



Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi

The Journal of International Social Research

Cilt: 9 Sayı: 45 Volume: 9 Issue: 45

Ağustos 2016 August 2016

www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581

## THE SELF-FASHIONING OF CHAUCER'S FRANKLIN: THE PERFORMANCE OF BOURGEOIS IDENTITY

Oya BAYILTIŞ ÖĞÜTCÜ\*

### Abstract

Chaucer's Franklin in the *Canterbury Tales* presents a medieval example of Greenblatt's concept of self-fashioning through his performance of bourgeois identity. Although he has feudal origins as a freeholder, the Franklin goes beyond the borders set for him by the three estate structure of medieval England as a money-made man. Hence, he becomes the embodiment of the *new* man, who has held administrative duties owing to his monetary status and thus who claims gentility despite his need for social recognition and acceptance. Accordingly, this article aims at analysing the Franklin's depiction in the "General Prologue" to the *Canterbury Tales*, his words to the Squire and his tale in order to display his self-fashioning through his bourgeois identity performance.

**Keywords:** Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, The Franklin, Self-fashioning, Bourgeois Identity Performance.

### 1. Introduction

The Black Death of 1348-49, which led to the death of almost one-third of the population in England, provided the survivors with opportunities for upward social mobility as well as with the possibility of downward social mobility. As a result, the traditional three estate structure of society did not fit into the social structure of fourteenth century England and there was need for a social reform to fully recognise the status of the newly emerging non-aristocratic but wealthy people. They were neither the members of the nobility, those who ruled, nor the members of the commoners, those who worked, nor the members of the clergy, those who prayed.<sup>1</sup> They constituted a new social group and claimed a high social status owing to their money. Franklins were among this social group, who had money and held great amounts of land, but they were not regarded as the members of the gentry in the fourteenth century, which problematised their social status. They were in need of social reform, which would grant them social recognition and respect. Accordingly, this article analyses Chaucer's Franklin in the "General Prologue" to the *Canterbury Tales* as a member of this group of men in need for social reform.<sup>2</sup> It will be claimed that despite his need for social acceptance and thus social reform, the Franklin's depiction in the "General Prologue" and his words to the Squire as well as his tale can be regarded as reflections of his self-fashioning as a bourgeois man who asks for more than that is allowed to him in the traditional three estate structure of medieval English society. Hence, it will be asserted that although he does not fit into the traditional estate structure owing to a number of social changes, the Franklin's self-fashioning through his performance of bourgeois identity enables him to contribute to the social reform subverting the traditional estate boundaries.

### 2. Franklins in Fourteenth Century England

According to *The Middle English Dictionary*, "franklin," means "[a] landowner and member of the gentry ranking immediately below the nobility; a freeman, a gentleman" ("frank(e)lein," (a)). This definition reveals that franklin meant a free tenant or a freeholder. In medieval England, land belonged to manors and it was divided into three types: demesne land, freehold land and customary land. Demesne land was held by the lords of manors directly from the king while freehold land was held by free tenants in return for certain obligations, and customary land was held by peasants who were not free. In thirteenth century England, most of the lands were held by unfree peasants as customary land. However, as Whittle asserts, following the Black Death in the fourteenth century, the numbers of free tenants and the amounts of land that they held increased (2008: 140). In accordance with this increase, there was also an increase in the social status of these free tenants, that is, franklins. They were not after all mere peasants but men with money, land, and thus authority, which problematised the relationship between franklins, who were of peasant origin, and

\* Dr., Hacettepe University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature.

<sup>1</sup> See Dyer for a discussion of this change in the society (1989: 16-26).

<sup>2</sup> This article is developed out of my unpublished PhD Dissertation, entitled "Medieval Self-Fashioning: Identity Performances in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*" (Hacettepe University, 2016), which proposes the analysis of the Franklin's self-fashioning in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* through his bourgeois identity performance. For a detailed discussion of the relation between self-fashioning and performance, see the Introduction. An earlier and shorter version of this article, entitled "Chaucer's Franklin and Desire for Social Reform", was presented at the *Twenty-Second International Medieval Congress* (IMC 2015), organised by the Institute for Medieval Studies, University of Leeds (Leeds, UK 6-9 July 2015). I thank all the members of the organising committee for granting me a partial bursary to attend the congress.

those in the higher estates. They were the members neither of the peasantry nor of the nobility in traditional sense which was constituted by people who were noble by blood. Yet, franklins also claimed a high social status due to their money which enabled them to hold large amounts of land.

Therefore, the nobility tried to keep the peasant-survivors of the Plague, who had the means for upward social mobility, at their pre-Plague status and tried to control their monetary gain, since they had started to ask for more wages. Hence, for instance, as reflected by the impositions of the Ordinance of Labourers in 1348 and the Statute of Labourers in 1350, there were attempts to regulate the wages of peasants (Britnell, 2008: 151-152). Yet, there was money to be made not only for peasants to work on land, but also for those with money who could invest their money on buying more and more lands. This, in return, provided these men with the means to sustain a high social status although the land based values of feudalism were in decline following the Black Death. Tenure was still “the basis of classification” in society (Dyer, 1989: 11), as a result of which there was an “active market in land” (Britnell, 2008: 161). Land still provided one not only with economic prosperity, but also with social and political authority. Consequently, freeholding meant not only wealth but also social and legal status for franklins, which differentiated them from unfree peasants. This shaped the difference both between franklins and peasants, and between franklins and the nobility.

As revealed by the 1379 parliamentary schedule about social hierarchy, which was designed for taxation, income gained more importance than status (Dyer, 1989: 13). This meant that the difference between landed people, ecclesiastical people, the commoners and the newly emerging bourgeois group including merchants were bound to their income rather than their noble status, noble, of course, referring to the nobility by blood. Franklins were also cited in this parliamentary schedule, which signified their rise in the social strata to the levels of *gentils*, even if not to the level of gentlemen, which can be regarded as a reflection of the changes in the traditional social hierarchy. In the same line, according to the records of the poll tax of 1380-81, there were a great number of taxpayers who were not aristocrats but landowners, among whom were franklins. The hierarchy among these non-aristocratic people depended on the amount of land owned by them and their wages (Dyer, 1989: 14-15). Accordingly, it can be argued that franklins achieved rising in the social hierarchy in the fourteenth century and they were keen on buying more and more lands to secure and sustain this rise, because land was still the dominant factor in defining one’s place in the estate hierarchy.

In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century, there was an increasing demand for land and lords could buy their lands back that they had given to free tenants. However, following the Black Death, the demand for land was in decrease and lords started to lease their lands to tenants at cheaper rents. This meant that, for instance, if one was a customary land holder beforehand, he could have more advantages through “a purely contractual relationship with a manorial lord and achieve personal freedom” (Whittle, 2008: 147). This would also mean that he would have transformed from being a customary landholder into a free tenant. Besides, in the fourteenth century, due to the harvest failure of 1317-19, which resulted in famines and a decline in population, large amounts of lands were either abandoned or rented at lower prices (Specht, 1981: 81). This was also in line with the decrease in the demand for land and increase in wages because of the decline in labour force. The Black Death contributed to these changes due to the increasing death toll during epidemics. All these led to the failure of agricultural products either because of the fact that it was becoming harder and harder to find men to work on lands, or because of the lack of people to buy them. Thus, despite the Statutes of Labourers in 1368, which aimed at providing labourers with the same amount of the wages as the wages of the pre-Plague period, labourers were asking for more wages. As a result, as Specht indicates, many franklins turned to sheep farming and its lures for wool trade, which brought them great wealth making it possible for them to buy more and more land (1981: 82). All these resulted in change both in the social and economic hierarchy of the countryside, and contributed to the opportunities of franklins in the fourteenth century.

Actually, franklins could already sublet their lands starting from the late thirteenth century onwards (Whittle, 2008: 145). They could not only buy and sell lands but also lease lands as did lords, and their rights were protected by the royal courts, which enhanced their legal rights as well as their social and economic rights. Moreover, their lands could be inherited by their heirs (Specht, 1981: 56; Bailey, 2002: 26-28), which was functional in sustaining the change in the social hierarchy among generations. This meant that even if a franklin could not himself achieve being accepted as a member of the rich higher estates, his son could do so more easily as the heir of a rich man with large amounts of land. Hence, being able to hold more and more land was very important for franklins. In this “active land market” (Raftis, 1997: 4), there was a tendency in the well-off franklins of the post-Plague period to prosper through leasing and acquiring more lands and in some cases even whole manors. It was mainly this “agricultural capitalism” (Maddern, 2005: 24) that led to a change in the distribution of wealth and thus contributed to the rise of the social status of franklins.

### 3. Franklins as the Members of the Gentry

In accordance with all these improvements in the social status of franklins in the fourteenth century, franklins started to be regarded as “the class immediately below the gentry” as observed in “the poll-tax returns for the West Riding of Yorkshire of 1379” where “the franklins are assessed at 3s. 4d. and the knights at 20s. So a franklin was ‘one sixth of a knight’” (Denholm-Young, 1969: 24).<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, franklins were grouped in the poll tax of 1379 among the lesser esquires, which signalled that franklins rose in the social ladder from being mere peasants to *becoming* the members of the gentry (Harris, 2005: 137). This can also be observed in the definition of franklin in *The Middle English Dictionary* as stated above. In this respect, gentility stands out as an important part of a franklin’s identity as “a rising man” (Keen, 2005: 38) and constitutes an important part of his desire for social reform as it will be discussed below in relation to the Franklin’s self-fashioning through his performance as a bourgeois man.

The gentry was, in fact, just above peasants in the social hierarchy. Yet, the free peasants on the highest level of this gentry group, among whom were franklins, had great amounts of holdings and at some cases had incomes as much as the lower knights, who were also the members of the gentry. Thus, in 1247, it was allowed by the Crown that those freeholders with 40s. annual income could be knighted. However, many freeholders did not want to be knighted because of the economic burdens of knighthood in the late medieval period. Nevertheless, as a result of the lack of knights, the Crown had to appoint such not-knighted members of the gentry to serve in the shires (Postan, 1972: 157-158). This contributed to franklins’ rise into the gentry, who had important roles as local governors appointed by the Crown. They were acting as sheriffs and the justices of peace. Franklins could build up their way to lordship through such offices. They could be the holders of manorial lordship and act as the representatives and enactors of jurisdiction in their counties. Therefore, as the officers appointed by the Crown, franklins held great authority, which also attributed them a type of lordship among localities and thus the status of the gentry (Harris, 2005: 164).

However, initially, the title *gentry* was used for the people of aristocratic origin, that is, for people who were noble by blood. As a result, the justices of peace and people who were involved in local administration in the fourteenth century were given the title “esquire,” not “gentleman.” Yet, in the Statute of Apparels in 1363 and the poll tax grant in 1379, “esquire” referred to the “gentils” as well (Keen, 2005: 38). This can be regarded as an indication of the social reform taking place in the fourteenth century England, and it can be argued that the gentry was recognised as an important social group of the estate hierarchy in that period. In this respect, it is equally important to note that landowners with certain local administrative duties in the fourteenth century were also recognised as “gentils” (Keen, 2005: 39). Likewise, it was due to such official duties that franklins started to be regarded as “country gentry” (Denholm-Young, 1969: 1). Therefore, although Thrupp defines the social status of franklins as “obscure” (1962: 235), it can be claimed that their rise in the social hierarchy was evident in the fourteenth century as reflected by the statutes and grants despite the lack of its recognition and acceptance by society. It was for this reason that, despite the improvements in their social status, franklins were still in need of social acceptance to secure their social status as the members of the gentry and to be accepted by society as the figures of authority.

### 4. Chaucer’s Franklin in the “General Prologue” to the *Canterbury Tales*

In the light of these, Chaucer’s Franklin in the *Canterbury Tales* stands out as a member of this group in the fourteenth century. He has risen in the social hierarchy and become a member of the gentry as it is displayed by the offices he has held. However, despite the lack of social recognition and acceptance of his social status, the Franklin can be defined as a self-fashioner through his bourgeois identity performance as revealed in his depiction in the “General Prologue,” his words to the Squire and his tale. Greenblatt defines self-fashioning as “the Renaissance version of [...] control mechanisms, the cultural system of meanings that creates specific individuals by governing the passage from abstract potential to concrete historical embodiment” (2005: 3-4). Drawing attention to the control over self by the external “mechanisms,” Greenblatt emphasises “the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process” (2005: 2). However, this process is influenced not only by the external “mechanisms” but also by an individual’s self-conception. In accordance with Greenblatt’s definition and with the increase in the social status of franklins in fourteenth century England, Chaucer’s Franklin presents a medieval example of self-fashioning. He fashions himself as a bourgeois man who has risen from his feudal origins to become a man of civil offices by using and abusing the traditional estate literature arguments.

To start with the Franklin’s self-fashioning in the “General Prologue” to the *Canterbury Tales* the Franklin’s portrait reveals his significant official duties and his concern with the display of wealth through the references to food and hospitality. The Franklin is an old man, who has grown white beard, and he is

---

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, heralds regarded gentry as the social group just below knights in the late Middle Ages (Denholm-Young, 1969: 23).

sanguine (I (A) 332-333).<sup>4</sup> After presenting the details about the Franklin's age and appearance, which draws attention to his experienced nature, the "General Prologue" displays the Franklin's self-fashioning as a bourgeois man, despite his need for social recognition and social reform, in two main parts: firstly, his interest in delight and pleasure, which is displayed through his love of food, and his being a great householder with an always ready table; and secondly, with the list of his official duties.

To begin with the Franklin's interest in delight and pleasure, the "General Prologue" defines him as "Epicurus owene sone" (I (A) 336) as a man who has been accustomed "[t]o lyven in delit" (I (A) 335). The Franklin believes that "pleyn delit / Was verray felicitee parfit" (I (A) 337-338). In line with his love of living in delight, the following part of his depiction in the "General Prologue" reveals his love of food. He is a lover of bread dipped into wine in the mornings (I (A) 334). Furthermore, he is depicted as a great householder: "An housholdere, and that a greet, was he; / Seint Julian he was in his contree" (I (A) 339-340). This depiction draws attention to the idea that those who claimed gentility were living in such a society that, as Maddern indicates, "their social status was continually being tested and negotiated by peers and neighbours in their community of honour," where "to be a gentleman/woman was to be forever acting out a role" (2005: 31). In this performance, the foods one consumed and the house one lived in were very important for one's role playing. Accordingly, as the members of the rising gentry, franklins also started to have big manor-like houses to display their economic and thus social superiority over their fellow-villagers in the late Middle Ages (Specht, 1981: 86). Likewise, Chaucer's Franklin performs as a man who pays keen attention to displaying his wealth and thus his superiority over his peers by being a great householder. This is also an important part of the Franklin's performance of bourgeois identity. Although these lines reveal no specific information about the type of the house the Franklin lived in, it can be suggested that he has a great house, maybe a manor-like one, in which he displayed his material wealth and gained the title "Saint Julian" of his county as a result of his reputation for hospitality. This detail is important to convey the idea that generosity is a very important feature for the Franklin to be regarded as a superior man in his community. As Fleming notes, generosity was considered to be a prerequisite of the nobility in the Middle Ages and it was essentially required to be displayed to the public as much as possible (2005: 54). Accordingly, as a bourgeois man who has only his material wealth to claim a distinct social status, the Franklin performs his role as a generous householder to assert his status in his community.

Similarly, as a great householder and a hospitable man,<sup>5</sup> the Franklin is the owner of good quality bread and ale as well as wine, large amounts of pies, fish and meat, which reveal him as "a gourmet and *bon viveur*" (Coss, 2014: 229):

His breed, his ale, was always after oon;  
 A bettre envyned man was nowher noon.  
 Withoute bake mete was nevere his hous,  
 Of fissh and flessch, and that so plentevous  
 It snewed in his hous of mete and drynke;  
 Of alle deyntees that men koude thynke,  
 After the sondry sesons of the yeer,  
 So chaunged he his mete and his soper.  
 Ful many a fat partrich hadde he in muwe,  
 And many a breem and many a luce in stuwe. (I (A) 341-350)

These lines display that the Franklin is such a rich man that all the food and drink items almost snow in his house (I (A) 345). Furthermore, he has such delight in food that he has all the seasonable dainties as his meal or supper (I (A) 346-348), which again asserts that he is rich enough to have seasonal food on his table for his guests. Although this is an exaggerated depiction, it is functional in signifying the wealth of the Franklin due to which he can buy any food or drink item he likes. The abundance of food in his house is a product of the abundance in his pocket. The Franklin desires showing off this abundance so that people can see and recognise his superiority. Additionally, it will not be wrong to claim that the Franklin wants people to show respect to him as a hospitable man, which is almost a requirement for a man of authority. Thus, his being a hospitable and generous man not only displays his bourgeois identity performance and his self-fashioning as a bourgeois man, but also contributes to this very performance. In the same line, the "General Prologue" indicates that "[w]o was his cook but if his sauce were / Poynaunt and sharp, and redy al his geere" (I (A) 351-352). The reference to his cook reveals both the Franklin's concern about the quality of the food he consumes and that he is rich enough to have a cook in his house. As a result, his cook also contributes to the visibility of his wealth and thus his authority and bourgeois identity performance.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout the article, the references to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are from *The Riverside Chaucer* (2008), Ed., Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Due to these features, Jill Mann regards the Franklin as a satirical portrait of Chaucer (1973: 152-1599).

As a great householder, “[h]is table dormant in his halle always / Stood redy covered al the longe day” (I (A) 353-354). The reference to his always ready table again draws attention to the Franklin’s desire to be recognised and accepted as a superior man in the country by anyone who comes to his house at anytime. This is again a reflection of his being interested in displaying the items of food that are functional in displaying his wealth, which draws attention to the performative aspect of the Franklin’s bourgeois identity. The Franklin’s interest in display is an indication of the idea that his gentility is dependent on the recognition and acceptance of his “supposed peers (other reputable gentlemen and esquires)” in his country (Maddern, 2005: 26). Hence, it is important for the Franklin to display his wealth to anyone in order to be recognised and acknowledged in his country as a man of superior status.

As for the Franklin’s official duties in the local administration, although Keen suggests that the Franklin, as a great freeholder, is more like a yeoman rather than a country esquire, who might be a justice of peace or a sheriff, he still cannot avoid asserting that the list of the Franklin’s official duties reveals that he has been the governmental representative of his county (2005: 37-38). The Franklin’s “General Prologue” portrait goes on revealing the first office he has held: “At session ther was he lord and sire” (I (A) 355). This signals that the Franklin has served as a Justice of Peace. A Justice of Peace had the right to arrest and hold trials to sustain the peace in his county. He could hold four sessions in a year. Moreover, the sheriff’s judicial powers would be conferred upon the Justice of Peace in 1461, which meant an increase in the social status of the Justices of Peace in the fifteenth century. Starting from 1461, it was required that a Justice of Peace was to reside in his own shire and starting from 1439-40 onwards, it was required for him to have £20 annual landed income (Fleming, 2005: 51). In this respect, his depiction in the “General Prologue” asserts that the Franklin meets all these requirements as a man who has served as a Justice of Peace in the fourteenth century. Thus, this official duty signals not only the Franklin’s authoritative position but also his economic status.

Then, the “General Prologue” displays that the Franklin has served as a knight of the shire many times (I (A) 356), which means that he represented his county as an MP in the Parliament. Actually, from 1310 to 1377, the knights of the shires were not only military knights but either franklins or esquires, who could be called “parliamentary gentry” (Denholm-Young, 1969: 15) According to Denholm-Young, on population basis, “we must expect to find 18,000 to 20,000 country gentry. If there are 2,000 strenuous knights only one-third of the gentry are knights” (1969: 16). This also signals that there was a change in the meaning of the title “knight.” The meaning of the “knight” in the 1300s was totally different from its connotations in the 1100s (King, 1987: 142). It was not after all only a military title given to the men of arms but also a civilian title attributed to the men of gentry representing their counties in Parliament.<sup>6</sup> Beside its political aspect, being a knight of the shire also had an economic importance for the king, because, in order to sustain the financial demands of war, he needed to guarantee the support of the “local elites” (Fleming, 2005: 52). It was the duty of franklins to provide this guarantee for the king as the bridge between the Crown and the country gentlemen. Thus, being a knight of the shire was a “career path” for landowners in the late Middle Ages (Fleming, 2005: 53). Hence, many landowners competed for becoming an MP. One could have lands in more than one county, which meant that he could be elected by all these counties for different elections. One could be elected from a county once, and then, in the next elections, he could be elected in another county, which meant opportunities for those who were interested in getting a seat for more than one time (Denholm-Young, 1969: 66). Similarly, the Franklin’s being a knight of the shire means that he has represented his county at the Parliament and thus he has become one of “the parliamentary ‘commons’” (Fleming, 2005: 52), which signals his political authority in his county and his distinction from other country gentlemen as a man elected by his fellow countrymen.

Furthermore, the Franklin has also served as a sheriff and a contour (I (A) 359). To start with his being a sheriff, according to *The Middle English Dictionary*, sheriff meant “[a] high elected or appointed official representing the Crown, having various legal and administrative duties” (“šīr-rēve” (a)). Hence, it is natural for the Franklin to have the Man of Law as his travelling companion (I (A) 331), which is actually the first implication of the Franklin’s position as a man of authority involved in legal matters as well. According to a statute of 1331 granted by Edward III, it was required to have a certain amount of land in the county to be appointed as a sheriff (Specht, 1981: 131). The emphasis on property continued in the statute of 1371, which argued that it was required for a person to hold land with £20 annual worth to be elected as a sheriff in the same county. A similar sort of reference to property for the (re)election of sheriffs was also referred to in the statute of 1377. It was required that if there was another candidate, who wanted to be a sheriff with the same amount of property in a county, it was prohibited for the former sheriff to be re-elected within three

---

<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, since the travelling expenses were met by the shire, it was cheaper for the shire to send a franklin rather than a knight as the knight of the shire to the Parliament (Denholm-Young, 1969: 60-63).

years (Specht, 1981: 131). Throughout the fourteenth century, a sheriff was elected by the shire, excluding the time period between 1311 and 1338 when he was elected by the Ordinaries. He was elected to serve for a year and he was appointed by the Exchequer. The position lost its authority with the transfer of its tasks in relation to local government to other special officials such as the justice of peace (Denholm-Young, 1969: 54). Nevertheless, as Specht suggests, a sheriff was an important local administrator appointed by the government throughout the fourteenth century (1981: 30). The sheriff was the main officer of the king and thus commissioned by the Crown for one year. His duty was to preside over the county court and support the royal justice, to be the custodian of gaols in the county, to serve royal laws, to control elections to and appointments for the Parliament and to raise troops if required to do so (Fleming, 2005: 51). Therefore, the Franklin's serving as a sheriff draws attention to his identity performance as a man of political authority and his sustaining the link between the Crown and the commoners, which contributes to his self-fashioning through his bourgeois identity performance.

As for the Franklin serving as a contour (I (A) 359), *The Middle English Dictionary* states that "contour" as a noun means "[a]n accountant; esp., an official who oversees the collecting and auditing of taxes for a shire, a kingdom, etc." ("cōuntōur" (1.(a)). Therefore, it should be noted that, in addition to his political status as a Justice of Peace, a knight of the shire and a sheriff, the Franklin has also been assigned the role of an accountant and tax-collector for the Crown. This again contributes to the Franklin's socio-economic importance and impact, which are important parts of his bourgeois identity performance. As a freeholder, he has risen from being a mere landholder to a man of social, political and legal importance, which can be interpreted as revelation and performance of the Franklin's self-fashioning as a bourgeois man.

The Franklin is also "a worthy vavasour" (I (A) 360). Vavasour was a person, who "belonged to an early and transitional phase in the formation of a graded English gentry" in the thirteenth century (Coss, 1983: 146). This is also revealed by the meaning of vavasour, in that, according to *The Middle English Dictionary*, it meant "[a] feudal tenant holding land of some other vassal, a subvassal; a feudal vassal, a liegeman; also, a member of the landholding nobility, presumably ranking below a baron;—often used in contrast with a king, knight, squire, etc." ("vavasōur" (a)). Hence, it can be argued that the Franklin's being a vavasour draws attention to his being a *noble* landholder.<sup>7</sup> Although his social status is not equal to a person noble by blood such as a lord or a baron, the Franklin still occupies a *noble* status owing to the amount of his money and lands, which provide him with a number of administrative positions. Accordingly, it can be suggested that the members of the gentry benefitted much from the offices they held, due to which they asserted their rising social status, which was bound to and enhanced by being more and more visible in the public. It is due to this authoritative and visible position that the Franklin fashions himself as a bourgeois man despite his feudal origins.

Furthermore, the relationship between lords and the members of this sub-knightly gentry group was mutually beneficial for lords and the members of the gentry. First of all, the gentry made it easier for kings and magnates to sustain their control over the counties, in return for which these landed gentry asked for either offices in local administration, or land, or fees (Fleming, 2005: 55-57). In line with these, as Coss states, Chaucer's Franklin appears as "a figure of great social, and hence historical, significance" (1983: 148). He has served in almost all the important local administration offices as a justice of peace, knight of the shire, a sheriff, a contour and a vavasour. As a result, despite his feudal origins, the Franklin stands out as a member of the country gentry, who had great economic, social, legal and political authority in the fourteenth century. It is owing to this social status, which is created by his material means, that the Franklin fashions himself through his bourgeois identity performance.

In this respect, the references to the Franklin's "anlaas" and "gipser al of silk / Heeng at his girdle, whit as morne milk" (I (A) 357-358) are also functional in drawing attention to the Franklin's social status as a man of authority. The "anlaas" was a dagger used in hunting in the Middle Ages, which, as Erol asserts, draws attention to the fact that the Franklin has been allowed to hunt as a man of high social estates as a landholder (1981: 104). His "gipser" also contributes to this image of the man of authority. As Ege suggests, his silk "gipser," which means a "purse," "fits what we hear of the Franklin's wealth" (1993: 346). Therefore, it can be argued that the Franklin carries his dagger and silk purse as "common markers of reputation and markers of gentility" (Maddern, 2005: 29), which again contribute not only to the visibility of the Franklin as a man of high social status, but also his identity performance as a bourgeois man. It is due to this concern about the visibility that the Franklin stands out as a *new* member of the gentry who is in need of social recognition and acceptance. Although he has already achieved rising in the social ladder, he has not still achieved attaining social acceptance of this rise due to his feudal origins. This would come only through a

---

<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, Saul indicates that "franklin" "was a word applied in a civilian, usually a rural, context to the wealthy freeholders—those proud of their freedom, but inferior to the noble blood of the knights and lords" (1983: 13).

social reform, since the traditional estate hierarchy gives no space for such type of newly emerging social groups. Thus, the Franklin does not avoid fashioning himself as a bourgeois man, which can be regarded as his way of contributing to this social reform, which is also revealed in his relation with the Squire and in his tale.

### 5. The Franklin's Words to the Squire

Adopting themselves into the gentry's ways of life, "the sub-knightly among the gentry absorbed with their new-found social dignity the traditional culture and values of the old chivalrous landowning elite" (Keen, 2005: 47).<sup>8</sup> As the members of this social group, franklins turned their attention to chivalric culture to adopt its values. In this way, they aimed at receiving social recognition and acceptance by the nobility. In this respect, the Franklin's words to the Squire following the Squire's tale are very important in reflecting his self-fashioning as a bourgeois man and his need for social reform. He says,

[i]n feith, Squier, thow hast thee wel yquit  
And gentilly. I preise wel thy wit, [...]  
[...] considerynge thy yowthe,  
So feelyngly thou spekest, sire, I allow the!  
As to my doom, ther is noon that is heere  
Of eloquence that shal be thy peere,  
If that thou lyve; God yeve thee good chaunce,  
And in vertu sende thee continuaunce,  
For of thy speche I have greet deyntee.  
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! Fy on possessioun,  
But if a man be vertuous withal!  
I have my sone snybbed, and yet shal,  
For he to vertu listeth nat entende;  
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 comune with any gentil wight  
Where he myghte lerne gentillesse aright. (V (F) 673-694)

The Franklin praises the Squire and his rhetorical skills in his tale, which is an incomplete romance. This praise has two important aspects: Firstly, it reflects the Franklin's awareness of his difference as a member of the gentry from the chivalrous nobility, here represented by the Squire; and secondly, it reflects the Franklin's interest in courtly romance. To begin with the first aspect, the Franklin's praise of the Squire and his rhetorical skills reveals that the Franklin is aware of the social and thus cultural distinction between freeholders and the chivalric estate. At this point, it will not be wrong to claim that the Franklin admires the Squire, the heir of the Knight, the epitome of chivalric culture, and accepts him as the ideal son model. It is for this reason that the Franklin compares the Squire with his own son and he wants his son to "look and live like a knight's son, not like a bumpkin with too much money" (Keen, 2005: 37). This comparison indicates that the Franklin admires the Squire and his being a truly "gentil" man by heart and deed, which can be regarded as a reflection of the Franklin's self-fashioning as a bourgeois man who has social ambitions despite the lack of social recognition.<sup>9</sup> As a self-fashioner, he wants his son to be like the son of a knight, which can be interpreted as his desire to be on equal terms with a knight. Accordingly, it can be suggested that his son also constitutes an important part of the Franklin's self-fashioning. As he fashions himself as a bourgeois man despite his feudal origins, the Franklin's words to the Squire can also be interpreted as his urge to fashion his son in order to sustain his self-fashioning throughout generations.

### 6. The Bourgeois Performance of the Franklin in His Tale

While the Franklin has been praising the Squire, the Host intervenes and wants him to tell his own tale. In return for this invitation, the Franklin exhibits an example of humility topos. He says that he will tell his tale but "I prey yow, haveth me nat in desdeyn" (V (F) 700). This, in fact, reveals how the Franklin is "expressing with false modesty his lack of skill with language" (Haas, 2007: 45). Hence, this humility topos also displays "the Franklin's interest in language usage as a marker of genteel class values" (Haas, 2007: 46).

<sup>8</sup> As a reflection of this interest in chivalry, the members of the gentry developed an interest in heraldic insignia as well (Keen, 2005: 45).

<sup>9</sup> Also see Lumiansky (1955: 82) for a discussion of Franklin's social ambitions.

He is aware of the fact that his rhetorical skills cannot be compared to the rhetorical skills of the Squire. Still, the Franklin is also aware of the fact that his turn in the tale telling game is an opportunity for him to perform and to display his rhetorical skills as a member of the gentry. Thus, he says,

[g]ladly, sire Hoost, [...] I wole obeye  
Unto your wyl; now herkneth what I seye.  
I wol yow nat contrarien in no wyse  
As fer as that my wittes wol suffyse.  
I prey to God that it may plesen yow;  
Thanne woot I wel that it is good ynow. (V (F) 703-708)

Hoping to “please” his audience, the Franklin tells a Breton lay, which is based on the ideals of truthfulness and honour, which are “concomitants of gentility”<sup>10</sup> (Maddern, 2005: 30). Besides these themes, the choice of a Breton lay as a subject matter is itself indicative of the Franklin’s concern with the chivalric culture. The Breton lays depicted how a man grew up to be a hero and his achievements. These lays, in a way, set examples of the nobility for the members of the gentry. In this respect, it was not unusual for the gentry to be also interested in didactic works, especially the mirrors for princes, which depicted the education process of kings and noble people. The *Secretum Secretorum* (Secret of Secrets), in which Aristotle teaches Alexander the Great how to be a good king, was one example of those popular works among the gentry in the late Middle Ages (Orme, 2005: 65-66). Although such works were in fact written for the aristocracy, the gentry had also great interest in them. Accordingly, there was an important similarity between the texts read by the country gentry and the urban elites, that is, the nobility (Radulescu, 2005: 100). Yet, the gentry read such literary works not only as a reflection of their interest in chivalric culture, but also as a part of their education process and as guidebooks for gentility. After all, they were the members of a literate estate<sup>11</sup> and knew reading literary works in English, even if not in Latin or French. Thus, their interest in war, chivalric culture and literature, and chivalric hero “all played their part in shaping both the cultural vocabulary and the social self-perception of the gentry in the formative period of their emergence as an identifiable estate” (Keen, 2005: 43). Hence, the Franklin’s interest in chivalric literature can be defined as a form of “[a]cculturation” (Keen, 2005: 47) and another reflection of his self-fashioning as a bourgeois man. Despite his feudal origins, the Franklin chooses to tell a Breton lay depicting the nobility’s ways of life and presenting knightly figures as his characters. As Coss states, no matter what his official duties are, the Franklin “appears to be lacking in direct experience of knightly and courtly life” (2014: 239). However, in accordance with the Franklin’s self-fashioning and his concern about his gentility and its social recognition and acceptance, his telling a tale on truthfulness and honour is functional in contributing to his gentility<sup>12</sup> and thus his performance of his bourgeois identity.

## 7. Conclusion

The Franklin’s concern with the display of his wealth through the emphasis on food in his house, his hospitality and his silk purse as well as his words to the Squire and his choice of telling a Breton lay, exhibit that the Franklin needs to perform in a specific pattern to be accepted as a member of the gentry. Therefore, it can be suggested that the Franklin’s depiction in the “General Prologue” draws attention to his importance, function and authority in his county, all of which display his self-fashioning as a bourgeois man. He enhances this authoritative position in his tale by narrating a Breton lay. The Franklin fashions himself as efficient as the Squire or the Knight to tell a tale about chivalric culture. In this respect, he becomes the embodiment of the failure of the traditional three estate model. Hence, although there is still desire for social reform and acceptance in the Franklin, he presents himself as the “new man”<sup>13</sup> of the gentry, who is of feudal origin, but has gone beyond this origin and stood out as an example of the newly emerging bourgeoisie. In order to contribute to this social reform, the Franklin performs his bourgeois identity in accordance with his self-conception ignoring the impositions of the traditional three estate structure and fashions himself as a bourgeois man, a man who has climbed up the social ladder despite his feudal origin and who has become a *new man*.

## REFERENCES

BAILEY, Mark, ed. (2002). *The English Manor c. 1200-1500*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

---

<sup>10</sup> Also see Saul’s “Chaucer and Gentility” for a discussion of the concept of gentility (1992: 41-55).

<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, literacy was important for each and every member of the gentry not only for learning and adopting the nobility’s ways of life but also for being involved in the local administration or commerce. Hence, literacy was not a luxurious activity for the gentry but a required feature (Truelove, 2005: 85-86).

<sup>12</sup> See Lindsay A. Mann’s article “‘Gentillesse’ and the Franklin’s Tale” (1966) for a detailed discussion of the ideal of “gentillesse” as an important theme of the Franklin’s tale.

<sup>13</sup> See Paul Strohm for a discussion of franklins as “new” men (1989: 107-108).



- BRITNELL, Richard (2008). "Land and Lordship: Common Themes and Regional Variations", In *Agriculture and Rural Society after the Black Death: Common Themes and Regional variations*, Eds. Ben Dodds and Richard Britnell, (pp. 149-167), Hertfordshire: Hertfordshire University Press.
- CHAUCER, Geoffrey (2008). *The Riverside Chaucer*, Ed. Larry D. Benson, (3rd ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- COSS, Peter (2014). "The Franklin", In *Historians on Chaucer: The 'General Prologue' to the Canterbury Tales*, Eds. Stephen H. Rigby and Alastair J. Minnis, (pp. 227-246), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- COSS, Peter (1983). "Literature and Social Terminology: The Vavasour in England", In *Social Relations and Ideas: Essays in Honour of R. H. Hilton*, Eds. T. H. Aston et al. (pp. 109-150), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- "CÓUNTÓUR" (n.d.). In *The Middle English Dictionary*. Retrieved January 15, 2015.
- DENHOLM-YOUNG, N. (1969). *The Country Gentry in the Fourteenth Gentry with Special Reference to the Heraldic Rolls of Arms*, Oxford: Clarendon.
- DYER, Christopher (1989). *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- EGE, Ufuk (1993). *Costume in Chaucer's Works with Special Reference to the Visual History of Costume in His Era*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Lancaster: Lancaster University.
- EROL, Burçin (1981). *A Pageant of Well-Dressed People: A Study of Chaucer's Costume Imagery in the Canterbury Tales*, Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Ankara: Hacettepe University.
- FLEMING, Peter (2005). "Politics", In *Gentry Culture in the Late Medieval England*, Eds. Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove, (pp. 50-62), Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- "FRANK(E)LEIN" (n.d.). In *The Middle English Dictionary*. Retrieved January 15, 2015.
- GREENBLATT, Stephen (2005). *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- HAAS, Kurtis B. (2007). "The Franklin's Tale and the Medieval Trivium: A Call for Critical Thinking", *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Vol. 106, No. 1, pp. 45-63.
- HARRIS, Gerald (2005). *Shaping the Nation: England 1360-1461*, Oxford: Clarendon.
- KEEN, Maurice (2005). "Chivalry", In *Gentry Culture in the Late Medieval England*, Eds. Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove, (pp. 35-49), Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- KING, Edmund (1987). "Large and Small Landowners in Thirteenth-Century England: The Case of Peterborough Abbey", In *Landlords, Peasants and Politics in Medieval England*, Ed. T. H. Aston, (pp. 141-165), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- LUMIANSKY, Robert M. (1955). *Of Sundry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in the Canterbury Tales*, Austin: University of Texas Press.
- MADDERN, Philippa (2005). "Gentility", In *Gentry Culture in the Late Medieval England*, Eds. Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove, (pp. 18-34), Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- MANN, Jill (1973). *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- MANN, Lindsay A. (1966). "'Gentillesse' and the Franklin's Tale", *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 63, No. 1, pp. 10-29.
- ORME, Nicholas (2005). "Education and Recreation", In *Gentry Culture in the Late Medieval England*, Eds. Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove, (pp. 63-83), Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- POSTAN, M. M. (1972). *Medieval Economic and Society: An Economic History of Britain in the Middle Ages*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- RADULESCU, Raluca (2005). "Literature", In *Gentry Culture in the Late Medieval England*, Eds. Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove, (pp. 100-118), Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- RAFTIS, J. A. (1997). *Peasant Economic Development within the English Manorial System*, Montreal and Kingston: Sutton.
- SAUL, Nigel (1992). "Chaucer and Gentility," In *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, Ed. Barbara Hanawalt, (pp. 41-55), Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press.
- SAUL, Nigel (1983). "The Social Status of Chaucer's Franklin: A Reconsideration", *Medium Aevum* Vol. 52, pp. 10-26.
- "SHĪR-RĒVE" (n.d.). In *The Middle English Dictionary*. Retrieved January 15, 2015.
- SPECHT, Henrik (1981). *Chaucer's Franklin in the Canterbury Tales: The Social and Literary Background of a Chaucerian Character*, Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag.
- STROHM, Paul (1989). *Social Chaucer*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- THRUPP, Sylvia L. (1962). *The Merchant Class of Medieval London, 1300-1500*, Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press.
- TRUELOVE, Alison (2005). "Literacy", In *Gentry Culture in the Late Medieval England*, Eds. Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove, (pp. 84-99), Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.
- "VAVASÓUR" (n.d.). In *The Middle English Dictionary*. Retrieved January 15, 2015.
- WHITTLE, Jane (2008). "Leasehold Tenure in England c.1300-c.1600: Its Form and Incidence", In *The Development of Leasehold in North-Western Europe, c. 1200-1600*, Eds. Bas J. P. van Bavel and Phillip R. Schofield, (pp. 139-154), Turnhout: Brepols.