disclaimer is so phrased as to evoke the fact of social difference established in the previous dialogue, while the Squire's apology cuts athwart some statements in the General Prologue which refer to his literary interests.

It would be totally out of character for the Franklin to mimic the Squire merely at the latter's expense. We are rather, I think, to see the echo as an improved, a more controlled and mature, use of the strategy. The Franklin, who praises the Squire for speaking *feelingly* and elegantly, affirms that his own "spirit feeleth noght" so far as rhetoric is concerned. Both statements are qualified by the total context; it may be that the Franklin locates himself at the other extreme from the Squire in order to establish the pattern of equipoise which his tale will fulfill. Though he distinguishes the more academic ornaments of rhetoric from the more sensuous colors of nature and visual art, we shall see in the tale that his attitude toward rhetoric seems to epitomize his feeling about a whole range of experience—the range concerned with the human tendency to adorn life, and with the various motives behind this tendency. The Franklin's insistence on being *burel* and plain-speaking will allow him to humor his own affinities for the worlds of magic and courtly love without losing sight of their limits or control of their attractiveness.

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(Part II will appear in the next issue.)

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THE SQUIRE IN WONDERLAND

by John P. McCall

Influenced by Gardiner Stillwell's important study, some recent commentary on the *Squire's Tale* has turned from viewing the story with sober enthusiasm as a promising fragment and has described it with realistic irony as a complete but rather silly performance.[1] There are, it seems, good reasons for both views. On one hand the Squire has evidently sought to create a scene of distant magic where almost anything can happen, and here his youthful zest is set free to ramble in the delights of a limitless fancy. And yet the Squire is also a very self-conscious story-teller who strains to use the tools of his craft, often clumsily, and who sometimes gives a surprisingly clear picture of how things really are. The result is a curious ambivalence which the Squire is either unaware of or unable to resolve. As disconcerting as this situation may appear on the surface, these pages will argue that Chaucer has carefully created it for a delicate, humorous effect.

The chief problem and chief fact about the *Squire's Tale* is that it leaves one wondering. A reader is apt and even encouraged to feel the same doubts about the tale that the crowd at court has about the gifts of the strange knight who flies into Cambyuskan's feast. The people, we are told, swarmed around and stared at the horse of brass with "Swich wondryng,"

> That syn the grete sege of Troie was,
> Theras men wondreden on an hors also,
> Ne was ther swich a wondryng as was tho.
> (F 306-8)

They "wondred on" the magic mirror (225), "wondred on" the mys-

1. G. Stillwell, "Chaucer in Tartary," *RES*, XXIV (1948), 177-88. Two critics have lately reached similar conclusions regarding the short-comings of the Squire and the incompetence of his rhetoric: D. A. Pearsall, "The Squire as Story-Teller," *UTQ*, XXXIV (1964), 82-92; and R. S. Haller, "Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* and the Uses of Rhetoric," *MP*, LXII (1965), 285-95. R. K. Root's praise of the romantic aura of the tale is still valuable: *The Poetry of Chaucer*, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1922), pp. 266-70. Most of the general comments on the tale describe it as a typical romance: for example, *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957), pp. 9, 717. References in this paper are to Robinson's text.

terious sword (236), and said there was never "swich a wonder thyng" (248) as the crafty ring given to Canacee. The nature of the wonderment is clear from the comments of the crowd: they are irreconcilably divided between two schools of thought. There are those of a fanciful and romantic turn of mind who associate the brass horse with Pegasus or, more fearfully, with the Trojan horse; they are amazed that the mirror can picture treacherous adversaries and treacherous loves; the remarkable sword reminds them of Telephus and Achilles' spear; and the unusual ring recalls an art—long forgotten—known only to Moses and King Solomon.

But there are also those in the crowd who look on all four gifts with a scientific and realistic eye and who conclude that these are only gimmicks which should surprise no one with an ounce of good sense. The horse is simply a trick or an illusion such as "Colle tregetour," or any talented Clerk of Orléans might create for a great feast; the mirror works according to the principles of perspective which are described in any decent tract on optics; the sword leads them to talk of how hard metals may be tempered with medicines; and if the ring cannot be explained right off, that is no surprise. People used to wonder how glass could be made from fern ash, but they stopped jangling about that long ago; they used to wonder about the causes of thunder, the tides, gossamer and mists, but all these were explained.

That a large and obviously learned court group should disagree about four strange things is, perhaps, not very surprising. But what is a source of wonder is the fact that the Squire who is telling the tale shows himself completely disdainful of the whole proceeding. In a story where the magical might be expected to dominate, the narrator calmly dismisses a hot dispute between the forces of Fancy and Reality. He not only leaves their conflict unresolved and unrelated to anything, he even belittles it:

> Of sondry doutes thus they jangle and trete,
> As lewed peple demeth comunly
> Of thynges that been maad moore subtilly
> Than they kan in hir lewednesse comprehende;
> They demen gladly to the badder ende.
> (220-24)

Under the circumstances, what is a reader to think? If he cannot credit either the world of mystery or the world of nature, the world of the past or of the present, the world of myth or of science—then what can he credit and where is he left? The only answers seem to be

"nothing" and "nowhere"; in which case the whole long episode (189-262) proves to be little more than a learned, ornate *tour de force*.

If the detailed disagreement about the strange knight's four gifts finally leads nowhere, the gifts themselves prove to be quite evanescent. The dangerous (or illusory) horse of brass stands "yglewed" to the ground for the most part, then goes into a silly skip-and-dance routine (312-13), and finally disappears (342-43). The marvelous mirror and sword, whatever one may think of them, are whisked off under guard to the king's high tower (174-77) where they are later joined by the bridle that made the horse skip and dance (340-41). Then, when everything but the magic ring has left the scene, the Squire brings our expectations regarding all of them—mirror, sword, bridle and horse—to an abrupt and meaningless end: "ye gete namoore of me" (343). In other words, if one is wondering about any of these things, forget it!

The elaborate but meaningless way in which the Squire deals with the magical paraphernalia of his tale is closely linked with his whole performance. He creates, in fact, a series of expectations without fulfillment. Thus Cambyuskan, we are assured, is a vigorous knight, heroic and youthful in spirit (9-27). But as a matter of fact Cambyuskan does practically nothing. He holds a tremendous birthday party for himself, moves from room to room, and then goes to bed late—apparently in his cups. The strange knight with the gifts, one might suspect, has an inside line on "this noble king"; for, when it comes time to distribute the presents, he points out that Cambyuskan can safely ride the brass horse through the air even while sleeping or resting on its back (126).

Cambyuskan's courtiers are, moreover, cut of the same cloth as their leader. During their curious dances their "subtil lookyng and dissymulynges" suggest a high-powered erotic atmosphere which the Squire confesses is beyond his poor power to describe; yet the romantic aura that is invoked culminates in nothing relevant. The revelers had already enjoyed one sumptuous banquet before the dance (58-76), but afterwards they eat and drink some more (291-95), go off to the temple (for no apparent reason) and then return to eating and drinking (297, 299-301); they are briefly interrupted by the strange knight's account of how to "trille" pins on a brass horse (314-33), and then back they go to feasting (344-46) until near sun-up when (with a rhetorical fanfare) they all stumble off to bed gaping drunk (347-56). Even the courtiers' inebriated dreams, which the Squire singles out for omission (357-59), are of no account. Thus, no matter what the Squire's intention, his narrative leaves the distinct impression that it would take

only some hard working cooks and busy wine stewards to overpower the Tartar kingdom. No matter what their eyes have said, these courtiers are more likely to be looking for hock and soda-water than for lady loves.

Only the beautiful Canacee—who is so beautiful that it takes the Squire ten lines *not* to describe her (32-41)—has leave to do something that may have meaning. But on close examination even Canacee's actions turn out to be negative, meandering and uncertain. The very first thing she does (or does not do, depending on how one looks at it) is to walk out on her father's birthday party (362-66). She wants to avoid a hangover ("Hir liste nat appalled for to be"), which suggests that she is at least thinking. For some reason or other her joy at having received the magic ring and mirror makes her change color twenty times in bed and, even more important, results in her having a true dream ("A visioun") which is neither explained nor described. It is comforting to know, however, that Canacee has at least slept better than the revelers: being "mesurable" does have its rewards.

Then, like Emily in the *Knight's Tale*, Canacee awakes before sunup; unlike Emily who longs to do her "observaunce" to May, however, Canacee has risen for no apparent reason. Her wise old governess cleverly realizes that almost everyone is sleeping it off (376-79), but when she asks her lady where she is going the reply confounds her: "I wol . . . arise, for me leste/Ne lenger for to slepe, and walke aboute" (380-81). Ten or twelve women are aroused to accompany their mistress, but inexplicably only five or six go along with her (383, 391). After another long rhetorical flourish (401-8), this aimless gathering of ladies is finally allowed to stop wandering. Suddenly they come upon a pitiful, bloody, lovely, gentle, fainting falcon who shrieks from the gory limb of a tree (411-31). Fortunately Canacee has her magic ring with her; it is on her finger rather than on her thumb or in her purse, as the strange knight directed (148, 433), but it still works.

Whatever Canacee first hears from the falcon must be especially touching because she almost dies for pity (438). But the Princess is practical as well as sentimental. Knowing that the falcon must soon fall from the tree at the next swooning, she holds the lap of her skirt wide open to catch it. She waits "a longe whil" in this position (441-44), pleads for the bird to come down (464), and then misses it when it falls (472-76). Undaunted, she recovers the falcon, listens to a long and flattering commendation of her own gentility and compassion, and is then asked to stop crying (497) so that she may hear the bird's sad story. After all, it would be well for Canacee to know what she is crying about.

During the remainder of the *Squire's Tale* there is little more that Canacee does. When the falcon's story has ended, she prepares some herbs to cure the bird. It is not clear whether the ring helped, although we had been assured earlier that it could teach one to cure such cases no matter how deep or wide the wounds (153-55). She also brings the poor creature to her room and keeps it in a coop covered with blue velvet, "In signe of trouthe that is in wommen sene." Surprisingly, though, Canacee has the coop painted green and covered with false birds chided by magpies (646-50). The choice of décor, whether by Canacee or the Squire, is nothing short of tasteless.

As Part Two ends the Squire assures us of even stranger things to come. Canacee's brother, Cambalo, is going to mediate the falcon's tangled love affair and will then engage two brothers in knightly combat "For Canacee er that he myghte hire wynne" (669). If one thinks closely on these matters he may find his imagination running wild. For example, how will Cambalo handle the repair of the bird's love affair? Through the court of love or the bureau of wildlife (i.e., the office of the forester)? Will he be able to use Canacee's ring, or will he learn bird-talk on his own? In the later struggle for Canacee are we to assume that her love will be won by two brothers (in bigamy) or her own brother (in incest)?[2] "Swiche unkynde abhomynacions," as the Man of Law noted, were not Chaucer's normal fare. But, then, perhaps the gentle Squire did not realize what he would have been letting himself in for if he had continued.

Besides Canacee there is one other major figure in the *Squire's Tale*, the poor betrayed falcon. The incongruous description of the bird—bloody, shrieking and self-lacerating, but beautiful beyond the Squire's power to describe—need not detain us. What needs to be pointed out, however, is the incongruous character of her story. On the surface it seems designed to arouse two strong impressions: first, of the falcon's own naïve and helpless gentility and, second, of her lover's vicious and calculated treason. But it is doubtful that her complaint actually achieves these ends. When the falcon's lover courts her and confesses his love, he is completely true to his word; and yet it is during this particular part of her account that the falcon denounces him, most ungently, with a host of violent epithets. He is full of treason and falseness; he is a serpent, a fair tomb encasing a corpse; he is a thief, a tiger full of duplicity, another Jason, a fiend (504-73). But there is no

2. Although the Squire's words have been interpreted differently—some critics arguing that there are two distinct Cambalos—the obvious reading implies incest: see H. Braddy, "The Genre of Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*," *JEGP*, XLI (1942), 287.

betrayal until after her lover is forced, by circumstances, to leave her. Then, at the very point where one might justifiably expect the falcon to condemn her lover in strong terms, she in fact excuses his treachery. She compares him to a bird, of all things, and then goes on for some ten lines to explain that birds are naturally inclined to break the bonds of care and affection (610-20): her lover has acted just like a bird! In the end, it would seem that the falcon's sad story is nothing more than a shaggy bird tale.

The details of the *Squire's Tale* that have been examined thus far are not isolated or unfairly chosen. There is much more that follows the same pattern of elaborate inconsequence, incongruity and downright bathos. The description of the splendid menu for Cambyuskan's feast ends with the mention of a course—apparently pismires[3]—"That in this lond [England] men recche of . . . but smal" (69-71). Moreover, almost every reference to time is in some serious way out of keeping with its context. The account of the seasonal background for Cambyuskan's birthday is entwined in contradiction: the sun is clear and jolly although it is rising to its exhaltation in the choleric and hot sign of Mars; but then the weather is "lusty" and "benigne" (48-52). The effect of the description is chaos. Then again, at the high point of the beginning of the narrative—just before the strange knight flies in—there is a temporal reference that runs completely counter to the nobility of the scene: "And so bifel that after the thridde cours" (76), and so on. When Canacee goes out for her morning walk, she is compared to the young sun, "That in the Ram is foure degrees up ronne" (386), but, when she is once outdoors, the narrator finds himself apologizing for the fact that the morning is really rather hazy and misty (393-96). A long and intricate astrological piece (263-74) sets the time for Cambyuskan's departure from the meal table (262, 275); and finally, reaching a high point in dramatic perversity, the Squire *ends* Part One with the lords feasting, "Til wel ny the day bigan to sprynge," and *begins* Part Two with everyone going to sleep (347-56). Given this kind of conflict between rhetoric and narrative, it should come as no surprise that the Squire's story ends abruptly after a long account of what is to come (651-70).

The *Squire's Tale* seeks to do many things, in fact far too much; and it shows something of the same self-conscious affectation and enthusiastic discontinuity that one associates with the first performance of a fairly good student in Freshman Composition. It seeks to do many things, and it does them all rather badly because the composer keeps

3. Stillwell, p. 183.

forgetting what he has done and where he is going. We may recall that early in the tale the Squire himself comments on his own predicament: in a self-effacing way he observes that he has difficulties climbing over the high "stile." Of course, he has more difficulties than he realizes. His efforts at rhetorical display are constantly backfiring or fizzling out; his attempts at characterization are inane and without result; and his endeavors at drama either evaporate or end in contradiction.

The Squire who tells the tale of Tartary, then, is very much the same character that Chaucer describes in the *General Prologue:* he has the trappings of nobility without the practice; he knows the theories of knighthood, art and love, but his performance is still adolescent and immature. And if he has been "In Flaundres, in Artoys, and Pycardie," it should be remembered that these were pointless skirmishes in an aborted and inglorious adventure.[4]

Thus, in one way, the *Squire's Tale* is a chaotic and fragmentary failure: but in a more important way it proves to be another one of Chaucer's complete and engaging masterpieces. For controlling all of the Squire's wild and wonderful attempts to be impressive—to seem subtle and exquisite—is the poet who knows his craft so well that he can twist its whole operation to his purpose. And Chaucer's way of twisting everything here is careful and consistent: he develops a pattern of irrelevance and illogic from a series of clashes between the worlds of romance and of reality, of art and of life. An heroic king from a distant land does nothing but sit around his palace and go to bed; his gallant courtiers spend most of their time eating and drinking, some magical gifts dissipate into real illusions; and a vague princess who can speak to birds hears a pointless story of how birds really act. Even the sun and planets move as nature demands despite the efforts of "poetry" to arrange them artfully.

In the end it would seem that the most wonderful thing about the *Squire's Tale* is the fact that we have missed its delicate humor for so long.

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4. Robinson notes in his edition (p. 653) that the line from the *General Prologue* regarding the Squire's military service doubtless refers "to the so-called crusade of Henry Le Despenser, Bishop of Norwich, in 1383." Despite the enthusiasm with which this "crusade" was begun, it proved to be an utter failure: see May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century 1307-1399* (Oxford, 1959), pp. 429-33. See also A. Gaylord, "A 85-88: Chaucer's Squire and the Glorious Campaign," *PMASAL*, XLV (1959), 341-61.

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