

## CHAUCER'S KNIGHT AND THE HUNDRED YEARS WAR

It is not surprising that the gallery of portraits which constitute the General Prologue commences with the description of the Knight, since according to Ramon Llull a knight 'of eche thousand [men] was chosen,' for being 'moost loyal / most stronge / and of most noble courage / & better enseynd and manerd than al the other' (Byles 1926: 15, Caxton's trans.). Furthermore, this same character will be chosen to begin the tale-telling game. Such a privilege allows him to establish the narrative tone for the contest, thereby becoming a central figure of the *Canterbury Tales*. The interpretation of his portrait, however, has generated noteworthy dissension among the critics. Traditional approaches have viewed the Knight as representative of the ideal of knighthood, lover of 'trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie' (*KT*, l. 46). Nevertheless, among these critics there is a division between those who regard the Knight as an anachronistic figure among the group of pilgrims (e.g. Herz 1964 and Robinson 1957), and those who see him as a realistic picture of the adventurous fourteenth century knight (Keen 1983, Mann 1973 and Manly 1907). In contrast to the traditional position, an anti-thetical opinion which regards the Knight as a medieval mercenary has been proposed; this is essentially founded on a singular interpretation of the description presented by Chaucer in the Prologue (Jones 1985 and Mitchell 1964).

In this paper, I as well will focus on the depiction of the Knight in the General Prologue in order to define the ideological viewpoint that informs the Knight's actions and omissions, with the objective of attaining a better understanding of his personality, and, therefore, of his intentions as narrator.

The first feature to stand out in the Knight's portrayal is the formidable list of campaigns in which he has participated; these adventures have brought him to the contemporary boundaries of 'cristendom'. This is not so astonishing if we take into account how, in the General Prologue, each pilgrim is described as the epitome of the social group he or she represents.

Nonetheless, in this case, the degree of hyperbolization seems excessive to me, not so much for its historical magnitude as for its narrative extension.<sup>1</sup> Jill Mann (1973: 111-2) argues that the function of such a roll call of battles is 'to evoke the exotic aspects of foreign travel, the romance of battle in far-off lands.'<sup>2</sup> From a merely historical standpoint, this catalog of campaigns (16 lines) constitutes an inventory of the scant successes obtained in the fourteenth century by European chivalry over the heathen.

The fact that the Knight, model of chivalry, has devoted his life-long career to fighting the infidel in crusades, apparently represents an indisputable religious commitment that would turn him into a soldier of God. However, this is just the first duty of a knight,<sup>3</sup> for the second chivalrous concern is 'to mayntene and deffende / his lord worldly or terreyn' (Byles 1926: 29, Caxton's trans.). Chaucer explains that 'ful worthy was he in his lordes werre' (*KT*, l. 47), yet this statement contains an ambiguity: is he referring to God or to his feudal lord?<sup>4</sup> It does not seem plausible to come up with a clear-cut explanation of this line. We should, therefore, direct our attention to the implications inferred from the rest of the description: it is queer that there is no single allusion to the English victories of Crécy (1346), Calais (1347), Poitiers (1356), and Nájera (1367). These mark the celebrated triumphs of English knighthood, and their conspicuous absence is extremely significant, particularly for Chaucer's contemporary audience, who are immersed in the never-ending French war. Terry Jones utilizes this omission to reaffirm his criticism of the Knight; however, his conclusions show a certain narrow-mindedness for not discovering other motivations for the Knight's behavior

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<sup>1</sup> A similar degree of exaggeration is found in the portrait of the Man of Law, but in this case its exposition is limited to two lines: 'In termes hadde he caas and doomes alle / That from the tyme of kyng William were falle' (l. 323-4).

<sup>2</sup> Muriel Bowden (1959: 51) considers the enumeration of battles as 'a chapter of romance'.

<sup>3</sup> In John Gower's words, 'Ecclesie prima debet defendere iura' (*Vox Clamantis*, v. 5, ed. Macaulay 1902, vol. 4)

<sup>4</sup> Traditionally that line has been interpreted as an allusion to God, mainly because the detailed list of battles that follows only contains campaigns religiously inspired (e.g. Hatton 1968). Other critics have proposed a more patriotic reading, suggesting that the lord is indeed the king of England (Robinson 1957: 652). But Jones (1985 ff.) assumes that line refers to the lord who has hired the Knight as a mercenary.

except for economical ones.<sup>1</sup> I will try to identify the presumable reasons that would justify the Knight's attitude.

The Knight's non-involvement in the Hundred Years War would ostensibly contravene the chivalrous ideal that he is believed to represent. Why does he not take part in those battles? At first sight we may think that he is one of those

qui mettent leur entente a faire lointains voiaiges, entre ceulx qui sont acoustumez, qui tousjours veulent aler pour veoir nouvelles et estranges choses et pou arrestent et ne peuent mie trouver ne estre es fais d'armes si tres lointains voiaiges ne quierent mie et qui plus s'arrestent et attendent les faiz d'armes de guerre (Geoffroi de Charny, eds. Kaeuper & Kennedy 1996: 90).

It seems evident that our Knight must have developed a certain taste for traveling and knowing foreign countries; for instance, he has just come from a journey ('he was late ycome from his viage', *KT*, l. 77), and has already set off for Canterbury. Nonetheless, his motivations for undertaking distant crusades are beyond mere wanderlust: he goes to accomplish objectives which are religiously sound, putting his life at risk. Charny's comment on this kind of knight is emphatic: 'devons nous telz gens qui ainsi ont esté en lointains et estranges voiaiges volentiers oïr, veoir et honorer; car vraiment nulz ne peut aler en telx lointains voiaiges que le corps ne soit en peril maintes foiz' (Ibid., emphasis mine).<sup>2</sup> Hence, it may be deduced that participation in this sort of campaign was praiseworthy; conversely, to devote all his energies to fighting the heathens when his help would have been so necessary for his country looks more contemptible.

Despite the Knight's failure to fight in the French war, Chaucer closes the enumeration of campaigns in the Knight's depiction by stating that 'though that he were worthy, he was wys' (*KT*, l. 68). These two concepts are essential for both the characterization of the Knight and his identification with the chivalric ideal. Before continuing with this analysis, I would like briefly to

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<sup>1</sup> Jones (1985: 101) concludes that 'at a period of crisis for the English nation, he has failed to serve his own country with spectacular single-mindedness and has ranged all over the known world in search of fat pickings'.

<sup>2</sup> This observation sanctions the capacity of the Knight to narrate remarkable stories, and implies a certain positive inclination on the part of his audience to listen to him.

refute the interpretation that Terry Jones (1985: 101) gives of the previous line, intrigued by its concessive nature: 'if worthiness and wisdom are *both* desirable moral qualities, why does Chaucer put in that little word *though*?'. The explanation for Chaucer's election of this conjunction is provided by Geoffroi de Charny in his treatise:

Si devez savoir que se uns homs avoit sens assez et il ne fust  
preudoms, cilz deus[t] se convertir du tout en mal. Et se uns homs  
estoit preudoms et ne fust mie assez saiges, tele preudommie est  
bonne mais non mie tant vallable ne de si grant merite como li saige  
de droit sens naturel qui sont vrai preudomme (Kaeuper &  
Kennedy 1996: 154).

This quotation lucidly resolves the meaning of line 68: the roll call of battles attests to the worthiness of our Knight, but Chaucer stresses the fact that he is one of the few who despite being worthy, is also wise, thus elevating him to a personage of 'grant merite'.

The term 'worthy' is present in the very first line of the Knight's description ('A Knyght ther was, and that a worthy man', *KT*, l. 43), and is used three times further (ll. 50, 64, 68). Chaucer has given enough evidence of what is expected from a worthy knight: 'Si bona milicia fuerit, deus astat in illa / Vincat vt invicto miles in ense suo' (Gower, *Vox Clamantis*, v. 475-6, ed. Macaulay 1902, vol. 4). Conversely, we find out that he is wise only because Chaucer declares so, although he does not give any explicit evidence. What are the implications of Chaucer's statement? Hatton (1968: 79) asserts that a wise knight is aware of the values and principles that govern the order of chivalry, and 'thus he restrains and shapes his worthiness in accordance with these ideals'. Hence, such a faculty of wisdom is fundamental in determining the legitimacy of a cause, the step prior to entering in battle, as Gower argues (*Mirour de l'Omme* ll. 24013-18, ed. Macaulay 1899, vol. 1):

Mais cil q'au droit se voet armer  
Et sur les guerres travailler,  
Estuet a garder tout avant  
Pour la querelle examiner,  
Qu'il ne se face a tort lever,  
Don ert la cause defendant.

Reflection on the justice of war was not for a soldier a gratuitous act, since for him, not only his reputation was at stake but also his standing in the afterlife. The English Dominican friar John Bromyard comments c. 1390 that 'in bello corporali maximum est periculum corporum et animarum', and adds that those who are successful 'deum et sapientiam habentes adiutores'.<sup>1</sup>

The previous exposition of the chivalric implications of the concept 'wise' will assist us to better understand line 68. After the enumeration of chivalric actions undertaken by the Knight, an inventory which proves his worthiness, the omission of any reference to the Hundred Years War implicitly evinces his wisdom: the Knight doubts the justice of that war.

What factors have influenced the Knight, endowed with wisdom, to make that decision? According to the generally accepted chronology of Chaucer's works, the General Prologue was composed in 1388-92 (Benson 1987: xxv). At that time many voices rallied against the war in France, generating a debate in English and French society (Barnie 1974, ch. 5). The source of this dissatisfaction with war was twofold: on the one hand, the dubious morality of this war, fought between Christians; on the other hand, the irrationality of going on with a conflict which was not providing substantial benefits to either side, though it required an important cost both human and economical (Allmand 1988: 25). Logically, the Knight would be more concerned with the issue of the justice of this war, equipped with denunciations such as Gower's: 'Set magis in fratres, signat quos vnda renatos, / Pro mundi rebus publica bella damus' (*Vox Clamantis*, III. 665-6, ed. Macaulay 1902, vol. 4).<sup>2</sup>

Having established the Knight's ideological stand with relation to the Hundred Years War, I must consider now its historicity. Some Chaucerian critics, with an historical approach to the Knight's crusades, have attempted to identify him with a real-life model (Manly 1916: 165-238). However, none of these searches stood scholarly scrutiny. Furthermore, none of the individuals pointed out could have been a prototype for Chaucer, since, as Terry Jones

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<sup>1</sup> *Summam Predicantium* (Basel, c. 1485), under 'Bellum', chapter 23; source identified following Allmand (1973: 38-9).

<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, this attitude was not prevailing at all: in 1393 J. Colwull and J. Netton 'universitati Cantebrigiensis, theologie professores' assert that 'bellare pro defensione iusticie tam contra infideles quam contra cristianos est factum sanctum et licitum et dicere oppositum est erroneum' (Capes ed. 1916: 377); source identified following Allmand (1973: 20).

(1985: 100-1) attests, a characteristic common to all of them is that at some point in their careers they had fought the enemies of England. Does this mean that Chaucer has portrayed an unreal character? In 1369 Jean Froissart, in his *Chroniques*, records the case of a French knight, Sir Aymenions de Pumiers, who decides not to participate in the war with England, and instead opts to go on crusading, a more honorable solution:

Tout en tel manière se départi de la ducé d'Aquitainne messires Aymenions de Pumiers, qui estoit chevaliers dou prince, et dist que, la guerre durant, il ne s'armeroit, ne pour l'un roy, ne pour l'autre. Si s'en ala li dessus dis oultre mer, en Cypre et au Saint-Sépulcre et en pluseurs aultres biaux voiages (Lettenhove ed. 1867-1877: VII<sup>2</sup>, 420).

Our Knight, therefore, is not the only one to have reservations about the war, although this is not a widespread position.

To sum up, Chaucer has chosen for his pilgrimage an extraordinary figure who embodies a particular representation of the chivalrous ideal of his time, even if it defies the official stance: because he is engaged on crusading expeditions, disregarding his obligation to his country, and also because he questions the legitimacy of the Hundred Years War and decides not to take part. Now it is possible to understand Chaucer's rationale for including the entire list of the Knight's successes: on the one hand it attests to his worthiness, and on the other, it counterbalances the omission of the English victories mentioned above. This character's experienced outlook and exciting life bestow upon him those meritorious credentials which herald a magnificent tale.

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