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## The Knight Dismounted

**A**t the outset of this project, I planned to analyze the apparent shift in values depicted in the Knight and Squire of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. When I started my research into the Knight I found the interpretations I expected: the Knight drawn by Chaucer as the paradigm of chivalry. These articles reinforced the image I already possessed concerning the Knight and echoed my own reverence for the character and his values. But a second set of sources marched under another banner, one that painted the Knight as a brutal mercenary and a monument to the decay of chivalry. My Knight was unhorsed and with him, my topic.

My research now shifted towards finding the truth behind the interpretations of the Knight. In my studies I found two firmly entrenched camps: those who commend and those who condemn. In this paper I intend to analyze the arguments of both sides and determine whether the Knight is indeed a "worthy man."

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, freedom and curteisie.

(I.43-46)

These lines from the "General Prologue" introduce the Knight as the first of Chaucer's pilgrims and for those who support the traditional view, rightly so. "The Knight is of course the proper character to head

the series of description . . . socially he stands highest among the pilgrims; morally, he represents the high ideal of Christian Chivalry” (Brooks 3). But in order to understand what is meant by the “high ideal of Christian Chivalry” we must look at the birth of the chivalry.

Chivalry as a code of behavior did not exist as we know it until 1093 with the assembly of the first Crusade. It was Pope Urban II who forged the Christian ideal from the “cross and sword.” In Urban’s address he included a list a characteristics, stating that the true soldier of Christ would be “wise, provident, temperate, learned, peace-making, truth seeking, pious, just, equitable, pure.” Few would ever achieve such perfection, but it gave the pious warrior a standard to strive for (Bowden 45-46).

After this the knight became the champion and defender of the Church, and, by the fourteenth century, Orders of Knighthood were as prolific as guilds. The orders varied only in the extravagance of their code and all were basically bound by the same code of behavior set down by Urban II. Simply stated, the mission of the Knight was to serve as “the righteous and implacable enemy of the infidel, the compassionate protector of the weak and oppressed, the defender of all Right and Justice” (Bowden 45).

Having defined the role of a knight we can now weigh the Knight’s character to determine whether Chaucer depicted him as an ideal or intended to satirize him. The traditional interpretation leans toward the former and is based on lines such as these:

And everemoore he hadde a sovereyn prys;  
 And though that he were worthy, he was wys,  
 And of his port as meeke as is a mayde,  
 He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde  
 In al his lyf unto no maner wight.  
 He was a verray, parfit gentil knight.  
 [ . . . . . ]  
 His hors were goode, but he was not gay.  
 Of fustian he wered a gypon  
 Al bismotered with his habergeon,  
 For he was late ycome from his viage  
 (I.67-77)

## THE KNIGHT DISMOUNTED

In addition to the lines at the beginning of this paper, these two passages paint the embodiment of chivalry. In humble and functional dress, sober and solemn demeanor the Knight radiates the tenets laid down by Urban II. He wastes nothing on luxury but rather attends to the tools of his trade, such as strong horses and armor. Muriel Bowden, in her *Commentary on the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, points out that, “It is very much a credit of the Knight that he is not overdressed, not too ‘gay,’ for according to the sermon literature of the fourteenth century, the upper classes are continually censured for their, ‘synful costlewe array of clothyng’”(50).

Those who uphold the traditional view and those who challenge it seem to agree these lines appropriately outline the ideal Knight. The problem comes when “the structure of the portrait sets off [a] contrast. Two passages describing the Knight’s chivalry, which, if joined together, would comprise an unambiguously ideal portrait but are separated by a long list of the Knight’s campaigns” (Wetherbee 22). This passage gives birth to the debate concerning his character:

At Alisaundre he was whan it was wonne.  
Ful ofte tyme he hadde the bord bigonne  
Aboven alle nacions in Pruce;  
In Lettow hadde he reysed, and in Ruce,  
No cristen man so ofte of his degree.  
In Granada, at the seege eck hadde he be,  
Of Algezir, and ridin in Balmarye.  
At Lyeys was he and at Satalye,  
Whan they were wonne; and in the Grete See  
At many noble armee hadde he be.  
(I.51-60)

To those who challenge the traditional interpretation, these lines portray the Knight as a “cold-blooded professional whose involvement in some of the most brutal fighting of his day is in glaring contrast to his perfect courtesy and honor” (Wetherbee 22). Leading the charge of this interpretation is historian Terry Jones.

In *Chaucer’s Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary*, Jones takes a historical approach to interpreting the litany of battles that the Knight

is charged with fighting in. His book begins by questioning the motive behind Chaucer's including these lines. Traditionally, these lines are seen as Chaucer exalting the Knight for being on the forefront of the Christian charge. Jones, however, asserts that by addressing the tale with a historical, rather than literal interpretation, the Knight is revealed as nothing more than a mercenary. In this context, both the Knight and his tale become social satires condemning the decaying and distorted chivalry prevalent during Chaucer's time.

To understand Jones' argument we will look at several points that he calls attention to in his book. He starts by questioning the very nature of the Knight's "ideal" status by pointing out that, "he is not endowed with any physical beauty or grace; there is no mention of any family background, no coat-of-arms, no shield, no belt, no manorial estates." All of these characteristics were part and parcel with the image of chivalry late in the fourteenth century, and by failing to possess any of them the Knight, Jones asserts, fails to uphold the standard (2-4).

The traditional favorable standpoint could defend its claim by pointing out that the Knight should not be separated entirely from his son the Squire. Together they form a portrait of the chivalric lifecycle. The Knight represents the battle-hardened veteran while his son is the embodiment literary chivalry and possesses the "physical beauty and grace" that Jones is looking for (Brewer 63-67). This along with Bowden's comments on the censures against ostentatious dress mentioned earlier provides a suitable retort for Jones's first point.

The second argument comes, as I stated earlier, from the lines concerning the Knight's many military campaigns. Rather than being "a great rollcall of the crusades against the infidels," Jones asserts that most of the battles listed were scenes of appalling massacre and pillage. Specifically noted is the siege of Alexandria which, according to Jones was, "notorious for the disgrace which the English knights, in particular, brought upon themselves" (4). It would be impossible for Chaucer to have been unaware of popular opinion concerning these battles, especially at a time when the nature of Crusades was being called into question (Jones 2-4).

In order to debate this point, we need only turn back to the words of Pope Urban II in his address to the first Crusade. He stated, "Now

let those who have been in the habit of wastefully waging private wars, even against believers, proceed against the infidel in worthy battle” (Bowden 45). The fact that all the Knight’s encounters are established as either Crusades or against other heathens or Germanic tribes shows that he is following the very edict that is the foundation of chivalry. The fact that these conflicts were brutal affairs is a result of the cultural situation at the time, which is also why the ideal knight was such a rarity: in Bowden’s words, “mediaeval religion was too irrational, medieval warfare too cruel” (45). Scholars who challenge the Knight’s virtue based on his military career “judge it in terms of modern pacifist, humanitarianism, post-Christian ideals, which could not be shared by Chaucer” (Brewer 67).

The next point seems to be a direct challenge to Bowden’s argument, and her interpretation of the meanings behind the words used to describe the Knight. Bowden is of the belief that Chaucer modeled the description after a work written by Watriquet de Couvin who wrote a description of his patron knight. A majority of the words used by de Couvin, such as “honor” and “courtesy,” are found in the description. Bowden interprets the words as being complimentary and a sign of the Knight’s exemplary character (Bowden 45-47).

Jones, however, points out that many of these words have purely functional meanings that would change our perspective. His first example comes from the second and third lines, “That fro the tyme he first bigan/ To riden out. He loved chivalrie.” “To riden out” Jones explains, “[is a] technical military term: it meant ‘to go on raids.’ These were pillaging raids, undertaken away from the main body of the ‘host’ or army.” He goes on to explain that, yes, many knights enjoyed this. It allowed them the freedom to ransack villages away from the eyes of their leaders. Jones also points out that the “chivalrie” the Knight loved so much could also be interpreted as a purely military expression meaning that he loved cavalry warfare (Jones 45-47).

While this argument raises certain questions, in stating the problem of interpretation, Jones both constructs and destroys his own argument. First, by pointing out the multiple meanings behind each word, he shows the utter futility of trying to decide Chaucer’s intended meaning. Secondly, by showing that his interpretations are based upon meanings assigned in regard to purely military applications,

Jones ignores the literary notion of authorial audience. While Chaucer himself had served in the military, it is questionable that he would use, in essence, military jargon in a work that is aimed at a universal audience.

Jones's final and strongest argument deals in purely historical matters. He illustrates that by the fourteenth century the concept of the knight had shifted from zealot to aristocrat. The shift presumably stemmed from economic reasons. Jones points out that throughout the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century the cost of being a knight increased substantially. As technology continued to advance in the art of warfare, increasingly sophisticated and expensive weaponry was required. Knights as a rule would have to be lords of substantial lands in order to fit themselves for battle (Jones 5-7).

As a result of this, knighthood became reserved for those who could afford it, namely the aristocracy. As a further result a shift was seen in the nature of what was required of a knight. Skill at warfare, while still important, was not the sole requirement. Knights were educated and in time of peace they participated in courtly affairs and managed their estates. Because of this The Knighthood became a class of prestige and wealth (Jones 6-8).

But at the same time this change created a gap. While knights with large estates gained prowess and esteem, those who held small estates were crushed under an intolerable burden. These knights could ill afford either the equipment necessary for battle or the time taken away from management of their estate. It is estimated that by 1278 fewer than half of those eligible for knighthood were taking up the call. This in turn left lords without fighting men. Thus, the rise of the mercenary (Jones 7-9, 31-33).

Because of this shift, the fourteenth century was witness to large scale use of mercenaries. Kings took to hiring soldiers to do the fighting in order to lessen the burden on knights and mercenaries became the backbone of the army. As a result, armies were no longer tied together by loyalty to a specific leader or nation, and in time of peace they would form into autonomous fighting elements that pillaged the countryside. In England these bands of mercenaries were known as the "Free Companies" and were a scourge during Chaucer's age (Jones 13-15).

Given this cultural information, certain aspects of the Knight's description become suspect, namely, the lack of any mention of estates and his ability to have taken part in so many conflicts. The number of campaigns alone suggests that he was never in a state of peace but rather supporting himself solely as a man-at-arms. This type of paid-to-fight soldier was greatly frowned upon in a society that already satirized professions in medicine and law. Selling the ability to help a dying person or defend a guilty man for personal gain was seen as social erosion, and the mercenary was a horrifying expansion of this situation. Jones believes that because of this, "It would not be surprising . . . if Chaucer had chosen the portrait of such a knight as the centre-pin for his satire on the society of his day" (Jones 33-37).

The line that Jones calls attention to in order to support this, "And everemoore he hadde a sovereyn prys," is typically translated as, "He was of supreme value," or something to the effect of being extremely successful. While the word "prys" carries the meaning of "honour, value, praise" it also meant "a price" or possibly "a reward," the last two of which would support the mercenary stance and would have been understood by his audience. Jones points out that in situations where "prys" carried the meanings of honor or value it is written in conjunction with "of" as in "With fourscore knihtes al of prys." The syntax would appear to support this interpretation as Jones illustrates situations in the Parson's Tale where "prys" is used in the same manner and plainly means "price" (Jones 88-89).

Of all the arguments Jones presents, the cultural background and the Knight's unexplained wealth pose the greatest threats to traditional interpretations. In my research I could find nothing that challenged Jones's claims. Given my background in literature it is beyond my belief that Chaucer would not have been affected by the growing threat of this mercenary class: a class of paid killers hiding behind the plate mail of romance literature and noble birth. To rephrase an earlier quote, the Knight is of course the proper character to head the series of description. Socially, he stands as the greatest menace; morally, he represents the ultimate corruption of Christian Chivalry.

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