

Gina Filo (University of Evansville)  
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 Supervisor: Dr David Green

### Understanding Chaucer's Knight

*A KNYGHT ther was, and that a worthy man,  
 That fro the tyme that he first bigan  
 To riden out, he loved chivalrie,  
 Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie* (Chaucer 43-45)

The Knight in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* has always attracted a great deal of critical attention. Throughout the twentieth century in particular, views on this "worthy" knight have varied greatly. For the greater part of the century, critics such as Myrtle Bowden and J.M. Manly have regarded him as a representation of idealized knighthood, a force of unquestioned good in a world gone topsy-turvy, hearkening back to the heroes of chivalric romances (Jones 1). However, by the 1980s, a reactionary critical viewpoint had developed. By the time Chaucer wrote the *Tales*, the age chivalry, of loyalty and service based largely on feudal ties, was over, replaced by a system in which warriors fought not because of fealty, but for pay. Seen against this framework, some critics have viewed the Knight as a cruel mercenary, a scathing satire of this ignoble state of chivalry. This viewpoint was best exemplified in Terry Jones's 1980 book *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary*, in which Jones attempts to refute virtually all Chaucerian critical tradition and turn the portrait of the Knight entirely on its head, leaving us with not a paragon of virtue, but the very scum of the earth, a man who preys mercilessly on his fellow Christians and will stop at nothing to gain profit.

Neither of these traditions is, however, in the last analysis satisfying. Rather, a third way is possible. The Knight in *The Canterbury Tales* is best viewed as neither a wholeheartedly

approving embodiment of the values presented in the courtly literature and chivalric romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries nor a vicious marauder preying on innocent Christians, but rather as a relatively realistic, albeit somewhat idealized reflection of a living, breathing knight at the close of the fourteenth century.

In the General Prologue, the Knight receives only 35 lines of description. However, these mere thirty-five lines tell us a great deal about him as both a man and a knight. The description begins with a summation of his various virtues. He is described as “a worthy man...he loved chivalrie/Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie” (43-6). The first difficulty comes with the word “worthy.” Throughout his description, the Knight is deemed “worthy” no less than five times, a remarkably high number of instances for such a short selection of poetry. Different scholars interpret this word in varying ways. Terry Jones claims that “A ‘worthy man’ for example, did not primarily mean a man ‘deserving honour’ or ‘of great merit’ as it does now... [Chaucer] almost invariably used it to mean ‘well-to-do’ or ‘of high social standing’” (Jones 32). Other critics engage directly with Jones, flatly refuting his claim and saying that worthiness betokens being “distinguished by good qualities; entitled to honour or respect on this account; estimable” (Morgan 155). Additionally, the word has possessed this meaning since the beginning of the fourteenth century, making it entirely plausible as a descriptor for the Knight (Morgan 155).

However, most scholars, including Morgan, agree that the Knight’s worthiness is bound up in his military prowess. Worthiness is marked by martial skill and experience, as well as with upright behavior on the battlefield (Hatton 78). Worthiness was also seen as a prerequisite for virtue; that is, “an excellence of strength or power (worthiness) is needed for efficiency or effectiveness (virtue)” (Mitchell 74).

Indeed, in his mid-fourteenth century treatise on proper behavior for a knight, entitled *Livre de Chevalerie*, Geoffroi de Charny instructs his reader that “You can and ought to know that the best qualities that anyone can aim for and achieve is to be a man of worth” (Charny 80). Chaucer would have most likely been familiar with this text; this, combined with his continual insistence on the Knight’s worthiness, makes a positive interpretation of the word likely.

After telling us that the Knight has worthiness in spades, Chaucer proceeds to demonstrate this point with a catalogue of his achievements. The General Prologue lists a slew of battles in which the Knight has fought, so many, in fact, that it would have been almost physically impossible for him to have participated in them all. His battles range widely in both geography and time; he has fought in Alisaundre (Alexandria), Puce (Prussia), Lettow (Lithuania), Ruce (Russia), Gernade (Granada), Algezir (Algeciras), Belmarye (present-day Morocco, roughly), Lyeys, Satalye (both in Turkey), and in the Grete See, probably the Mediterranean (Chaucer 51-9).

This list of battles has caused perhaps the greatest amount of critical controversy in the Knight’s portrait. The battles take place in many diverse places, but they most emphatically do *not* take place in France or England. During the Hundred Years War, most, if not all, English knights would have been expected to serve their king and country against the French, rather than gallivanting across heathendom in Crusades. The generally accepted interpretation of this omission is that the Knight is dedicated to fighting against the heathens; that is, he is dedicated to the dissemination of Christianity throughout the pagan world, or, at the least, to the prevention of paganism making inroads into Christian lands. John Pratt says “[W]hat unites all [of the Knight’s] campaigns is that they fulfill the requirements of crusading in legal terms” (Pratt14). The foes enumerated posed a threat (either real or perceived) to Christianity in northern Europe.

Despite the Knight's non-presence in France, all in all, "Chaucer's Knight campaigned against the foes of fourteenth-century Christian Europe" (Pratt 15-6). In this way, the Knight is not only an English knight, but representative of Christian knights of all nationalities.

Crusading was by no means dead in the water at this point in history. By the late fourteenth century, a new crusading order had been established, the Order of the Passion. Notable members of this order included three uncles of Richard II—Lancaster, York and Gloucester. Many influential members of society were also enrolled in this order, including a fellow poet and friend of Chaucer's, Lewis Clifford (Keen 114). Crusading, even by the late fourteenth century was not abnormal. According to Maurice Keen, "The ideal of the crusade clearly remained a strong one... The crusades and would-be crusaders with whom [Chaucer's Knight] would have had most contact there and elsewhere belonged, moreover, to the true gentility, not to the mercenary riff-raff of the free companies..." (Keen 115). Public opinion was in favor of crusade, which had remained "a live issue in political society among the highest and most influential in the realm, in the late 1380s and the 1390s" — the period in which Chaucer was composing his *Tales* (Keen 114).

Additionally, the war in France, which had always been associated with raids and sieges, had, by the late fourteenth century, further devolved into nothing more than a series of pillaging raids (Pratt 16). The Knight, Chaucer suggests, is not interested in such activities and therefore seeks his fortune out of Christendom, away from a place where he would be forced to kill fellow Christians and possibly be involved in dishonourable activities such as pillaging. As Maurice Keen puts it "[T]he motive for crusading in this period had very little to do with the quest for gains of war, for plunder and ransoms, which is the motive that has been so strongly stressed... with regard to English knightly involvement in the Hundred Years War" (Keen 116).

The Knight's primary cause for fighting is not winning a fortune. That is not to say, however, that he is wholly against the personal gain which comes with fighting. Chaucer tells us "And everemoore he hadde a sovereynprys" (67). The Knight is not pillaging from Christians, but neither is he averse to potential material gain.

Another point of critical discussion arises in the preceding three lines: "This ilke worthy knight hadde been also / Somtyme with the lord of Palatye / Agayn another hethen in Turkye" (64-6). Was Chaucer's Knight not a chivalric hero at all, but rather a marauding mercenary?

To fully answer this question, the situation of knighthood and chivalry must be placed into a late medieval context. By the end of the fourteenth century, the old system of chivalry was changing irrevocably. Rather than leading groups of knights sworn to a lord into battle, it became necessary to raise massive armies of professional soldiers (Jones 12, Pratt 20, Housley 254). As John Pratt points out, "All fighting men in Chaucer's time received direct compensation for their services" (Pratt 20). Chaucer was writing in a time of transition; by the end of his life in the year 1400, the system of vassalage, fealty based on oath and land tenure, was essentially over, having been replaced by a system of indenture, or service based on contract, rather than oath, and secured by pay, rather than either land or traditional ties holding people to a specific place (Strohman x). Chaucer's writing reflects this new reality.

There is, however, an important distinction to be made between the marauding bands of mercenaries that terrorized the countryside and men who fought for pay but maintained the system of traditional chivalric values — "trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie".

Mercenaries, and indeed, many soldiers who fought for pay, rather than loyalty, when not employed, tended to get bored, and bored mercenaries are not people you want to have around a

civilian population; they enjoy starting fights, for either amusement or monetary gain. The massive numbers of mercenaries employed by the English and French, then, posed a massive threat to medieval society; when they had no work, they managed to organize themselves into large-scale fighting units, referred to as the “Free Companies” (Jones 14, Housley 254). Undermining the understood feudal and social order, they worked outside of official channels, terrorizing the French countryside (Housley 255). They took orders from only their own, immediate commanders and fought to instill terror in the countryside, both as a matter of policy and profit. Rape, pillaging and the murder of civilians were not uncommon.

It is clear, then, that the Knight operated outside of these bands’ spheres of influence, Italy and France. This offers a rather stark rebuttal to Jones’s assertion that “[Chaucer’s contemporaries] would not have seen a militant Christian idealist but a shabby mercenary without morals or scruples” (Jones 140). However, despite the so-called chivalric decline, by the middle of the fourteenth century, the majority of armies were composed of legitimate knights and soldiers who were paid for their services, *not* mercenaries who were like to go on illicit pillaging raids. As one historian put it, “without these contracts long-term warfare would have been impossible” (Hodges 280). This would not have been condemned by contemporaries, Jones’s claims to the contrary. Overall, then, Chaucer creates a knight who, despite acting outside of the world of traditional, single-master chivalry established in courtly tradition of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, largely holds to Christian values and can be seen as a role model for a new kind of knight—but one who still manages to retain traditional values.

However, the Knight occasionally fought for non-Christian masters: “This ilke worthy knyghthadde been also / Somtyme with the lord of Palatye / Agayn another hethen in Turkye” (64-6). Is this not a condemnation of his mercenary ways? Probably not. Although Jones once

again contends that this signifies that the Knight would fight for anyone at all, scruples be damned, this is probably not what Chaucer intended (Jones 86-8, Pratt 18). Once again, it must be placed into its proper historical context. Selling one's sword to a pagan master was entirely legal and even recognized as moral, so long as certain conditions were met. According to the Decretist Huguccio, who was the teacher of Pope Innocent III, stated that the "war had to be just, the Christian knight under the jurisdiction of the pagan prince, or the knight taken captive by the pagans and thus, serving a master out of necessity" (Pratt 18). While these prescriptions had been written well over a century before Chaucer's time, they remained in effect, and the Knight's actions were therefore legal.

Chaucer then credits the Knight with wisdom and humility, saying "And though he were worthy, he was wys / And of his port as meeke as is a mayde" (68-9). The fact that the Knight manages to demonstrate a maiden-like meekness despite the catalogue of battles in which he has fought is quite remarkable. This manner of self-presentation suggests that he lives the values for which he fights, that he will never abuse his chivalric skills (Strohm 85). He also maintains wisdom despite his "worthiness". This means that, although he is a highly credible fighter, he remains prudent, rather than taking foolish risks to attain glory. Wisdom is one of the virtues attributed to the ideal knight by Charny, but he emphasizes that wisdom is only truly realized in those who possess prowess and worthiness alongside (Charny 84). The Knight evinces all three traits. In these two lines, Chaucer establishes a major facet of the Knight's character.

Additionally, "wys" had a second meaning in Chaucer's time. In the words of one scholar, "the wise knight is prudent, but he is also the knight who under stands the philosophic and social ideals which inform the order of chivalry, and thus he restrains and shapes his worthiness in accordance with these ideals" (Hatton 79). According to his description in the

General Prologue, then, Chaucer's Knight never lets himself be blinded in search of a false honour; he is concerned with not only martial prowess, but also behaving in an ethical manner.

According to Paul Strohm, the Knight, as well with the other two "traditional" characters in the *Tales*, the parson and ploughman, is willing to sacrifice some bodily comfort in favor of a transcendent ideal (Strohm 85): hence the modesty of his behavior, retinue and attire. This is meant to display both his wisdom and meekness. A good knight, additionally, is under "heavy responsibilities" to appear virtuous, per Charny. It is not enough to simply be good, he says, as great men are under near constant observation from those less worthy. A good knight can do nothing that would allow even the slightest rumor of ignominy to take root, for thereby a knight will lose honour, which is the cornerstone of his existence (Charny 60).

The Knight is also a noble character; "He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde/In al his lyf unto no manerwight / He was a verray, parfit gentil knyght" (Chaucer 70-2). "Vileynye" suggests behavior suitable to a villein, a peasant, which the Knight eschews. He does not quarrel with others; in the *Book of Chivalry*, Charny explicitly forbids quarrels "above all", saying that to quarrel with someone of equal rank is "dangerous," of higher rank is "madness" and to quarrel with someone beneath you is "vile" (Charny 71). The Knight is also *gentil*, that is, both noble in character and refined in behavior, although not necessarily a nobleman.

His attire, however, would seem to contradict this appellation. Six lines are dedicated to the Knight's appearance:

*But, for to tellen yow of his array,*

*His hors were goode, but he was nat gay.*

*Of fustian he wered a gypon*

*Al bismotered with his habergeoun,  
 For he was late ycome from his viage,  
 And wente for to doon his pilgrymage (73-8).*

It is repeatedly emphasized that the Knight's appearance is humble, and significantly plainer than one might expect a knight of his stature to have. His gypon, the tunic worn over his armor, is made of fustian, which was not only a lower-priced fabric than the broadcloth used by many knights, but also generally made locally, rather than in the great weaving centers of Flanders or London (Hodges 283). Even more importantly, it is "bismotered" — it is dirty from his armour. This serves several functions. Perhaps the most immediate is that it emphasizes the Knight as a man of action; his clothing bears signs of the battles in which he has engaged. In chivalric romances, the knight is almost always impeccably clad. There is never a sign of wear and tear, of battle damage or sweat and dirt acquired on the road. These dirty clothes belong to a flesh and blood knight, one actively fighting for the cause, rather than a literary knight who, despite all his daring exploits, never seems to need to clean his clothing (Hodges 279). After all, Chaucer's Knight has just returned from his latest adventure and is so enthused to head out on pilgrimage that he has not taken the time to stop and clean his clothing (Chaucer 78). And as another critic says, "the presence of rust is a realistic detail that focuses at once on the reality of campaigning" (Morgan 142). In short, it adds a layer of realism to this new, pragmatic Knight.

Charny also warns against excessive attention on one's own appearance—a chapter of his treatise is entitled "A Good Man-at-Arms Should Not Pamper His Body" (Charny 68-9). He evinces a dislike for current male fashions; men who wear such clothing, he says, have forgotten shame, and by way of forgetting shame, they have also forgotten their honour (Kaeuper 26).

The Knight's humble attire serves literary functions as well. First, plain clothing betokens the humility of the Knight himself. He is less concerned with outward appearances and more with functionality. However, there is a deeper literary purpose at work here. In pilgrimage literature of the time, a spot or dirt on clothing is typically indicative of a spot in the soul—of sin, of imperfection that needs to be corrected, hence the pilgrimage (Hodges 285). While the Knight is almost certainly not a dissolute marauder, he is not without sins, likely incurred during battle. This *bismotered gypon* of fustian is indicative of the state of his soul — humble, but imperfect.

The Knight in *The Canterbury Tales* is, then, much more complex than many of his past critics have suggested. For one, he is not informed by nostalgia for an imagined former Golden Age of chivalry, a representation of a perfect knight of the past. However, he is certainly not the bloodthirsty, amoral marauder that Terry Jones would paint him as. He follows many of the tenets in *The Book of Chivalry* and fights in the cause of God, but indeed works for pay, rather than old-fashioned ties of feudalism. All in all, Chaucer presents the reader with the portrait of a living, breathing knight who gets dirty and fights hard but remains pious, meek and worthy throughout. This Knight is somewhat idealized, but not as a retrospective; rather, he is the best a knight in Chaucer's time could be, and the starting point for many later, more realistic portrayals of knights—and people in general—in literature.

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