

# Chaucer's knight – dichotomy and contradiction

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In the General Prologue of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, the first character portrait presented is that of the Knight. Though the knights of Chaucer's time were commonly perceived as upstanding, moral, Christian leaders in society, underlying Chaucer-the-Pilgrim's largely complimentary and respectful portrayal of the Knight is Chaucer-the-Poet's slightly sarcastic and accusatory version of the depiction. By comparing and contrasting these two representations of the Knight, the reader realizes that the Knight is a character of dichotomy and contradiction, neither wholly "good", nor wholly "bad". While Chaucer-the-Pilgrim's portrayal of the Knight is one of a man with a high moral character, Chaucer-the-Poet subtly inserts hints that the Knight is not as respectable and honorable as he appears. Chaucer-the-Pilgrim relentlessly overpraises the Knight. He uses some form of the word "worthy" to describe him four times in the 36 lines of the Knight's portrait (in lines 43, 47, 50, 68). The reader is told that the Knight "loved chivalrye/ Trouthe and honour, freedom and curteisye" (45-46). He was also "evere honoured for his worthinesse" (50) and had been "at many a noble armee"(60). Aside from being "a verray, parfit, gentil knight" (72), the Knight was a decent, nice person, in general. "He nevere yet no vileinye ne sayde/ In al his lyf, unto no maner wight" (70-71) and he was "meke as is a mayde" (69). Through Chaucer-the-Pilgrim's continually reiterating the Knight's prowess in battle (he uses half of the lines in the Knight's profile to discuss his battle resume), perhaps Chaucer-the-Poet is suggesting that the Knight is not as wonderful as Chaucer-the-Pilgrim believes. In striking contrast to The Pilgrim's favorable portrayal of the Knight, The Poet depicts the Knight as an unnecessarily, overly violent person. In speaking of all the

battles and wars the Knight had participated in, the reader learns that “thereto hadde he ridden, no man ferre” (48). It seems that the Knight had been at just about every major battle of his time, including the Crusades, but not limited to them, as “at mortal batailles hadde he been fifteen” (61). The Pilgrim’s comments that the Knight “was late y-come” (77) from war and still wore a tunic “bismotered with his habergeoun” (76) might be the Poet’s way of hinting that the Knight has something to confess, or get off of his proverbial and literal chest, something that couldn’t wait long enough for the Knight to change his clothes and rest a little while. That line may symbolize that the Knight has allowed his exploits on the battlefield to go beyond the exterior and affect him internally, perhaps within his soul, by fighting simply to fight. However, it was not uncommon in Chaucer’s time for men to fight for personal glory as well as for the Lord. Therefore, while Chaucer-the-Poet’s comments and excessive depictions of the Knight as bellicose do not necessarily mean that the Knight is a bloodthirsty maniac, they do cast some doubt on his “meke” personality. From Chaucer-the-Pilgrim’s perspective, the Knight is a shining example of a Christian. He fought in the Crusades. He dutifully is making the Christian pilgrimage to the place of Thomas Becket’s martyrdom, and is by default fulfilling the role of the leader on the trip. He is so Christian that, in his hurry to fulfill his duty of going on the pilgrimage, he doesn’t even stop to change his tunic, “al bismotered with his habergeoun” (76). On the opposite end of the spectrum of spirituality, Chaucer-the-Poet’s diction clearly implies that the Knight is not a good Christian man. The Pilgrim casually mentions that the Knight had fought “as wel in Cristendom as in hethenesse” (49), “sometime with the lord of Palatye,/ Ageyn another

heathen in Turkye" (65-66), establishing The Poet's juxtaposition between Christianity and paganism. The Bible plainly states that man cannot serve two masters. However, Chaucer-the-Poet states just as plainly that the Knight had fought "in his lordes werre"(47). Thus, the Knight fought on both sides of the battlefield, for God as well as for heathens. Though fighting for God was widely accepted and excusable in Chaucer and the Knight's time, and fighting for glory and prestige in honorable tournaments was also commonly accepted, there was no excuse for a man to be a traitor, to join the enemy's side. Especially when that enemy is as hated as the "infidels" of Chaucer's time were. It is difficult for the reader to reach a conclusive judgment on the Knight's character. On one hand, the Knight appears to be an exemplary member of society, as knights of Chaucer's time were expected to be. On the other, the Knight has committed questionable acts that cast doubt on his morality. However, the reader must take into account that the Knight, like the rest of Chaucer's characters, is a human being, who makes mistakes and cannot be expected to be perfect all of the time. Thus, the best conclusion that the reader can come to is that the Knight, underneath his label as a wonderful man and a perfect knight, is a man who has made mistakes and is still attempting to live up to his society's expectations of him. The Knight's hypocrisy and hidden guilt serve Chaucer's purpose of mocking societal values and class hierarchy. They also set the stage for the many more pages of dichotomous, hypocritical characters that the Pilgrim and Poet are about to introduce. However, unlike the Knight, some of Chaucer's characters are, in fact, unquestionably wholly "bad" or wholly "good".