Chaucer's Knight Reconsidered

by
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When I first began reading Chaucer, my high school English teacher talked about the Knight as the ideal paragon of chivalry. Then she pointed out the irony in the portraits of most of the other pilgrims en route to Canterbury. That the Knight was ideal beyond human possibilities although the other characters were mostly flawed and even scoundrelly but fascinating human personalities seemed unlikely to me. But the teacher told us that Chaucer wanted to present a range of characters running the gamut in social status, education, occupation, and morality. So I took the Knight as an unbelievable extreme, slightly dull as a result, and read the other characters with increasing interest.

In graduate school, the professor esentially agreed with my high school English teacher—and he'd edited the text in Middle English. Commentaries on the tales also assumed the Knight's perfection. So when I taught a Chaucer unit or a Chaucer course, I dutifully repeated that the Knight comes first because of his high social status and because he is the shining example. Then I moved on to the more interesting discussion of the ironic tone in the portraits of the rest of the pilgrims.

The doctrine of the perfect Knight never felt right; his story of conquest, betrayal, and bloodshed did not seem to fit with the perfections of chivalry; his interruptions of the Monk's tale seemed discourteous rather than Knightly. But all "mine auctors" held the same view, and they all knew more about Middle English grammar, phonemes, and history than I know or ever want to know.

Consequently, when I read an advertisement for Terry Jones's *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* and found that he proposed to prove that the Knight was a hired mercenary with doubtful morals I was interested. I admit to some skepticism as to whether anyone who wrote "Monty Python" could also write with scholarly credibility, but I read the book. Mr. Jones marshalls evidence that the word *Knight* had varied meanings in Chaucer's day and would likely have suggested a mercenary raider. He goes on to show that the battles were not glorious victories for Christendom but brutal raids, none of them fought for king and country. The Knight is less like a hero at Thermopylae than like a participant in the My Lai massacres. Mr. Jones shows that the Knight's attire, his manner, his tone, the allusions he makes, even the brand that the Ellesmere manuscript illustrator put on his horse, suggest strongly that the Knight is a villain and that Chaucer's audience would have been immediately aware of language being used to describe the decay of what had once been a chivalric ideal. Mr. Jones's historic evidence would, I believe, be totally convincing to anyone not weighed down with years of critical opinion that the Knight was the epitome of chivalry. So after years of seeing what critics had directed me to see, I reread the prologue with Mr. Jones's evidence in mind. Formalist critical reading of the text itself supports the sociological,

historical evidence that the Knight is to be seen ironically, that he is as much a pretender to the glories of chivalry as the religious pilgrims are to sainthood.

Chaucer begins by asserting that the Knight is a worthy man (A 43). Baugh glosses *worthy* as "distinguished, honorable" (n. A 43). Without quarreling with the meaning, one can be suspicious of just where Chaucer's tongue is in relation to his cheek. Four times the Knight is called worthy (A 43, 47, 64, 68); a fifth mention proclaims his worthiness (A 50). Five occurrences within thirty lines either make one think that Chaucer had a limited vocabulary or that he wished to call attention to the word. Chaucer protests too much.

Chaucer uses *worthy* eight times more in the prologue. The Friar was "well beloved and familiar" (A 215) with Franklins and with "worthy women of the town" (A 217) because he heard confessions so sweetly and gave easy penance in return for gifts. Just how respectable were the worthy women who patronized such a Friar is open to question; their worthiness seems to lie in their wealth, not in their characters. Later the Friar himself is described as such a worthy man that he can deal only with the rich and influential food sellers and not with poor beggars (A 240-48). The irony of his description intensifies with the conclusion that he is a "worthy limiter" (A 269). His clear violation of his religious calling suggests that his worthiness is related to financial worth and not to moral character. Perhaps the Knight is a worthy man because he has collected booty on his raids when he has ridden out slaying and pillaging.

The relation of worth to financial standing rather than to knightly virtues continues in the description of the Merchant. His obsession with money and his skill in concealing his indebtedness are notable. The description concludes that "he was a worthy man" (A 283), certainly with a large tinge of irony.

Chaucer calls the Franklin a "worthy vavasour" (A 360). Since the term was archaic in Chaucer's day, Baugh's note suggests that the term is "probably mildly humorous" (n. A 360). The adjective probably takes its tone from its noun. If it is not ironic, the adjective is at least not straightfowardly literal.

The Wife of Bath "was a worthy woman all her life" (A 459). Worthiness in her case involves five husbands and other company in youth according to the continuation of the sentence in which she is described as worthy. She seems to have extracted enough financial security from her matrimonial and trade ventures to appear well-dressed and on a respectable horse for her pilgrim journey. Perhaps her worthiness is at least partly financial and partly an admiration of her assertive lifestyle.

The Manciple manages to dupe his employers to his own profit, even though each one of those who employ him is worthy to be a steward of any lord in England (A 579), another use of *worthy* in close connection with money rather than with innate values and other connection of *worthy* with questionable monetary practices.

In Chaucer's "Tale of Melibee" the connection between *worth* and money is reinforced when Prudence concedes the necessity of temporal goods and the possible admirable uses of riches but quotes the observation that "they that been thralle and bonde of lynage shullen been maad worthy and noble by the richesses" (B 1560). That wealth may supply the nobility lacking by birth adds weight to the possibility that the

Knight's worthiness is an ironic observation about how efficiently he has acquired booty in his career as a raider.

In the Knight's own tale, the dukes and knights are repeatedly labeled worthy. Theseus's cruelty, Palamon and Arcite's quarreling and betrayal of each other although they are sworn brothers, and assorted other obvious breaches of the idealized chivalric code invest these uses of *worthy* with at least as great a tinge of irony as Antony's insistence that "Brutus is an honorable man."

The conclusion of the description of the Knight's personality offers the same possibilities for irony as the opening description does. The Knight is labeled gentle, that is, according to glosses, he is well-born, noble, worthy (n. A 72). The adjective joins the Knight to four other pilgrims, all of whom are traditionally considered to be described ironically by the term.

The Manciple who cleverly makes money under the very noses of the learned men to whom he is steward is described as gentle (A 567). The Summoner is called a gentle harlot (A647); with him there rode a gentle Pardoner (A 669). The Tabard itself is described as a gentle hostlery (A 718), a designation that can hardly be assumed to mean that only the well-born patronize it. Later the proprietor of that gentle inn calls the unclean and immoral Cook "gentle Roger" (A 4353). The company provided for the gentle Knight here certainly adds probability to the suggestion that Chaucer's tone is ironic.

Gentility later becomes a topic of debate in the tale telling. The Wife of Bath, who is worthy if not gentle, tells a tale that equates gentility with conduct rather than with birth. Gentle is as gentle does; he is gentle who performs the deeds appropriate to noble birth and good breeding. The Knight in her tale contrasts, at least in his reformation, with the Knight of the prologue and tale. He is not a raider slaughtering people but a penitent trying to save his life which stands in jeopardy because he has raped a maiden. The loathly lady, perhaps an old wife who makes a point about how the Wife of Bath herself would like to be seen, lectures the Knight, condemning as arrogance the notion that gentility and riches are related. When the Knight treats the lady in accordance with the chivalric code, his pardon and his reformation are complete.

The gentleness of the Knight in the tale of the Wife of Bath also contrasts with Duke Theseus and with Palamon and Arcite who treat Emily (and the other women in the tale) as property to be disposed of according to principles they have set up. Palamon and Arcite break their vows of sworn brotherhood to quarrel over possession of Emily, even when neither is in any position to make a credible claim. Theseus devises an elaborate scheme to decide on her destiny; no one asks Emily. She is consistently a victim. If the Wife of Bath and her spokeswoman are right in asserting that women want to be served in marriage as they are served in love situations and that such mutuality leads to joy, then the gentleness of the Knight and of the characters in his tale is called into question even more sharply.

Chaucer's little moral ballad "Gentilesse" repeats the lecture of the loathly lady, affirming that gentility must equate with virtue rather than with wealth, rank, or other external or inherited quality.

Besides the evidence of other uses of the word *gentle*, Chaucer uses the location of his initial description of the Knight to suggest that the word is not to be taken literally. He puts the description right after the list of battles, a list that by its very length suggests the excesses which are documented by historic accounts of the mortal battles and lists in which the foe was killed. Chaucer uses the contrast to set in sharp relief the probable irony of the description.

The line that introduces the Knight as gentle, "he was a verray, parfit, gentil knyght" (A 72), is echoed quickly in the prologue. The Physician is described: "He was a verray, parfit practisour" (A 422). Right after this assessment of the skill of the Physician, we learn that he has set up a profitable practice in kick-backs from apothecaries. A bit later, the Physician's love of gold is noted. The Physician, apparently learned enough, is tainted by dishonesty and greed. The line that calls him perfect takes its tone of ironic over-praise from the surrounding lines. The way the line echoes a similar description of the Knight reinforces the possiblity that the surrounding lines similarly dictate an ironic tone about the Knight's perfect gentility.

Other lines about the Knight are also echoed in the prologue in circumstances that cast extreme doubt on a straightforward, literal reading. The Knight's bearing is described as being "as meeke as is a mayde" (A 69), an apparent assertion of a soft interior under the battle armor. However, the outer appearance may be deceiving. In the Miller's tale, Nicholas is described as sly and secretive "And lyk a mayden meke for to see" (A 3202). His demeanor is a cloak for his reality; perhaps the Knight's meekness is similarly ironic.

The Miller insists on telling his tale right after the Knight has finished, displacing the Monk whom Harry Bailly has asked to speak second. The Miller says that his tale will match the Knight's. His relation to the Knight's tale tends to be forgotten as his quarrel with the Reeve becomes explicit; and, of course, the claims of a self-confessed drunk are suspect. But the Miller does posit a specific relationship between the two tales and begins by describing his less than ideal hero with a line echoing the description of the Knight's meekness.

When the Monk finally does tell his tale, the Knight interrupts him despite the Knight's own injunction to let every man tell his tale and see which one will win the supper (A 890-91). Conventionally, the Knight's interruption is supposed to be Chaucer's signal that the Monk's tale has turned into a dull string of tragedies. However, the fact that Chaucer replaced the Host with the Knight as the one who stops the tale (n. B 3957) may be part of the continuing relation between the Knight's tale and Monk's tale which is supposed to match with it. The tales do show similarities which connect their themes and make more credible the notion that the Knight is less than ideal.

The Monk tells a tale of one tragic fall from power after another. Fortune is repeatedly invoked as controlling human lives. The short tales make these falls matter of report rather than full dramatization, but the Knight's tale has smiliarly, if at greater length, invoked fortune repeatedly. Like the Monk, the Knight has told of falls from fortune, beginning with the ladies who greet Theseus with weeping and ask vengeance for their wrongs and continuing with the events that befall Palamon and Arcite. The

pattern of fall from fortune shows less obviously in the Knight's tale because of the welter of detail that the Knight provides. Perhaps the Monk annoys the Knight by stripping away much of the detail and repeating over and over the pattern that the Knight himself had used.

In the Knight's tale, the Duke is repeatedly responsible for the fall of other people, beginning with his conquest of Hippolyta. He takes vengeance on Creon, who seems to deserve his fate. When he comes upon Palamon and Arcite fighting, he substitutes a larger battle for a smaller one. His total effect is on the side of violence, although the details of gathering fighters, building lists, and invoking gods smother the starkness of his violence. Perhaps the Knight sees the Monk reducing to essentials the tale of force that the Knight fobbed off as if it were a glorious chivalric story.

The Knight's tale ends with a long reflection on the mutability of life. The oak tree falls at last, the stone wastes away, the river runs dry, the great towns wane, and men and women all die. The Monk takes the theme of the Knight's long reflection on change—change for the worse—and plays all the changes on it. The Knight may well resent having his long, didactic homily illustrated so thoroughly by the Monk.

But even if the Knight sees his own themes and techniques from his tale used almost to the point of parody by the Monk, his unease may reflect not so much concern for his tale as for his reputation. If Mr. Jones is right and the list of the Knight's battles raises revulsion in the minds of other pilgrims, then his part in causing the overthrow of people, often brutal overthrow for monetary gain, is all too obvious. No wonder if a list of tragedies seems to imply and criticize his own role in many tragedies. The Knight's request for happier stories may be a request to turn the stories away from the falls from prosperity with which he is all too familiar because he has been a hired agent producing such falls.

Obviously readers can and have for centuries seen the Knight as wearing the proverbial shining armor. However, the historic evidence that gives warrant for seeing him as a mercenary of dubious morality may well explain the long list of battles in the prologue, the endless battle details in the tale of the tyranny of Theseus and of fortune, and the necessity for interrupting the Monk. Irony may begin sooner and be applied more heavily in the prologue than readers suspected before Mr. Jones provided a different and perhaps more accurate way to read about that gentle, perfect Knight.

WORKS CITED

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