

1. *He was a verray, parfit, gentil knyght*"...

# CHAUCER AND CHIVALRY

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In his medieval classic, "The Canterbury Tales," Geoffrey Chaucer is quite deliberate when he introduces his cast of characters with the Knight. Although chivalry was a stylized code of behavior that signaled the decay of the medieval feudal system, Chaucer is upholding what is essentially the perfect expression of earthly behavior with divine aspiration -- knighthood.

During the Age of Chivalry, the ideal knight owed fealty to his king. The king considered himself God's intermediary, so a knight's military obedience became not only a spiritual defense of Christendom in general but a personal homage to God. In the Middle Ages, God was often referred to as the "Lord" and "Heaven-King"; therefore, when Chaucer tells us that the Knight "had proved his worth in his \*lord's\* wars," we can easily interpret this as meaning God Himself. Chaucer's Knight, then, becomes the standard by which the other pilgrims are gauged. And the Pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury becomes more than an opportunity to journey to a different place and tell stories -- the presence of the Knight transforms it to a spiritual quest.

What is the history of this saintly English Knight who leads the "company of nine and twenty" on their pilgrimage to Canterbury and who sets the spiritual tone of the journey? He "loved chivalry, truth and honor, liberality and courtesy." He also "proved his worth" in the holy wars and yet he is humble:

"Although he was valiant, he was prudent,  
never in all his life had he been  
rude to anyone at all.  
He was a true, perfect, gentle knight."

With such bravery, kindness, and gentleness for an opening portrait to "The Canterbury Tales," it is hardly surprising that scholars have seriously researched the possibility that such a memorable character actually existed and served as Chaucer's model. Of course, the inevitable place to look for historical evidence is the Knight's own impressive military career.

In enumerating his campaigns, we learn that the English Knight was "at the siege of Algeciras" and battled "for our faith in Tlemcen." These were attempts to control the raids on the Christians by the North African Moors as well as to force the Moors out of Spain. Algeciras was the Moors' great stronghold, which finally fell to Alfonso of Castile with the help of the Christian world in 1344. Englishmen did participate in the siege -- several Earls of England headed a group of approximately 30 knights each. Chaucer's Knight, more than likely, was among them.

Tlemcen (in what is now northwestern Algeria) also falls into the above early expeditions in order of time, and although the date is not certain, there is evidence that the Knight's "three tournaments" in Tlemcen are an accurate description of man-to-man combat set up by mutual agreement between the opposing parties.

The Knight, we are also told, "was at Alexandria when it was won," with Pierre de Lusignon, King of Cyprus, defeating the Saracen stronghold on October 11, 1365. Pierre, of course, had long prepared for the encounter when in October 1362 he started a campaign to recruit the Christian powers of Europe against the "enemies of God." To be sure, many Christians did follow the King of Cyprus, and when he sailed from Rhodes to battle the Saracens, he had the backing of the nobility of Europe, the Pope, and the Knights Hospitallers.

Chaucer also mentions that our worthy Knight "had been at Lyas and Attalia when they were won." Interestingly, Attalia was captured in August 1361 -- prior to Pierre de Lusignon's journey to Europe to recruit Christendom in his struggle with the Saracens. This suggests that Chaucer's Knight was initially drawn to the Middle East largely on his own. The Knight was also with Pierre at the capture of Lyas, the Turkish city and harbor, in 1367.

Finally, we may turn to the Knight's campaigns in northern Europe:

"...he had sat at the head of the table  
in Prussia, above knights of all nations;  
he had campaigned in Lithuania, and in  
Russia,  
more often than any other Christian  
man of his rank;"

Although Chaucer places the above expeditions at the beginning of the knight's campaigns, there is good reason to believe that these excursions into northern Europe occurred later. For one thing, the Knight "sat at the head of the table in Prussia," an honor accorded only to an experienced soldier mature in years and with a distinguished military history. If the Knight fought in Algeciras in 1344, and appears in Southwark, a suburb of London, for the pilgrimage to Canterbury, in 1387 (the generally accepted date of "The Canterbury Tales"), he must have been between 60 and 65 years of age. For another thing, the Knight's campaigns in Prussia, Lithuania and Russia were largely under the leadership of the Knights of the Teutonic Order who experienced military setbacks in 1385 in the struggle to defend their borders against the pagan Lithuanians, as well as the Tartars who ruled Russia. Many foreign knights came to their aid in 1385, and it is very likely that Chaucer's Knight was among them.

Thus, at the onset of "The Canterbury Tales," the Knight is a mature man in his early 60's who has had a successful military career. Chaucer is careful to point out that the Knight fought only in the holy wars where he joined, among others, two of the three major military-religious groups which formed in the Holy Land during the Christian Crusades -- the Knights Hospitallers and the Knights of the Teutonic Order. (By this time, of course, the third group, the once-powerful Order

of Knights Templar, had perished as a result of the intrigues of Philip IV, King of France, and Pope Clement V, in the early 14th century.)

With such specific descriptions of the Knight's activities, it is probable that the Knight served as a model of persons Chaucer actually knew. It has even been purported that a certain Yorkshire family of Scrope was in Chaucer's mind as he portrayed his noble figure representative of the Age of Chivalry.

Two English families, the Yorkshire family of Scrope and the Chester family of Grosvenor, claimed the same heraldic insignia -- the "arms Azure, a bend Or" -- as their own, and to decide the dispute, testimony was undertaken in 1386. Chaucer himself was one of the witnesses who testified in behalf of the family of Scrope. Testimony was given by those witnesses who had seen first-hand the arms displayed publicly, such as on a tombstone, or more importantly, in actual battle. Those knights and esquires who testified in favor of Scrope described the self-same battles that Chaucer's Knight had fought in.

That Chaucer used actual persons to paint his figure of the Knight is interesting historically. But we would be missing a vital clue to Chaucer the artist if we overlooked the fact that the Knight becomes a living representative of all that humanity strives for -- harmony between earthly valor and spiritual humbleness.

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