

Four Significant Words in Chaucer

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Undoubtedly some ethical and moral words which Chaucer seems to have cherished much play significant and vital roles in his poetry.¹ If it were not for them, Chaucer's poetry would be flat and insipid. They reflect vividly some aspects of medieval thought and culture, and at the same time they make us catch a glimpse of Chaucer's true mind.

[1] a. **Bountee**

"Bountee" (OF *bontet*), ultimately traced back to L *bonitas*, implies 'goodness' which is related to the moral excellence or virtue of a person, while on the other hand, "gentillesse" implies good manners like courtesy or politeness which is closely related to his birth and breeding.

Will Héraucourt makes a suggestive comment on the word *bountee* as follows:

es trifft bei Chaucer teilweise mit dem Bedeutungsfeld von *gentillesse* zusammen, mit dem es auch häufig gepaart erscheint. *Gentillesse* ist aus der Grundbedeutung des "So-seins auf Grund von Geburt," besonders durch Chaucer zu der des "Sich-so-verhaltens" gerückt, gemäß dem Wahlspruch *Noblesse oblige*, der, wenn damals auch noch nicht geprägt, vollkommen der Anschauung Chaucers entspricht, wie auch dem Ritterideal überhaupt.²

Chaucer commonly uses the word in order to characterize persons who are endowed with, mentally or physically, the good qualities like 'goodness, worth or virtue.' Worthy of mention is that the Wife of Bath declares that gentility comes from God alone, not from good birth nor social position. I do not think that her remarks involve irony in the perverse sense of the word, even if she is labelled generally as a lustful and lascivious woman. J.H. Fisher aptly glosses "bountee" as 'magnanimity.'³ Gentility, as the Wife of Bath declares, is essentially different from the renown of ancestors who have shown their magnanimity:

For *gentillesse* nys but renomee
Of thyne auncestres, for hire *heigh bountee*,
Which is a strange thyng to thy persone.
Thy *gentillesse* cometh fro God allone. (*WBT* 1159-62)

Directly after her tale, the Clerk of Oxford begins to speak. Chaucer also makes him assert expressly that "bountee" comes from God, not from "streen" or lineage. John H. Fisher also glosses "bountee" as 'virtue,'⁴ but it may be more pertinent to the context to take it as 'gentility,' since "gentillesse" and "bountee" are often used interchangeably:

Bountee comth al of God, nat of the streen
Of which they been engendred and ybore. (*CIT* 157-8)

The common meaning of *bounty* is 'goodness', a virtue which naturally involves physical beauty. The word subtly varies its implications according to the pairing of word: "thy bountee, thy magnificence, Thy vertu and thy

grete humylitee" (*PriT* 1664-5), "for his strengthe and for his heigh bountee" (*MkT* 3304), "Bothe of hir beautee and hir bountee wyde" (*PhyT* 112), "his bountee and his gentillesse" (*MchT* 1917), "Bountee, Gentillesse, and Curtesye" (*Pity* 68), "bounte and pruesse" (*Bo* 4. p.3. 1290-5), "alle honour and bounte" (*Tr* II 1444), "thy bounte and thyn excellence" (*Tr* III 1274), "Of verrey bounte and of curteysye" (*LGW* 1478), "Frendshipe, love, and all bounte" (*RR* 2184).

It is sometimes used as a plural noun, referring to good qualities and virtues:

for I wol closen schortly hir *bountes*, sche is lyk to hir fadir. (*Bo* 2. p. 4. 36)

Arrogant is he that thynketh that he hath thilke *bountees* in hym that he hath nocht or weneth that he demeth that he be that he nys nat. (*Pars* 396)

"Bounte" is likely to be modified and qualified by the epithets like *grete*, *heigh* and *sovereyn*, signifying 'great virtue' and 'the perfect goodness.' It is only God that has "sovereyn bountee":

And after that, for the *grete bountee* that is in wommen,oure Lord Jhesu Crist, whan he risen fro deeth to lyve, appeered rather to a womman than to his Apostles. (*Mel* 2265)

So spradde of hire *heighe bountee* the fame

That men and wommen, as wel yonge as olde,

Goon to Saluce upon to biholde. (*CIT* 418-20)

this is to seyn, that ther is no wight that hath *sovereyn bountee* save God allone, as he hymself recordeth in hys Evaungelie. (*Mel*

2269)

He mente thus, that in *sovereyn bontee*

Nis noon but God, but neither he ne she. (*MchT* 2289-90)

Noteworthy is the following example in which “goodnesse” is equivalently used with “bountee,” though, needless to say, different in connotation:

Now fele I wel the *goodnesse* of this wif,

That bothe after hire deth and in hire lyf

Hire *grete bountee* doubleth hire renoun. (*LGW G* 508-10)

“Bountee” is personified as a woman:

Hir name is *Bountee* set in womanhede, (*Comp L* 24)

In the following example “bountee” implies ‘knightly prowess, strength and valor,’ because “strengthe” is often coupled with “bountee.” However, Chaucer may have intended not only the physical strength of Hercules, but also his integrity of mind:

Thurghout this wyde world his name ran,

What *for his strengthe* and *for his heigh bountee*,

And every reaume wente he for to see. (*MkT* 21135)

The *OED* records the following instance which is indicative of ‘kindness, beneficence, an act of kindness and a good turn (sometimes ironical)’:

Agayn wikked dede of his enemy, he shal doon hym *bountee*. (*Pars*

451)

The word in issue is used as a plural noun, denoting 'good qualities, virtues':

For it is sory of alle the *bountees* of his neighebor, and in this manere it is divers from alle other synnes. (*Pars* 489)

I am withoute deffense dampnyd to proscricion and to the deth fro the studie and *bountes* that I have doon to the senat. (*Bo* 1. p. 4. 242-4)

It commonly represents the good quality or property of things, meaning 'excellence.' In the following example "bountee," "innere Ehre" may equal to "beaute," "äußere Ehre" since the conjunction "or" is paraphrased in the sense of 'that is, namely':

But certes, yif there were *beaute or bountee* in the schynyng of stones, thilke clernesse is of the stones hemselve, and nat of men; (*Bo* 3. p. 4. 39-42)

The word connotes 'praise, honour' as the *MED* defines it:

But by the mouth of children thy *bountee*
Parfourned is, or on the brest soukyng
Somtyme shewen they thyn heringe. (*PriT* 442-4)

Grisilda, though poorly fostered up, was "oon the faireste under sonne." She is portrayed ideally as a woman of praise and honour. J.H. Fisher points out that the Ellesmere reading and related texts read "beaute," not "bountee":⁵

Noght oonly of Saluces in the toun
Publiced was the *bountee* of hir name,
But eek biside in many a regioun,
If oon seide wel, another seyde the same; (*CIT* 414-7)

“Bountee” is specifically attributed to God which shows goodness in gracious liberality. It is equivalent to ‘mercy’ and ‘benevolence’:

I truste in *Goddess bountee*, and therfore
My mariage and myn estaat and reste
I hym bitake; (*CIT* 159-61)
Bountee so fix hath in thin herte his tente
That wel I wot thou wolt my socour bee; (*ABC* 9-10)

“Bountee” means a kindness or a good deed:

Another is to remembre hym of *bountee* that he of oother folk
hath receyved. (*Pars* 466)

It forms a common phrase like ‘do (one) bounty,’ meaning ‘do (one) a good turn. The below example makes it clear that “bountee” is directly opposed to “wikkednesse”:

Make no felawshipe with thyne olde enemys, for if thou *do hem bountee*, they wol perverten it into wikkednesse.’ (*Mel* 1189)

‘Loveth youre enemys, and preyeth for hem that speke yow harm, and eek for hem that yow chacen and pursewen, and *dooth bountee to hem* that yow haten.” (*Pars* 526)

What! Platly, and ye suffre hym in destresse,

Ye neyther *bountee don* ne gentillesse. (*Tr* III 881-2)

“Bountee” may be identical with the meaning of “largesse” i.e. ‘generosity, munificence.’ It is sometimes qualified by the word “sovereyn” as follows:

And for as muche as Jhesu Crist yeveth us thise yiftes of his largesse and of his *sovereyn bountee*, therefore is he cleped Jhesus Nazarene rex Judeorum. (*Pars* 284)
Yit halt thyn ancre and yit thou mayst arrayve
Ther *bountee* berth the keye of my substaunce,
And eek thou hast thy beste frend alyve. (*Fort* 38-40)

[1] b. **Bountevous**

“Bountevous,” used only twice in Chaucer’s poetry, means ‘good, virtuous, worthy.’ Benson glosses it as ‘full of goodness, generous.’⁶ “Bountevous” is an inappropriate word to characterize both Virginia and Criseyde. “Bountevous” is equivalent to “gracious” and “prudent”:

She was so *prudent* and so *bountevous*. (*PhyT* 110)
Ne I nevere saugh a more *bountevous*
Of hire estat, n’a gladder, ne of speche
A frendlyer, n’a more *gracious*
For to do wel, ne lasse hadde nede to seche
What for to don; (*Tr* I 883-87)

[2] a. **Fre**

The original sense of the adjective *free* was ‘dear’ which traced back to OE *freon* ‘to love.’ The word expresses, according to the *OED*, the condi-

tion of persons who are 'no bound or subjected' as a slave is to his master. Accordingly it implies 'to enjoy personal rights and liberty of action as a member of a society or state.' Then it has gradually come to acquire the characteristics of free men who are usually regarded as 'noble, honourable, of gentle birth and breeding.' In ME it was employed as a stock epithet of compliment, often in alliterative phrase like *fair* and *free*. When applied to ordinary actions, activity and motion, it implies 'unimpeded, unrestrained' as in *The Prioress's Tale*:

This strete..was *fre* and open at eyther ende. (*PriT* 1684)

"Fre" is commonly used to indicate 'free in rank':

whan they han turned hem to the feith, they maken hire thralles
free out of thraldom. (*Pars* 772)

It is used as the phrase "free or servant" indicating 'a free person':

Thou shalt considere what thow art that doost the synne, wheither
thou be...gentil or thral, *free or servant*... (*Pars* 961)

It means 'out of the bondage of sin.'

Thurgh synne, ther he was *free*, now is he maked bonde. (*Pars* 149)

"Free" means 'released from prison.' In fact, when Arcite is about to be released from prison, Palamon declares:

Sith thou art at thy large, *of prison free*,
And art a lord, greet is thyn avauntage
Moore than is myn, that sterve here in a cage. (*KnT* 1292)

It means 'free of the bonds of love or matrimony.'

Ther I was *free*, I moot been in servage. (*CIT* 147)

Allas! Syn I am *free*,

Sholde I now love, and put in jupartie

My sikenesse, and thrallen libertee? (*Tr* II 771-73)

"Fre" means 'free to do as one pleases.'

For thanne th'apostle seith that I am *free*

To wedde, a Goddes half, where it liketh me. (*WBP* 49)

Somme seyn that we loven best

For to be *free and do right as us lest*. (*WBT* 936)

"Fre" means 'not subject to control' which is applied to love or thought. "Love is free" is a set-phrase:

What! Verray fool, thynk wel that *love is free*,

And I wol love hire maugree al thy myght! (*KnT* 1606)

For wel wot ye that *love is free*,

And I shall loven, sithen that I will,

Who ever like it well or ill; (*RR* 3432)

Love is a thyng as any spirit *free*. (*FkIT* 767)

"Fre," meaning 'unrestricted, voluntary,' is likely to be combined with the words 'assent, choys and wyl' which often accompany prepositions 'by,

' through and of':

The pilgrims in the Tabard were willing to make a promise to tell two tales to and from Canterbury:

As he that wys was and obedient
To kepe his foreward by his *free assent*. (*Gen Prol* 851-52)
Ye been submytted, thurgh youre *free assent*,
To stonden in this cas at my juggement. (*MLT* 35)
Yet hath he *free choys* wheyther he wole werke by that conseil or
noon. (*Mel* 2273)

Here Troilus is engaging in long soliloquy whether he has free choice to detain Criseyde's going to the Greek camp and whether it is God's predestination for her to go there. His conclusion is gradually tending to the pessimistic one that "we have no free choice":

We han no *fre chois*, as thise clerkes rede. (*Tr* IV 980).

Walter decides to marry Griselde 'from his own will':

Wherefore of my *free wyl* I wol assente
To wedde me, as soone as evere I may. (*CIT* 150)

Worthy of special mention here is that the phrases like "fre choys" and "fre wyl" have notably a theological connotation of 'not predestined':

Or elles, if *free choys* be graunted me
To do that same thyng, or do it nought,
Though God forwoot it er that I was wrought; (*NPT* 3246-48)

We are frequently met with phrases like “free wil”, “fre arbitrie” in *Boece*. L.D. Benson has noted that “The question of predestination versus free will and the issue of divine grace were much debated in the universites during Chaucer’s time.”⁷ God’s predestination, as Boethius argues, is not a necessary cause of man’s actions.

“Fre,” used a characterizing epithet, implies ‘noble in character, gracious.’ “The noble Troilus” (*Tr* II 319) is ideally portrayed as “The goode, wise, worthi, fresshe, and free (*Tr* II 317). Criseyde, like Troilus, is described as “Charitable, estatlich, lusty, fre (*Tr* V 823).

It is also used conventionally to praise women as “o mayde moder free” (*PriT* 1657), “my lady fre” (*Tr* V 144), “hire syster fre” (*LGW* 1977).

It is ironically used as found in “my lady free” (*MchT* 2138).

It is typical that ME *fre* often means ‘generous or openhanded’:

If thow be foul, be *fre* of thy dispence. (*CIT* 1209)

So large of yift and *free* was she. (*RR* 1168)

The primary sense of “free” is, of course, ‘generous, liberal,’ but it is exploited ironically to highlight the character of January and daun John:

Allas, this noble Januarie free, (*MchT* 2069)

Free was daun John, and namely of dispence, (*ShipT* 43)

“If to be ‘free of dispence’ was a virtue, as the Shipman implies,” Ralph Elliott has noted, “then to be ‘esy of dispence’, tight-fisted, as the Physician was (*Gen Prol* 441), was presumably a vice.”⁸

“Free,” used as noun, indicates ‘person of noble character’ like “O

goodly fresshe free" (*Tr* III 128).

It means 'ready or willing (to do something), spontaneous':

Of avarice..Is al my prechyng for to make hem *free* To yeven hir
pens. (*PdT* 401)

[2] b. **Frely**

"Frely" has an ordinary sense of 'freely and unrestrictedly':

Frely to goon wher that hym liste over al. (*KnT* 1207)

we may *frely* passen forth oure way (*MiT* 3573).

After the squire Aurelius begs to postpone his thousand pounds debt, he tells the philosopher why he released Dorigen from her promise to love him. Here the word, intimately associated with the original meaning of "free," means 'liberally, openhandedly':

And right as *frely* as he sente hire me,

As *frely* sente I hire to hym ageyn. (*FraT* 1604-5).

It means both 'willingly, gladly, eagerly' as in (*LGW* 704) and (*Bo* 2. pr. 2. 14) and 'unreservedly, completely' as in *LGW* 683) and (*Bo* 3. m. 9. 19).

[2] c. **Freedom**

ME *freedom* was derived from OE *freodom*. In Anglo-Saxon husbandry it meant 'children and free men,' as opposed to 'slaves,' since L *liberi* meant 'children and free men.'

"Freedom," according to the *OED*, emphasizes 'the quality of being free

or noble; nobility, generosity, liberality' as exemplified in *The Monk's Tale* (564) and 'the quality of being free from the control of fate or necessity.'

'Generosity, liberality,' in particular 'an act of generosity,' is highly esteemed in the Middle Ages. Undoubtedly Chaucer thinks of 'nobility of character' as one of the essential qualities indispensable for the ideal Knight:

Trouthe and honour, *freedom* and curteisie. (*Gen Prol* 45-6)

He was of knyghthod and of *freedom* flour; (*MkT* 2642)

The wise, worthi Ector the secounde,
In whom that alle vertu list habounde,
As alle trouthe and alle gentillesse,
Wisdom, honour, *freedom*, and worthinesse. (*Tr* II 158-61)

The above quotations reveal clearly that "freedom" is joined with "trouthe", "honour," "curteisei," "gentillesse," "wisdom" and "worthinesse," all of which are closely related with "chivalrie" and knyghthod.'

According to the *MED*, freedom sometimes is equivalent to 'liberty (as opposed to servitude), the social status of a freeman.' It also has a figurative meaning like 'national sovereignty, independence' and 'spiritual liberty, the state of not being in subjection to sin or the Devil' as found in *Tr* I . 235, *Buk* 32, and *Bo* 1. p. 4. 189. Chaucer uses the phrases "freedom of...hertes" and "freedom of conscience":

Ye wise, proude, and worthi folkes alle,
To scornen Love, which that so soone kan

The *freedom of youre hertes* to hym thralle; (*Tr* I 233-5)

for this liberte hath the *freedom of conscience*, that the wraththe of more myghty folk hath alwey ben despised of me for savacioun of right. (*Bo* I p. 4. 51-4)

“This liberte hath the freedom of conscience,” Benson notes, is glossed as ‘(my) freedom of conscience has given me the further freedom.’ The word “conscience” means ‘awareness of right and wrong,’ as the *MED* defines it.

“The freedom of Rome” means ‘Roman liberty,’ that is ‘the national sovereignty of Rome.’ Historically speaking, Boethius was imprisoned and put to death in Pavia in 524, because he was suspected of having hoped the freedom of Rome under Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths:

by whiche lettres I am accused to han hoped the *freedom of Rome*, what aperteneth me to speken therof? (*Bo* I p. 4. 170-2)

It is used to suggest ‘freedom of action,’ meaning ‘liberty to do what one pleases or permission to do something.’ ‘Freedom’ connotes ‘liberty of choice, free will, a free choice,’ accompanied by the prepositional phrases such as *of arbitri*, *chesing*, *liberte* and *wil* as found in *RR* 4906, *Bo* 5.p.3.9, *Ibid.* 5. p. 3. 91 and *Ibid.* 5. p. 4. 32.

The theological problem concerning predestination and the free will of man, particularly in the Middle Ages, was keenly discussed by scholars as exemplified in the phrase “the knowynge and predestinacioun devyne, and of the liberte of fre wil” (*Bo* 4 p. 6. 28-9). “Liberty of free will” is equated with ‘free will or free choice.’

“Freedom of liberte” below is an interesting phrase which may sound

somewhat redundant nowadays. Richard Green has translated it into 'freedom of the human will':⁹

It semeth..to repugnen and to contrarien gretly, that God knoweth byforn alle thinges and that ther is any *fredom of liberte* (*Bo* 5 p.3. 5-7)

Chaucer intentionally paraphrases "of oure arbitre" as "of our fre wil."

And this thing oonly suffiseth inow to destroien the *fredom of oure arbitre* (that is to seyn, of our *fre wil*). (*Bo* 5 p.3. 79-82)

thanne trowe I that thilke selve *fredom of wil* schal duellen al hool and absolut and unbounden. (*Bo* 5 p. 4. 53-5)

In addition to these examples, there are some phrases like "the liberte of fre wil" (*Bo* 4 p. 6. 31), "liberte of willynge and of nillynge" (*Bo* 5 p. 2. 21) and "liberte of arbitre" (*Bo* 5 p. 3. 18), all of which mean 'freedom of the human will, free choice.'

The above examples display that "liberte" and "fredom" are easily interchangeable.

[2] d. **Franchise**

"Franchise," cognate to "fredom," was adapted from OF *franchise*, meaning 'freedom, frankness (*franc* free). It means 'freedom, immunity, privilege. It also means 'freedom as opposed to servitude or subjection' as found in *Pars* 378. The word also denotes *fredom* (as opposed to *servitude*), the social status of a freeman (whether by birth or by manumission) and national sovereignty, independence; It also means spi-

ritual freedom, especially the privileged state of Adam and Eve before the fall. It means 'freedom of action (without social or political implications), freedom to do as one pleases' as found in *Pars* 452.

It means 'nobility of character, magnanimity, liberality, generosity; a noble or generous act' found in *MkT* 3854, *FraT* 524, *RR* 955, *Ibid* 3003, and *Ven* 59.

L. D. Benson glosses "franchise" as 'generosity of spirit.' But it is needless to say that Chaucer makes the Merchant use this word ironically:

Heere may ye se how excellent *franchise*
In wommen is, what they hem narwe avyse. (*MchT* 1987-8)

"Franchise" is coupled with "fredom" and "gentillesse":

And [he] lesith *fredom and fraunchise*,
That Nature in hym hadde set, (*RR* 4906-7)

"Franchise" in the below two examples is equivalent to 'generosity':

And in his herte he caughte of this greet routhe,
Considerynge the beste on every syde,
That fro his lust yet were hym levere abyde
Than doon so heigh a cherlyssh wrecchednesse
Agayns *franchise* and alle *gentillesse*; (*FraT* 1520-4)

Who shal me yeven teeris to compleyne
The deeth of *gentillesse* and of *franchise*,
That al the world weilded in his demeyne,

And yet hym thoughte it myghte nat suffise? (*MkT* 3853-6)

The *MED* quotes the following example in the sense of 'the social status of a freeman.'

Certes, goodes of body been *heelee of body, strengthe, delivernesse, beautee, gentrice, franchise*. (*Pars* 452-4)

"Fraunchise" below means 'a noble or generous act':

And certis, Love, when I me wel avise
On any estat that man may represente,
Then have ye made me thurgh your fraunchise
Chese the best that ever on erthe wente. (*Venus* 57-60)

Next we can find the alteration of the word quite regular in the three texts: Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*,¹⁰ Jean de Meun's *Livres de Confort de Philosophie*¹¹ and Chaucer's *Boece*. As a result it will be clarified that Jean de Meun translated L *libertas* into OF *franchise* which Chaucer rendered ME *freedom* with no exceptions:

- (1) *conscientiae libertas*: franchise de conscience: freedom of conscience:
- (2) *libertatem..Romanam*: la franchise romaine: the freedom of Rome:
- (3) *summa libertas*: souveraine franchise: a sovereyn freedom:
- (4) *libertatis principium*: commencement de franchise: begynnyng of freedom:
- (5) *libertatis arbitrium*: arbitre de franchise: freedom of liberte:
- (6) *arbitrii libertatem solum*: la franchise de notre arbitre: the freedom of our arbitre:
- (7) *consiliis..libertas*: la franchise des conseuz: the freedom of the conseiles:

- (8) arbitrii libertatem: franchise de volente: fredom of wil:
- (9) voluntatis..libertas: franchise de volente: fredom of wil:
- (10) ex arbitrii libertate: par franchise de arbitre: by fredom of arbitre:
- (11) arbitrii libertas: franchise de arbitre: fredom of arbitrie:

The above examples clearly show that the translation from Latin to French and then to English is quite regularly made as “libertas,” “franchise” and “fredom.”

[3] a. **Honest**

“Honest,” according to the *OED*, was derived from OF *honeste* (12th c. in Littré), mod.F *honnête*, traced back to L *honestus*, meaning ‘honourable, respectable, decent, fine, handsome’ which was formed on L *honus* in the sense of ‘honour.’

“Honest” means ‘honorable, respectable, noble’ as to the reputation or desires of persons.’ It is also used figuratively. The phrase “honest cure” means ‘desire for honor or respectability’:

Soothly swich multitude is nat *honest*. (*Me1* 2259)

The phrase “honeste cure” means ‘concern for decency.’ Drunkenness is indeed the grave of man’s reason and his judgement:

Thy tonge is lost, and al thyn *honeste cure*,
 For dronkenesse is verray sepulture
 Of mannes wit and his discrecioun. (*PdT* 557-9)
 And the gladnesse of wyf and children were an *honest thyng*, (*Bo* 3.
 pr. 7. 18-9)

“Honest” means ‘excellent’ as to virtue:

Is this to yow a thyng that is *honest*,
That swich a boy shal walken as hym lest
In youre despit, (*PriT* 1751-3)
Glad poverte is an *honest* thyng, certeyn; (*WBT* 1183)
They shal hem telle so fele tidynges,
And moeve hem eke so many requestis
Bi flateri, that not *honest* is, (*Romaunt* 6038-40)
As evere of gentil women is the wone
To save a gentyl man, emforth hire myght,
In *honest* cause, and namely in his ryght. (*LGW* 2133)

“Honest” means ‘suitable’ as to counsel:

ire, coveitise, and hastifnesse, the whiche three thinges been contrar-
iouse to every conseil *honest* and profitable; (*Mel* 2437)

L.D. Benson glosses “how honeste” as ‘what a virtuous’:¹²

The peple cam unto the hous withoute,
And wondred hem in *how honest* manere
And tentifly she kepte hir fader deere. (*CIT* 332-4)

“Honest” means ‘proper, seemly, becoming’ as to the attributes or
countenance of persons.’ It also means ‘competent or qualified’:

if thou have licence for to shryve thee to a discreet and

an *honest* preest, where thee liketh, (*Pars* 1009)
And this ageyns holy scripture,
That biddith every heerde *honest*
Have verry knowing of his beest. (*Romaunt* 6452-4)

“Honest” means ‘befitting one’s social status or office, socially or customarily proper or correct, decorous.’ It is not befitting the Friar’s social status or office to keep company with poor people and lepers:

It is nat *honest*; it may nat avaunce,
For to deelen with no swich poraille, (*Gen Prol* 246-7)
He yaf the lord, and sitthe al his meynee,
Whan that he cam, som manere honest thyng, (*ShipT* 48-9)

L.D. Benson glosses “honest” as ‘honorable, respectable’:¹³

This noble Januarie, with al his myght,
In honest wyse, as longeth to a knyght,
Shoop hym to lyve ful deliciously. (*MchT* 2023-5)

“Honest” means ‘morally pure, righteous, upright’ as to actions, thoughts, words, etc. The Pardoner is asked to tell a moral tale by Harry Bailley, the innkeeper of the Tabard. To this he responds ironically as follows:

I graunte, ywis...but I moot thynke
Upon som *honest* thyng while that I drynke.” (*PdT* 327-8)
that oon is *honest* and leveful, and that oother is deshonest

and unlevelful. (*Pars* 777)

“Honest” means ‘truthful, honest, frank.’ In *The Manciple’s Tale*, Chaucer depicts the Manciple as a person who “sette hir aller cappe” (*Gen Prol* 586), or ‘deceived them all.’ The word “honest” means ‘truthful’:

I meene, he speke wole of smale thynges,
As for to pynchen at thy rekenynges,
That were nat *honest*, if it cam to preef.” (*MancT* 73-5)

No one denies that the word “honesty” usually serves as the criterion of ascertaining a person’s honourableness of character or propriety of behaviour. It plays a vital role as one of the most significant words, ethical, moral, or religious, throughout Chaucer’s poetry.

[3] b. **Honeste**

Unfortunately the exchange of Criseyde for Antenor has been decided by both parties of Greek and Troy contrary to Troilus’s expectation. Troilus eagerly persuades Criseyde to flee with him. To his urgent request she declines rationally on the pretext that she is thinking on her “honeste,” meaning ‘good name or reputation,’ though she is ultimately to be unfaithful to him. If Criseyde had fled with Troilus, the tragic story of *Troilus and Criseyde* would not have been brought into existence:

And also thynketh on myn *honeste*,
Than floureth yet, how foule I sholde it shende,
And with what filthe it spotted sholde be,
If in this forme I sholde with yow wende. (*Tr* IV 1576)

In *The Legend of Good Women*, Hypermnestra's father urges his daughter to kill the husband Lynceus with a knife, but she cannot do such a brutal deed. She chooses to die "in wifly honeste" rather than live on as a shameful traitor. In this case "honeste" implies dignity which always involves 'honorableness of character or conduct':

yit is it bet for me

For to be ded *in wifly honeste*

Than ben a traytour lyvyng in my shame. (*LGW* 2700-2)

The below word "honeste" is equal in meaning to 'decorum,' i.e. propriety of behaviour. The Friar was very indignant with the Summoner, but he said no ugly word without reservation, which was "for honestee," i.e. 'for good manners' sake':

This worthy lymytour, this noble Frere,

He made alwey a maner louryng chiere

Upon the Somonour, but *for honestee*

No vileyns word as yet to hym spak he. (*FriT* 1265-8)

"Honeste" here means 'good manners,' particularly the sense of propriety or decorum. L.D. Benson glosses "estaatly honestee" as 'dignified decorum'¹⁴ which Julius Caesar is said to have made much of:

So manly was this Julius of herte,

And so wel lovede *estaatly honestee*,

That though his deedly woundes soore smerte,

His mantel over his hypes caste he,

For no man sholde seen his privetee; (*MkT* 3901-5)
She sholde eek serven hym in alle *honestee*, and been attempree
of hire array. (*Pars* 932)

Lucretia is shedding tears “ful of honeste,” troubling herself about her husband Collatinus in the battlefield. Undoubtedly “honeste” here is equivalent to “chastite”:

And eek hire teres, *ful of honeste*,
Embelished hire *wifly chastite*; (*LGW* 1736-7)

In *The Legend of Good Women*, Medea reproaches Jason for his falseness. The *OED* records the below word “honeste,” meaning ‘chastity,’ the honour or virtue of a woman:

“Whi lykede me thy yelwe her to se
More than the boundes of myn *honeste*?” (*LGW* 1672-3)

W. Héraucourt states as follows:

Honestee wird von Chaucer zwar hauptsächlich im speziellen prägnanten Sinn von Keuschheit, Schamhaftigkeit, Schicklichkeit, Unbesholtenheit gebraucht, wohl auch mehr äußerlich im Sinne vom guten Ruf der Dame.¹⁵

In *The Physician's Tale*, the narrator suddenly digresses from the main subject and into the teaching of governesses. L.D. Benson observes that “This digression on the responsibilities of parents and guardians has

often been regarded as unduly obtrusive, and historical explanations have been sought.”¹⁶

The narrator pointedly emphasizes the two reasons for which they are put in charge of younger gentlefolk. It is either because they have kept chastity or because they have fallen in weakness. J.H. Fisher glosses “honestee” as ‘virtue.’¹⁷ The *MED* defines it as ‘purity, virginity, or chastity.’ The narrator’s statement sounds greatly ironic:

Outher for ye han kept youre *honestee*,
Or elles ye han falle in freletee, (*PhyT* 77-8)

The narrator expounds “hevenes lilie” as ‘pure chasteness of virginity,’ ‘whiteness of honesty,’ ‘green of conscience’ and ‘the sweet savour of good name.’ “Honestee” corresponds in meaning to ‘chastity’ that was regarded in the Middle Ages as the virtue of a woman as referred to above:

It is to seye in Englissh “hevenes lilie,”
For pure chaastnese of virginitee;
Or, for she *whitnesse* hadde of *honestee*,
And grene of conscience, and of good fame
The soote savour, “lilie” was hir name. (*SecNT* 89-91)
Ne noon so ful of *honeste* (*Romaunt* 4257)

[3] c. **Honestete**

Chaucer also uses “honestete” (cf. mod. F *honnetete*) besides “honeste.” His example is the last citation. It usually means honorable character.

L. D. Benson glosses, as usual, “honestete” as ‘honor, virtue.’ Walter married Griselda “lowely,” but “roially.” He espoused her “with fortunat

honestetee”:

Thus Walter lowely nay, but roially
Wedded with fortunat *honestetee*, (*CIT* 422)

Sic Gualtherus humili quidem sed insigni ac prospero matrimonio, honestatis summa domi in pace, extra vero summa cum gratia hominum vivebat.¹⁸ Hendrickson, as L. D. Benson has noted, suggests that “honestatus” is more adequate, because “honestatis” is ‘awkward and probably corrupt.’¹⁹

“Honestetee” means ‘elegance,’ ‘comeliness’ and ‘fairness’ concerning clothing:

I sey nat that *honestitee* in clothyng of man or womman
is uncovenable, (*Pars* 431)

“Honestetee” means ‘decency,’ especially temperance in conduct or action shown by Christ:

that foule partie shewe they to the peple prowdly in despit
of *honestitee*, which *honestitee* that Jhesu Crist and his
freendes observede to shewen in hir lyve. (*Pars* 429)

“Honestete” means ‘truthfulness’ which is the quality directly opposed to falseness as the below example clearly shows:

And of the *honestete* or of the falsnesse of thynges that ben
opposed ayens the, thow hast remembred thynges that ben knowen

to alle folk. (*Bo I. pr. 5. 49-52*)

[4] a. **Humble**

“Humble,” as the *OED* explains, was adapted from OF *umble*, *humble* (12th c. in *Littre*), traced to L *humilis* ‘low, lowly, small, slight, mean, insignificant, base.’ The original meaning of the Latin word *humus* is ‘ground, earth.’

“Humble” means ‘humble, obedient, or loyal’ concerning persons. The word is often jointed with other equivalents “devout,” “chaast” and “poore”:

Thilke that thou clepest thy thralles been Goddes peple, for
humble folk been Cristes freendes; they been contubernyal
with the Lord; (*Pars 760*)

She, ful devout and humble in hir corage,
Under hir robe of gold, that sat ful faire,
Hadde next hire flesh yclad hire in an haire. (*SecNT 131-3*)
Who folweth Cristes gospel and his foore,
But we that *humble* been, and chaasr, and poore,
Werkeris of Goddes word, nat auditours? (*SumT 1935-7*)

The word was formerly used to address a person regarded as one’s superior:

I nevere heeld me lady ne mistresse,
But *humble servant* to youre worthynesse, (*CIT 823-4*)

Troilus calls Criseyde “myn owen lady bright” (*Tr III 1485*) and then himself “youre humble servant and youre knyght” (*Tr III 1487*). The word implies ‘meek, lowly, or respectful’ specifically as to speech and behaviour:

Tellyng his tale alwey, this olde greye,
Humble in his speche and in his loking eke,
The salte teris from his eyen tweye
Ful faste ronnen down by either cheke. (*Tr* IV 127-30)

The idiom “with humble herte” is equated in sense with ‘humbly, respectfully, obediently.’ It is easily combined with other adjectives “sad,” “glad,” “trewe.” “pitous”:

But on hir knees they setten hem adoun
With humble herte and sad devocioun,
And losten bothe hir hevedes in the place. (*SecNT* 396-8)
And she *with humble herte and glad visage,*
Nat with no swollen thoght in hire corage,
Cam at his heste, ... (*CIT* 949-51)
For which, *with humble, trewe, and pitous herte,*
A thousand tymes mercy I yow preye; (*Tr* IV 1499-500)

The word means ‘meek, lowly, respectful, reverent’ concerning actions, behaviour, manner, purpose, or voice’:

And doun he kneleth, and *with humble cheere*
And herte soor he seyde as ye shal heere: (*KnT* 2219-20)
And she hym thonked *with ful humble chere,*
And offer wolde, and it hadde ben his wille,
And took hire leve, and hom, and held hir stille. (*Tr* I 124-6)
Have pitee of my bittre teeris smerte,
And taak myn *humble preyere* at thyn herte. (*KnT* 2225-6)

And therwithal here bekes gonne mete,

[Yelding] honour and *humble obeysaunces*; (LGW G 134-5)

“With humble entente” is paraphrased literally as ‘with humble will or intention,’ but it may be equivalent in connotation to ‘buxomly or reverently’:

And they, *with humble entente, buxomly,*

Knelynge upon hir knees ful *reverently,*

Hym thonken alle; (CIT 186-8)

The word below means ‘meek, reverent’ concerning manner or voice:

she *in ful humble wise*, whan she saugh hir tyme, seide to hym
thise wordes: (Mel 2241)

The literal meaning of “humble bed” is ‘modest bed,’ but, figuratively used, it means a person of lowly rank. It is directly opposed to “roial magestee,” meaning a person of high rank. “Humblehede” is a reading in some Chaucer MSS. for “humble bed.”²⁰ The tradition of Caesar’s humble birth, which occurs in Ranulf Higden’s *Polychronicon* 3.42 and later English writers, is at variance with historical fact. Waller shows how the tradition may have arisen by the confusion of Suetonius’s account of Augustus Caesar’s ancestry. But it is more interesting and pertinent to Julius Caesar to accept a reading of “humble bed” than that of “humblehede”:

By wisdom, manhede, and by greet labour,

From *humble bed* to roial magestee

Up roos he Julius, the conquerour, (MkT 3861-2)

“Humble” in the below instances indicates ‘plain, unpretentious’ concerning things, for example, clothes. Chaucer likens Criseyde’s eyes to ‘modest nets,’ metaphorically exploited, in which Troilus has been neatly caught:

“O eyen clere,
It weren ye that wroughte me swich wo,
Ye *humble nettes of my lady deere!* (*Tr* III 1355)
And certeynly, sikerest hidyng
Is undirnethe *humblest clothing.* (*Romaunt* 6147-8)
But I ne speke in no such wise,
That men shulde *humble* abit dispise, (*Romaunt* 7271-2)

[4] b. **Humblely**

“Humblely” means ‘in a humble manner, with humility, meekly.’ The *OED* quotes the following example as earliest:

com forth with me,
And loke that ye thonken *humblely*
Hem alle thre... (*Tr* III 1718-20)
Besoghte mercy of hir trespassyng,
And *humblely* songen hire repentyng, (*LGW F* 155-6)

Troilus salutes humbly to Criseyde when he rides in high spirits by the window out of which Pandarus and his niece are looking at him. “Humblely” means ‘graciously, politely, gently’:

With that he gan hire *humbly* to saluwe
With dredful chere, and oft his hewes muwe; (*Tr* II 1257-8)

[4] c. **Humility**

In Scholastic philosophy, the four chief 'natural' virtues is a general term for the four virtues of justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude, as clearly distinguished from the 'theological' virtues of faith, hope and charity. In consequence, all these virtues are, after the manner of the seven cardinal or deadly sins, often spoken of 'seven' cardinal virtues of *fides*, *sobrietas*, *humilitas*, *pudicitia*, *patientia*, *operatio* and *concordia*.²¹

The seven deadly sins, according to the sequence of the Parson's sermon, are *superbia* (pride), *invidia* (envy), *ira* (ire), *accidia* (sloth), *avaricia* (covetousness), *gula* (gluttony) and *luxuria* (lechery). It is a matter of common knowledge that "humility" is directly opposed to *superbia* or "pride." Originally it was not included among the ancient virtues, but has come to be highly esteemed as a primary requisite, one of the Christian virtues. Both virtues and sins, sometimes personified, are portrayed as women.

It is the most characteristic of the Christian virtues. Another word of Christian virtue 'meekness' signifies the virtue of 'humility.' As Will Héraucourt has pointed out, "*meke* ist das germanische Wort, das in gewisser Weise dem romanischen *humble* entspricht":²²

The remedie agayns pride...is *humylitee* or *mekenesse*, that is a vertu thurgh which a man hath verrey knoweleche of hym self. (*Pars* 476)

The word in question is jointed with *bountee*, *magnificence*, *vertu*, *science*, *virginitee*, *abstinence*, *attemperaunce*, *pacience*, *mesure of beryng* and *array*, as the following examples show:

Lady, thy bountee, thy magnificence,
Thy vertu and thy *grete humylitee*

Ther may no tonge expresse in no science; (*PriT* 474-6)
For which she floured in virginitee
With alle *humylitee* and *abstinence*,
With alle *attemperaunce* and *pacience*,
With *mesure* eek of beryng and array. (*Phy T* 44-7)

“Humilitee” commonly means ‘humble behaviour or conduct,’ but over-humility gives rise to ‘disparagement’:

For right as men seyn that ‘overgreet hoomlynesse engendreth dispreisyng,’ so fareth it by to *greet humylitee* or mekenesse.” (*Mel* 2876)

Also the *humilitee* of mouth is in foure thynges: (*Pars* 481)

Humilitee eek in werkes is in foure maneres. The firste is whan he putteth othere men biforn hym. (*Pars* 482)

Another signe is *humylitee* in confessioun, (*Pars* 988)

The following examples display that man should have two kinds of humility, inward and outward. Inward humility signs ‘humility to God in heart,’ while outward humility signs ‘humility to the priest in body’:

And this *humylitee* shal been in herte and in signe outward,
for right as he hath *humylitee* to God in his herte, right so
sholde he *humble* his body outward to the preest, that sit
in Goddes place. (*Pars* 989)

[4] d. **Humblesse**

“Humblesse” means ‘patience, graciousness, or gentleness’:

That is to seyen, trouthe, honour, knyghthede,
Wysdom, *humblesse*, estaat, and heigh kynrede,
Fredom, and al that longeth to that art— (*KnT* 2789-91)
Alas! Wher is become your gentillesse,
Youre wordes ful of plesaunce and *humblesse*,
Youre observaunces in so low manere,.. (*Anel* 247-9)

“Humblesse” is opposed to “tirannye”:

Humblesse hath slayn in hire al *tirannye*. (*MLT* 165)
Men speke of Job, and moost for his *humblesse*,
As clerkes, whan hem list, konne wel endite, (*CIT* 932-3)
O tresorere of bountee to mankynde,
Thee whom God ches to mooder for *humblesse*! (*ABC* 107-8)

The word in question means ‘humiliation’:

yif thou coveytest be honour to gon byfore othere folk, thow
schalt defoule thiself thurw *humblesse* of axynge. (*Bo* 3. pr. 8. 15)

The word is used to express humble behaviour or conduct, usually accompanied by *in* or *with*, meaning ‘in all humility, very humbly’ which is opposed to “wilfully,” meaning ‘perversely, obstinately’:

I biseke yow *in al humblesse* that ye wol nat *wilfully* replie
agayn my resouns, ne distempere youre herte, thogh I speke
thyng that yow displese. (*Mel* 2426)

She thanked hym, and *with ful greet humblesse*
She seyde,.. (*FraT* 753-4)

And this was day by day al hire preyere,

With al humblesse of wifhod, word and chere. (LGW 2268-9)

The *OED* quotes the following example as earliest, meaning 'humbleness, humility':

Humblesse and pees, good feith the emperice. (Former 55)

Notes

- 1 Larry D. Benson (ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer* 3rd Ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). All quotations from Chaucer's poetry are from this edition.
- 2 Will Héraucourt, *Die Wertwelt Chaucers: Die Wertwelt einer Zeitwende*, (Heidelberg: Carl Winter's Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1939), pp. 44-45.
- 3 John H. Fisher (ed.), *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), p. 124.
- 4 J. H. Fisher, op.cit., p. 150.
- 5 J. H. Fisher, op. cit., p. 154.
- 6 L.D. Benson, op. cit.,
- 7 L.D. Benson, op. cit., p. 939.
- 8 Ralph Elliott, *Chaucer's English* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1974), pp. 111-12.
- 9 Richard Green, (tr.), *The Consolation of Philosophy : Boethius* (1962 ; Indianapolis : The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1982), p.105.
- 10 *Boethius: The Consolation of Philosophy*, tr. S.J. Tester (1918; Harvard Univ. Press, 1973).
- 11 *Boethius: De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed.
- 12 "Boethius' *De Consolatione* by Jean de Meun," ed. V.L. DedeckHéry, MS, 14 (1952), pp.165-275.
- 13 L.D. Benson, op.cit., p. 251.
- 14 L.D. Benson, op. cit., p.
- 15 L.D. Benson, op. cit., p.
- 15 Will Héraucourt, op.cit., p. 49.
- 16 L.D. Benson, op.cit., p. 903.
- 17 J.H. Fisher, op.cit., p. 217.
- 18 Joseph Délcourt (ed.), *Chaucer: Contes de Cantorbery* (Paris: Aubier, 1946), p.209.
- 19 L.D. Benson, op.cit., p.154.

20 L.D. Benson, *op.cit.*, p.882.

21 M.W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature* (1952; Michigan State Univ. Press, 1967), p. 65.

22 Will Héraucourt, *op. cit.*, p.329.