

The Wife of Bath and the Scholastic Concept of *Operatio*

by

Joseph E. Grennen
Fordham University

The loathly lady of Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale* delivers a lecture to her reluctant swain which is remarkably gracious and persuasive, although hardly unconventional. Her sentiments, which find a parallel in Dante's *Convivio*, may be summed up in a phrase: Virtue is the true nobility. True virtue, furthermore, is a legacy from Christ, not an inheritance passed on with titles and wealth. The chief difficulty facing a reader is to find a way of reconciling this view with the cynical, maverick personality established for Alice of Bath in her own prologue. We might suppose that Chaucer is here speaking to us over the head of his narrator, but the gentility of the sentiment is an achievement not merely beyond the Wife's reach, but totally at odds with the materialism she has been preaching. The justification she offers for marital infidelity is merely the most arrogant of a series of flagrant rejections of the received morality:

He is to greet a nygard that wolde werne
A man to lighte a candle at his lanterne;
He shal have never the lasse light, pardee.¹

My concern here is to examine the strategies by which Chaucer adjusted the speech on "gentillesse" to his conception of a bitter and intelligent woman who bridled at male affectations of superiority. Contemptuous of what she considered a bloodless, schematic approach to human motivation and behavior by academics, she was at the same time well enough versed in the technical concepts and terminology of scholastic discourse to be able to deflate the clerkly penchant for pontifical utterance and orotund evasion. The prologue presents us with a woman capably orchestrating the rhetoric of a traditional anti-feminism. But she has also become master of a lecture-hall vocabulary which tended to reduce human complexity and individuality to the more manageable counters of the physical world of "mobile being" or the abstrusities of metaphysics. Her

tone is one of continual, mocking self-justification. Thus, to take just one example, Alice's Aristotelian "appetit," the teleological drive shared with all other elements of the world of changeable being, is insisted upon in such a way as to render morally neutral her life of carefree libertinism.²

Against such a backdrop, in short, the loathly lady's speech, which begins with an earnest exhortation to gentility, virtue, and participation in a Christian community, may seem orthodox and gracious to a degree far transcending the potentialities of the Alice we have come to know. It is not long, however, before the familiar accents appear (emphasis added):

Taak fyr, and ber it in the derkeste hous
 Bitwix this and the mount of Kaukasous,
 And lat men shette the dores and go thenne;
 Yet wol the fyr as faire lye and brenne
 As twenty thousand men myghte it biholde;
 His *office natureel* ay wol it holde,
 Up peril of my lyf, til that it dye.

Heere may ye se wel how that genterye
 Is nat *annexed* to *possessioun*,
 Sith folk ne doon hir *operacioun*
 Alwey, as dooth the fyr, lo, in his kynde.

(1139-49)

The illustration is offered as proof that "gentillesse," since it is not observed to be an invariable characteristic of the scions of so-called "gentil" families, is not something "planted natureely" and thus subject to the law of nature. "Office natureel," "annexed," "possessioun"—the academic terminology is a rather clear sign that the clerk-baiting harradin is showing through the assumed character. The word "operacioun," in particular, has a range of associations that is worth considering. Even from the most general perspective, however, the term nicely underscores the image of an Alice possessed of a grudging fatalism towards the passing of youth into age, when a clerk can no longer "do / Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho" (707-08), when the pith is gone and only the husk is left to sell, and when sleepy old dotards who marry are useful only as meal tickets. The only reasonable criteria, in Alice's view, for measuring vital worth, are performance, practice, works—the stuff of "experience." Alice could even have found authoritative, if qualified, support for her attitude among the schoolmen. Aquinas, for instance, commenting on a point in Aristotle, notes that

every capacity is reduced to operation (*operatio*)
 as to its proper perfection. Consequently, what is
 principal is operation and not mere capacity, for

act is more excellent than potency, as is proved in the ninth book of the *Metaphysics*. . . . From this it is evident that for animal or man life in the full sense is an act of sensation or thought. Indeed a slumbering individual—since he does not actually feel or think—does not live completely but has half a life.³

Aristotle himself makes action or operation the very hallmark of felicity. His initial discussion of the point in the first book of the *Ethics* is summed up by Bradwardine in the statement “Felicity consists in use, not in possession.”⁴ Bradwardine’s principal concern is with the future felicity of the blessed, described by him as an actual and perfect operation of the intellect and will, which nevertheless allows for a disposition in these faculties which has, as he says, a certain indifference, potentiality, and imperfection “annexed” to it. It is clear that “possession” refers here not to material acquisitions but to psychological attainment such as a developed understanding, which would make possible the speculative “operations” in which true felicity, even for Aristotle, consists. It is noteworthy how Chaucer adapts this learned vocabulary to his immediate purpose—how he provides an echo of the context of academic discussion in such a way as to make that context seem diminished by the more humane setting in which its instruments are forced to function. The assertion that “genterye is nat annexed to possessioun,” for example, immediately suggests by its phrasing that the argument is somehow worthy of serious philosophical attention, even while it ostensibly limits itself to more basically human questions of social standing, inheritance and personal behavior.

Such terms, “operacioun” in particular, were scholastic commonplaces. As technical terms in philosophy, *operatio* and its correlative *scientia* in the first instance refer to acting and thinking as the two perfections of the human soul. As Gundissalinus explains it, they correspond to the faculties of sense and reason, and dictate the basic division of philosophy into speculative science and practical science.⁵ Since most sciences are not purely one or the other this eventuates in the separation of the majority of scientific treatises into a *theorica* and a *practica*. Medicine, for instance, as Avicenna remarks, has two parts: “One contains a knowledge of principles, the other the mode or manner of treatment (*operandi*).”⁶ Even Physics, which as Ockham notes is for the most part a theoretical science because it does not on the whole treat of human actions (*operibus nostris*), should have a part reserved, he feels, for providing directive knowledge for performance of actions.⁷

Aquinas treats the distinction between speculative and practical sciences at considerable length in his commentary on Boethius’ *De Trinitate* and elsewhere, a matter which William Wallace has discussed in detail.⁸ Obvious examples of speculative science are metaphysics and physics, and of practical

sciences engineering and ethics (the science of producing human happiness). The distinctive note of a practical science, as Wallace points out, is “that it is concerned with the principles and causes of operables,” and he notes that “the end of practical science . . . is operation.”⁹ A further distinction (again, made by Aquinas) is also possible, between practical or operative sciences dealing with human actions *per se* and those dealing with the production of external objects (*scientiae factivae*).¹⁰ A slight variation in terminology can be noted in the *Summa philosophiae* of the pseudo-Grosseteste, who specifies that an *actio* which involves a material subject is more properly called an *operatio*, and is seen for the most part in the productions of craftsmen (*artifices*).¹¹ That Chaucer at some point began to conceive of the Wife as a kind of parodic version of “operative scientist,” standing against the speculative Clerk in particular, is, in my view, a defensible position. Those lines early in her Prologue, apparently genuine but cancelled by Chaucer (44a–44f)–

Of which [prospects] I have pyked out the beste,
 Bothe of here nether purs and of here cheste.
 Diverse scoles maken parfyt clerkes,
 And diverse practyk in many sondry werkes
 Maketh the werkman parfyt sekirly;
 Of fyve husbondes scoleiying am I

–may not alone be fair evidence of the extent to which Chaucer wants the Wife to be taken as a practical scientist manqué, a person with marriage rather than, say, medicine as her field of expertise. Nevertheless, her Prologue readily resolves itself, significantly, into the two parts of a treatise, a *theorica* (vv. 1–183), and a *practica* introduced by the Pardoner’s mollifying remark:

Telle forth youre tale, spareth for no man,
 And teche us yonge men of youre praktike.
 (186–87)

In more general usage *operatio* was only slightly less technical, referring to actions performed not casually but rather as formally related to some virtue or potency in the agent. Thus a man may operate as a horologist by designing and making a clock, or as a moral agent by answering the claims of friendship; Nature has her “operations,” too—the processes governed by what we call natural law; even God is said (although equivocally) to “operate” in performing miracles, bestowing grace, judging souls, and so forth.¹² The classic treatment of human operations, at least of man considered as a moral being, was the *Ethics* of Aristotle. There is, in addition, good reason to consider the *Ethics*, and the tradition of Christianizing commentary on that work as having particular relevance to Chaucer’s purposes in the speech on “gentilesse.”¹³

To begin with, the illustration of the operation of natural law through the example of fire burning the same way even in the Caucasus mountains almost certainly comes ultimately, if not directly, from Aristotle's brief discussion of natural law, or natural justice, in the *Ethics*. There he distinguishes it from statute law, which varies from place to place: "Some hold the view [he says] that all regulations are of this kind, on the ground that whereas natural laws are immutable and have the same validity everywhere (as fire burns both here and in Persia) they can see that notions of justice are variable."¹⁴

It should also be noted that justice is the subject of one book of the *Ethics* (the fifth) because acting justly towards oneself and others is an aspect of moral virtue. There is an important and related question concerning the possibility of man's having an innate capacity for choosing the good, a notion elsewhere vigorously attacked by Aristotle. The issue posed in the hag's speech concerning inherited "gentillesse" is really the same question in another form. Aquinas, in his commentary on the Aristotelian argument, provides a formulation of the opposing position, a position he regards as erroneous. In his discussion, he introduces the image of the capacity "planted naturely":

That a person desires a proper end [they say] does not arise from his own free will but must belong to him by birth. As from birth a man has external sight by which he correctly distinguishes colors, so also from birth he should have a well-disposed internal vision by which he may judge well and desire what is really good. Thus he must be said to be of good birth in whom the previously mentioned judgment has been implanted [*inditum*] from birth. When a man innately has in good and perfect fashion what is greatest and best for him, this is a perfect and truly good birth. . . .¹⁵

The argument is naturally rejected by Aquinas, as it is by Aristotle; after allowance is made for dispositions or inclinations wrought by planetary influence and bodily temperament, freedom of the will and individual responsibility are of course affirmed. Hardly revolutionary is the hag's rejection of the idea of a naturally inherited nobility of character. One may easily suppose that Chaucer, having derived pertinent ideas from the ethical tradition, here applied them specifically to the concept of "gentillesse."

By far the most significant feature of the *Ethics*, in terms of its usefulness as a gloss on the "gentillesse" speech, is Aristotle's consideration of the way in which virtue (*virtus*—power, ability, strength, but especially moral strength) is developed.¹⁶ Bradwardine, in the *De Causa Dei*, discusses at some length the Philosopher's treatment of this point, in connection with the analogous question

of the way in which grace comes to be present in the human soul.¹⁷ His analysis is especially interesting in view of Chaucer's (or the hag's) repeated insistence on the fact that true "gentilesse," the power to live virtuously, derives from Christ and comes in the form of divine grace. Bradwardine's chief concern is to defend the principle that divine grace is necessary for willing the performance of meritorious acts. That is to say, one cannot independently of the Creator develop the power inescapably to choose the good. He sees a potential threat to this position in Aristotle's view, stated at several points in the *Ethics*, that people develop moral virtue by the successive performance of virtuous acts. A man becomes just, temperate, and brave by continually doing just, temperate, and brave deeds, just as a person becomes a builder by building, or (a famous, if quaint illustration) one becomes a zither-player by playing the zither. When we are born we are constituted to receive certain virtues, but we bring them into increasingly perfect actualization by practice; we develop "habits" in ourselves. *Virtus ex operibus generatur* ("a power is produced by a succession of individual acts") was the familiar form of the principle.¹⁸ Aristotle himself seems to have recognized a difficulty, namely, that the position appears to suppose some degree of innate capacity. Averroes, too, explicitly argued in connection with the point that it is impossible for anything to come into being without having initially something of that which it will have at last, and that thus no one can come to play the zither without having possessed from the beginning something of the art of zither-playing. An ass can not learn to play the zither, nor a man in whom "zitherizing" is not to some degree innate. Bradwardine's own position is that a man, having a certain species or form of zither-playing in his imagination, perfects it through practice.¹⁹

The entire discussion is for the purpose of making a distinction between virtues of this sort however developed or acquired, and the grace freely given by God. Bradwardine insists that of ourselves or from other creatures we have not the least scintilla of charity or grace, and he goes on to condemn the heretical view that grace is given by God so that a man can perform more easily what he would in any case be able to do, though with more difficulty, without the aid of grace.

Now, although the loathly lady's speech on "gentilesse" may seem unexceptionably Christian, it might nevertheless be argued that much of its special force derives from the fact that some of the particular sentiments it expresses are not themselves exclusively Christian in nature, and that the very structure of the speech reflects the uniqueness of Chaucer's appreciation of the hard-won intellectual and moral stance of the central religious current of his time. The speech assimilates acceptable pagan ideas in a framework which echoes the scholastic struggle to adapt the Aristotelian world view, especially the vision of the moral athlete which informs the *Ethics*, to the Christian world of charity and grace. With only a slight change of terminology, statements such as "vileyng sinful dedes make a cherl," or "he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis,"

can easily be accommodated to Aristotle's humanistic, pagan outlook. And the passage,

Looke who that is most vertuouſ alway,
 Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay
 To do the gentil dedes that he kan;
 Taak hym for the gretteſt gentil man,

(1113-16)

might well find a place in the *Ethics* if one merely substituted for "gentil" Aristotle's "just, temperate, and brave." Even the ambiguity may be deliberate on Chaucer's part. Do "cherles" and "gentils" come to their villainous or virtuous perfection through repeated operations like the zither-player, or are their actions the result of a character existing prior to the deeds? But the point need not be pressed.

There may even be an implicit contrast intended on the precise point that man perceived through Christian eyes, because he is unable to persevere in his "operacioun," requires the divine operation of a God granting grace as a continual support for the performance of virtuous actions. As noted earlier, the terminology of a God "operating" by giving man the grace to be just, pious, wise, and blessed, with such analogies as that to the sun operating to illuminate the world, or the farmer operating with the plow to produce food from the field, can be found in Bradwardine and other scholastic commentators. But this point, too, need not be vigorously urged. The hag's prayers for the grace of "gentilesse" can stand by themselves, even if we can never decide whether or not Alice herself is best understood as fully subscribing to the sentiments enshrined in the speech. The complexities of her character persist to the very end of the tale, where she herself prays for grace—the "grace t'overbyde hem that we wedde"—and begs Christ to shorten the lives of husbands who refuse to submit. Whether the blasphemy is meant to be genuine or facetious on the part of the Wife, or whether the ending as a whole is to be seen as a good natured joke or a final bit of impudence, probably depends largely on a reader's own critical predilections. It does appear, however, that Chaucer was at some pains to make the speech on "gentilesse," insofar as it is understood to be a fictive creation of the Wife of Bath, seem the natural utterance of one as competent in scholastic give-and-take as Alice has previously shown herself to be.

NOTES

1. *Canterbury Tales*, III, 333-35, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957). Further references will be made by line number in the text.

2. I ne loved nevere by no discrecioun,
 But evere folwede myn appetit,
 Al were he short, or long, or blak, or whit;
(622-24)

The last line, an obvious allusion to certain scholastic sophisms having to do with "denomination," helps to make the more extended meaning of "appetit" (Aristotelian *appetitus*, inclination towards natural place) the relevant one.

3. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger, O.P., 2 vols. (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964), II, 840. The following, and further references to the Latin text of the *Ethics* and of the Commentary of Aquinas, will be to Sancti Thomae Aquinatis, *In decem libros Ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum Expositio*, Marietti edition (Turin, 1934):

Omnis autem potentia reducitur ad operationem, sicut ad perfectionem propriam. Unde id quod est principale consistit in operatione, et non in potentia nuda. Est enim actus potior quam potentia, ut probatur in nono Metaphysicorum. . . . Et ex hoc patet quod principaliter vivere animalis vel hominis, est sentire vel intelligere. Dormiens enim, quia non actu sentit vel intelligit, non perfecte vivit, sed habet dimidium vitae. . . . (p. 609)

4. Thomas Bradwardine, *De Causa Dei*, ed. Henry Savile (London, 1618), p. 235. Cf. Aristotle, *Ethics*, I, xii.
5. Dominicus Gundissalinus, *De divisione philosophiae*, ed. Ludwig Baur, in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters*, IV (Münster, 1903), 11-12, 142.
6. Avicenna, *Liber Canonis* (Venice, 1555), p. 3.
7. William of Ockham, *Philosophical Writings: A Selection*, ed. and trans. Philotheus Boehner, O.F.M. (London: Thomas Nelson, 1957), p. 15.
8. William A. Wallace, O.P., *The Role of Demonstration in Moral Theology* (Washington, D.C.: The Thomist Press, 1962). See esp. pp. 71-89.
9. Wallace, pp. 74, 77.
10. Wallace, pp. 86-87.
11. *Summa philosophiae*, ed. Ludwig Baur, pp. 275-643 of *Die philosophischen Werke des Robert Grosseteste*, in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie des Mittelalters*, IX (Münster, 1912), 376.
12. Bradwardine, *De Causa Dei*, p. 235.
13. See above, n. 3, for Marietti edition. I have also consulted the translation by J. A. K. Thomson, *The Ethics of Aristotle* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1955).
14. Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1134b24 *et seq.*, trans. Thomson, p. 190.
15. Litzinger, *Commentary*, p. 229. Cf. *Ethics*, 1114a32 *et seq.*; Marietti ed., p. 177.
16. Aristotle, *Ethics*, 1103a4-b3, trans. Thomson, pp. 91-92.
17. Bradwardine, *De Causa Dei*, pp. 329-33.
18. Bradwardine, *De Causa Dei*, p. 331.
19. Bradwardine, *De Causa Dei*, p. 333. The reference to Averroes is made by Bradwardine.