1. Introduction

1.1 Preface

The gentleman ideal is so crucial a concept in English literature that in the past a substantial amount of research has been devoted to it. It is so closely related to the very crux of English society that it would be unthinkable to ignore its historical relevance and consequent role in English literature. Literature very often serves as a mirror of contemporary society and at the same time a catalyst to development, thus both documenting and influencing change.

At the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries, we are presented with a fascinating period in time when once more literature lived up to its reputation as a metamorphical driving force. Great minds were beginning to search for other answers to scientific and philosophical questions than those offered by the established machinery of rationalism. After the upheavals of the Civil War and the establishment of the new business classes, made up to a great extent by the Puritans, the aristocracy no longer had an unquestioned moral right to rule. The wealth and relative peace of the Augustan period created the right conditions for new thought, science and education. Literacy and the ensuing popularity of the moral weeklies enabled many men and women of upper classes to become familiar with new ideas and a code of moral values embodied by the gentleman ideal. Good manners and gentlemanly behaviour had to be internalised by the rising mid-

dle classes, usually via education, before any merger with the old established ranks could take place. Humanism infiltrated the fixed concepts of education, changing them to a revolutionary extent.

In Elizabethan England a consciousness of English identity and pride had taken root and this grew to such an extent that it revolutionized the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries entirely. England was not only relatively wealthy and industrious but acquired more and more of her own very English ideals and thoughts and these stood their ground beside their continental counterparts. Here we can for instance consider the gentleman ideal beside the Italian Courtier, or empiricism besides French rationalism. At this time, the English language became increasingly standardised and accepted as the written vernacular, thus diminishing the role of Latin and foreign influence in general. Many works by European philosophers or leading thinkers were translated into English, making knowledge much more accessible and igniting a process of demystification. Often these translations were coloured to give them English relevance and flair.

In the sixteenth century, Sir Thomas Elyot contributed greatly to this cause by compiling a Latin-English dictionary in 1538, and he also introduced a multitude of words into the English language by coining them in his books. He also caused an uproar amongst the medical elite by writing *The Castle of Health*:

> a novelty in so far as it is a medical treatise written by a layman and in the vernacular. Elyot was attacked for writing it both by doctors, who resented the intrusion of an amateur, and also by men of his own class who held that such work 'beseemeth not a knight, he mought haue been much better occupied'.[1]

Thus all these previous developments and events led to a state of mind and society at the beginning of the eighteenth century that is of special interest for the gentleman ideal. There has been no in-depth research concentrating in particular on this limited period,

which is the very reason and justification for the following piece of work. In addition, this paper also considers the situation of gentlewomen at this time.

1.2 Etymology of the Word "Gentleman"

All research on this subject could do well to consider the 'etymology' of the word gentleman and early references to the ideal in order to be able to understand its development and origins. In the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* the word gentleman derives from the French *gentilhomme*, *gentil* is synonymous with high-born and noble and also means 'belonging to the same *gens* or stock', or 'belonging to a good family'. In English 'gentle' means well-born; noble, and generous.[2] In the *Middle English Dictionary* the *gentil-man* is denoted as " [a] man of noble or gentle birth, one of the gentry; also a Greek aristocrat, a Roman patrician, ..."[3] Gentil itself means a member of the nobility or gentry; "often implying a person of refined or aristocratic tastes."[4]

We find the same definitions in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, as, here too, gentle is connoted as high-born or noble and derives from "*gentiles* 'belonging to the same *gens* or race, f. *genti-*, *gens* race, family."[5] The OED defines a gentleman as: "[a] man of gentle birth, or having the same heraldic status as those of gentle birth; properly, one who is entitled to bear arms, though not ranking among the nobility ... but also applied to a person of distinction without precise definition of rank."[6] It also makes another interesting contribution to our understanding of the term: "3. A man in whom gentle birth is accompanied by appropriate qualities and behaviour; hence, in general, a man of chivalrous instincts and fine feelings." However, this definition does not apply to pre-Chaucerian times. Up until Chaucer, what was of exclusive and overriding importance to the idea of gentleman was his ancestry, the fact that his family was known and could be traced back and was thus usually synonymous with wealth. It was only gradually that this began to change to also mean "nobility of character"[7]

In Chaucer's verses a new definition of the gentleman can be discovered, where noble ancestry must be coupled with virtue in order to be truly gentle. The *Middle English Dictionary* cites Chaucer in this context: "Gentilrie a) c1440 Chaucer CT.Pars. (Cmb Ii) 1.461: Gentilre (Heng: For to pryde hym of his genterye is ful gret folie)."[8]

Chaucer clearly expressed this in his moral ballad *Gentilesse*.[9] In the first verse he dwells on the subject of dress, which would symbolize aristocratic affiliation, but is in his eyes insufficient in itself and must be accompanied by moral character:

Morale Balade of Chaucier

The firste stok, fader of gentilesse-
What man that claymeth gentil for to be
Must folowe his trace, and alle his wittes dresse
Vertu to sewe, and vyces for to flee.
For unto vertu longeth dignitee,
And noght the revers, saufly dar I deme,
Al were he mytre, croune, or diademe.

In the second and third stanzas he notes that virtue is not necessarily hereditary. If the noble offspring does not strive to be virtuous himself, his nobility is worthless:

This firste stok was ful of rightwisnesse,
Trewe of his word, sobre, pitous, and free,
Clene of his gost, and loved besinesse,
Ayeinst the vyce of slouthe, in honestee;
And, but his heir love vertu, as dide he,
He is noght gentil, thogh he riche seme,
Al were he mytre, croune, or diademe.

Vyce may wel be heir to old richesse;
But ther may no man, as men may wel see,
Bequethe his heir his vertuous noblesse
(That is appropred unto no degree
But to the firste fader in magestee,
That maketh hem his heyres that him quemes),
Al were he mytre, croune, or diademe.[10]

Gentility therefore implicitly involves a moral obligation to live up to the virtue and merit of the family founders, who probably received their titles from the King on account of their good deeds and loyalty. He continued in this vein in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, as she considers the gentleman to be a Christian knight whose virtues cannot be inherited but have to be earned anew:

But, for ye speken of swich gentillesse
As is descended out of old richesse,
That therefore sholden ye be gentil men,
Swiche arrogance is nat worth an hen.
Looke who that is moost vertuous alway,
Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay
To do the gentil dedes that he kan;
Tack hym for the grettest gentil man.
Crist wole we clayme of hym oure gentillesse,
Not of ouer eldres for hire old richesse.
For thogh they yeve us al hir heritage,
For which we clayme to been of heigh parage,
Yet may they nat biquethe, for no thyng,
To noon of us hir vertuous lyvyng,
That made hem gentil men ycalled be,
And bad us folwen hem in swich degree.[11]

The last line shows us how, even in Chaucer's time, the gentleman served as an ideal for the people to try to follow and live up to. Hence the tremendous influence of the gentleman at all levels of

society. According to the Wife of Bath a nobleman could thus invalidate all claim to membership of the ruling classes if he behaved waywardly:

> And nel hymselven do no gentil dedis,
> Ne folwen his gentil auncestre that deed is,
> He nys nat gentil, be he duc or erl;
> For vileyns sinful dedes make a cherl.[12]

This is perhaps the first documentation we have of the ambivalence of the term 'gentleman', of the incorporation of the two aspects of blood and behaviour. Furthermore, Chaucer even commends the possibility of someone rising from the very lowest ranks through virtue to the nobility:

> Thenketh hou noble, as seith Valerius,
> Was thilke Tullius Hostillius,
> That out of poverte roos to heigh noblesse.
> Reedeth Senek, and redeth eek Boece;
> Ther shul ye seen expres that it no drede is
> That he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis. [13]

The last line is of overwhelming importance here.

1.4 The Role of Education in Changing the Gentleman Ideal

Education was really the most essential key to unlocking the latent virtue of the young gentleman and making him a fit member of the ruling class. Although in Chaucer's time education did play a role in forming the young man by making him knowledgeable and able to live up to future expectations, the possibilities of gaining an extensive education were limited: "Nobles and gentlemen, brought up more often than not in their fathers' households or those of persons (sometimes ecclesiastics) of equal or higher rank, learned their reading and writing from the domestic clerks and some, subsequently, at the greater grammar schools."[14]