they lived in sorrow, never having any other children.
>
> You should never make God any promises you can't keep, and never mock God the way this couple did. Nor should people take their children away from the monastery once they have been given to it, which I have seen happen many times.
>
> I have also seen with my own eyes people being taken from abbeys for the sake of the lands and possessions they would inherit when their relatives died. None of those who were removed from the monasteries ever lived peaceably—in the end they all came to naught. This is true

> of women as well: I didn't know a single one who was taken from a monastery who didn't have an evil end. They were defamed and dishonored and died in childbirth, or else had some other bad end to their lives. You can see from this that men shouldn't take from God that which is his.

Both younger boys who wouldn't inherit and girls who weren't to be married might be promised to the church for life, whether or not they were particularly religiously inclined. But you had to be wealthy to place your child in a monastery or convent, so only the nobility, perhaps one percent of the population, usually gave any of their children to the church. It was a convenient place to leave weak, handicapped, or illegitimate children, and church officials sometimes complained about the custom[6] even as they benefited from the wealth that accompanied the child. A girl was required to bring a dowry to the convent, one not quite as large as she would have brought with her to a marriage, whereas boys' families usually gave some kind of gift to the monastery. This meant that generally only noble girls entered convents, but a few boys might also come from lower classes (particularly the boys who joined less prestigious orders). Some noble girls who would eventually marry were sent to convents to be educated instead of being brought up by tutors and governesses at home.

In the next story we see that sparing the rod was hardly considered a proper way to raise a child. Although the story's purpose is to warn parents against cursing their children to the devil, Sir Geoffrey compares cursing to beating and advocates the latter. Boys were routinely whipped and beaten when they were bad or when they didn't learn their lessons at school. Some writers, such as Anselm of Canterbury, spoke out against corporal punishment, and in doing so, they indicate how common the practice was. Girls were also beaten, although probably less often; after all, the writers who mention whippings are usually discussing them in the context of formal education, and girls received far less formal education than boys. Christine de Pizan tells princesses that they should supervise their children's discipline, but she doesn't specify what kinds of punishments they should receive. The wise lady will correct her children "severely herself if they misbehave," she writes,[7] but she goes into no further details, the way Sir Geoffrey does below.

He begins with Jacob and Leah who—he says—never cursed their sons when they were bad, instead finding other ways to punish them, including beating them. For, Sir Geoffrey writes, it's better to beat

your children a hundred times than to curse them once—as the next part of his story shows.

How the faders and moders ought to praye for theyr children
(How fathers and mothers ought to pray for their children)

Cursing your children brings about perils, like it did to a woman and her husband who were both easily angered and always brawling with each other. Once their son did something wrong, and both his mother and father cursed him bitterly. Angrily, the child answered them foolishly. This filled the parents with wrath, and they cursed him to the devil. The Fiend came and, seizing the boy by one hand, lifted him from the ground. Wherever he touched the child, fire sprang out—and thus his hand was destroyed. Because of this, he was in peril all his life. Keep this example in your memory and see by it that there is great danger in cursing your children and wishing them any evil, and even greater peril in giving them to the devil out of anger.

The devil is all too ready to take that which is offered to him. Indeed, in a story the fourteenth-century English preacher Robert Manning of Brunne tells, when a mother curses her daughter for not being ready with her clothing after she bathes, the devil snatches the daughter away to his infernal regions.[8]

Parents had to be careful in other ways as well. The excessive celebration over the birth of a son in the next story turns into tragedy for the parents and reminds readers to be moderate, even in their joy. It would have been far better had the parents in this story celebrated through prayers and Masses rather than with feasts and jousts.

How men ought to sette and put theyr children in the wylle of god
(How men ought to entrust their children to the will of God)

I want you to know about a queen of Cyprus who was too old to have children. Nevertheless, because her husband was so good, at his prayer God gave them a son. To celebrate their immense joy, they put on a feast and a joust, and sent for all the great lords and ladies of the land. The feast was nobly and richly held, and nothing was lacking: there was plenty of silk and cloth of gold, and the palace resounded with music. The jousting and the tourneying was fair to see, the knights running at each other like they were in a battle. What pleasure and joy there were. But all this displeased God, and by his providence and will, the child died. When his death was known throughout the court, the joy and mirth turned into great sadness and sorrow. Everyone left, going sorrowfully to their own homes. And thus men ought not to