

Knight as a hero in the canterbury tales

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Geoffrey Chaucer's Knight

Geoffrey Chaucer's famous poem the Canterbury Tales, follows a motley group of twenty-nine pilgrims on a pilgrimage to the Canterbury Cathedral to pray to St. Thomas a Beckett. Each pilgrim is to tell four tales; two on the way to the Cathedral and two on the way back. The first pilgrim to share his tale is the Knight. In the prologue, Chaucer describes the Knight first because he is highest on the social scale; the closest to aristocracy. The Knight tells his tale first because he drew the shortest straw out of all the pilgrims. The narrator notes, " Whether by chance or fate or accident / The truth is this, the cut fell to the Knight," (Chaucer 25) which suggests that he feels it was not by chance at all that the Knight tells his tale first. In the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer introduces the Knight as someone who is the embodiment of a perfect cavalier. The tale which the Knight later narrates is appropriate because it is a story of war, reflecting on the occupation of the Knight. Knights of the Middle Ages were the core of the military and the heart of the kingdom. Their duty was not only to protect the realm, but also sustain the presentation of a chivalric gentleman.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages began about A. D. 500 and lasted until the start of the Renaissance in 1500 (Corrick 8). The beginning of the Middle Ages was filled with violence from invaders, and kings needed to protect themselves and their territories (9). The violence of the Middle Ages brought forth knights, which later became the heart of kingdoms through their skills in fighting (9). These knights dominated the battlefields, fought on horseback, wore body armor from head to toe, and

used numerous weapons, most famously the sword and the lance (9). The process of becoming a knight started at a very young age, and took years of training. Required by law, the knight in training had to be the son of a knight, so it is presumed that Chaucer's knight was destined for knighthood at birth (29). Training began at the age of five, when a boy was sent off to live and serve in a household under the title of a page boy. Proper behavior and horsemanship were taught, and obedience was learned. At around age fourteen a page became a squire, and immense training began. At this stage, squires were taught how to fight, using a sword and the lance. If the squire was upstanding regarding his fitness as a knight, he then began preparing for the ceremony of knighthood, known as dubbing. The ceremony included a church service followed by the accolade, delivered by a senior knight. The accolade was either an open handed blow to the head, neck, or shoulder or a light touch on the shoulder with a sword, signifying the emergence of a new knight.

In the eleventh-century chivalry emerged, and by the middle of the thirteenth-century the major principles of chivalry could be found in knighthood manuals (Corrick 32). Chivalry reiterated the aspects required to be a good warrior and a good man (33). In order to face brutal combat, a knight had to be brave but also present honor and loyalty (33). During battle, it was expected of a knight to fight with the bravery of his lord, despite the odds, until his lord retreated (33). Honor required that the knight always obey and keep his word to his feudal lord (33). Loyalty consisted of never betraying his lord in any large or small matter (33). In accompanying to bravery, honor, and loyalty, the archetypal chivalric knight was firmly

religious and had an aspiration for justice (33). Another piece of chivalry includes courtliness, or how knights were expected to behave around other nobles, both men and women (35). Courtliness gave knights a sense of sophistication and refinement that helped polish the idea of a rugged man whose business was to fight and kill other men (35). Courtliness did not apply to those of lower classes whom knights treated badly (35). Despite the extreme emphasis of chivalry, most knights fell short of their knightly duties. Those who managed to live their lives fully by the chivalric code were deemed as perfect knights, but they were scarce (35). Most knights were ambitious, not always brave, religiously devout, or courtly (35). The death of chivalry came and the fall of knights swiftly followed in pursuit. The knight, which was once the core of the military, became obsolete by new weaponry (79). The idea of a knight was a courageous and honorable gentlemen, but realistically that title of knight was tarnished and truthfully corrupt.

In the Canterbury Tales prologue, Geoffrey Chaucer describes the Knight as the perfect war hero. During the time of Chaucer, knights presumed a bad reputation. Chaucer wanted to restore the good name of the knight, so he created an ideal one. Out of the many pilgrims on the journey to Canterbury, the Knight is one of the few who is not ironically described by the narrator. As Michael Calabrese notes, Chaucer's knight is "the overall most gentle and respected of the Canterbury Pilgrims;" which is clearly depicted by the host, the narrator, and the other pilgrim's mannerisms toward the Knight (Calabrese 1). In the prologue, the narrator introduces the Knight first, and recites the four main qualities he remembers about the Knight.

The narrator describes the Knight as “ a most distinguished man” (Chaucer 4). He then tells of the Knight’s ideals, “ To ride abroad had followed chivalry, / truth, honour, generousness and courtesy,” these qualities being of utmost importance of a proper knight (4). The narrator then tells of the Knight’s impressive military career with his affiliation in the Crusades and other battles:

“ When we took Alexandria, he was there... / Of honour, above all nations, when in Prussia. / In Lithuania he had ridden, and Russia... / When, in Granada, Algeciras sank / Under assault, head had been there, and in / North Africa, raiding Benamarin; / In Anatolia he had been as well / And fought when Ayas and Attalia fell, / For all along the Mediterranean coast / He has embarked with many a noble host. / In fifteen mortal battles he had been / And jousted for our faith a Tramissene” (4)

This also demonstrates the Knight is worldly and well-traveled. The narrator also recalls the Knight’s gentle and meek manner: “ And in his bearing modest as a maid. / He never yet a boorish thing had said / In all his life to any, come what might; / He was a true, a perfect gentle knight.” (5). The fourth aspect of the Knight the narrator describes is the Knight is dressed. The narrator says, “ Speaking of his equipment, he possessed / Fine horses, but he was not gaily dressed. / He wore a fustian tunic stained and dark / With smudges where his armour left a mark;” the Knight is still in uniform because he has recently come home from an expedition immediately to the pilgrimage, also indicating his religious devotion (5). Those who accompany

the Knight on the pilgrimage and he interacts with the other pilgrims, also reflect on the his character.

On the pilgrimage to Canterbury the Knight is traveling with his son, the Squire, and the Squire's Yeoman. The Knight's son resembles him, but with perhaps a greater stature of a knight, as he combines art and literature with his warlike studies (Blake par. 4). The Squire's Yeoman is also a character of prestige; he is a man who is established in his profession (par. 4). As Blake notes, "Chaucer describes here [Yeoman] a mighty man; one who in war is the worthy attendant on noble heroes;" this is a reflection on the Knight, who associates himself with those who are noble and honorable. His interaction with the other pilgrims also gives more indication about him. In the prologue to the Nun's Priest's Tale, the Knight asks to hear something more lighthearted because hearing stories about tragic falls deeply upsets him. He would rather hear stories of men who begin in poverty and climb their way to attain fortune and wealth (Chaucer 213). At the end of the Pardoner's tale, the Knight breaks up a fight between the Host and the Pardoner, ordering them to kiss and make up (258). Chaucer writes:

"The worthy Knight immediately began / Seeing the fun was getting rather rough, / And said, 'No more, we've all had quite enough. / Now, Master Pardoner, perk up, look cheerly! / And you, sir Host, whom I esteem so dearly, / I beg of you to kiss the Pardoner'" (258).

Although he is a soldier, the romantic and ideal Knight clearly has an aversion to conflict or unhappiness of any kind.

The Knight's Tale begins in Ancient Greece, where a duke named Theseus ruled Athens. One day four women dressed in black weep and inform him that their husbands died in battle and were not given a proper burial by the lord of Thebes. Enraged, Theseus conquers Thebes and on his way home he finds two wounded enemy soldiers. Instead of killing them, he heals the two but imprisons them for life in a tower. The two soldiers are named Palamon and Arcite, who are cousins and blood brothers. One day they see a gorgeous woman named Emily through the tower window and both immediately fall in love with her. Eventually Arcite's freedom is granted, but on the condition that he is banished permanently from Athens. He becomes jealous of Palamon because he still gets to see Emily everyday, while Palamon worries that Arcite will lay siege to Athens and take Emily by force. Later on, Arcite and Palamon, who escapes from prison, accidentally meet in the woods and argue over who has the right to Emily. They duel and Theseus finds them, recognizes them and suggests to the duke that they should die, but before he can kill them, the Queen and Emily plead for their lives. The duke then decides to hold a tournament and whoever wins will have Emily's hand.

An enormous stadium is constructed for the tournament along with three temples. There is a temple for Venus, the goddess of love, another for Mars, the god of war, and a temple for Diana, the goddess of chastity. Before the tournament Palamon visits the temple of Venus, asking for a victory in the name of love, to which he receives a positive sign. Emily visits Diana's temple, which she prays to stay a virgin and begs for the prevention of the impending marriage, but Diana tells her she must marry. Arcite visits Mars'

temple before the duel and asks for a victory in battle, and receives a positive sign. There is then a change in scene to the gods themselves. Saturn, Venus's father, assure Venus that despite Mars' aid to Arcite, Palamon will have Emily's hand in the end. The tournament begins and amongst the fighting, Arcite sees his chance and claims Palamon with a sword to his throat. Arcite is pronounced the winner but Saturn orders the earth to shake beneath Arcite as he rides towards Theseus. Arcite is thrown off his horse and is fatally wounded. Before he dies, Arcite tells Emily that if she was to marry, she should consider Palamon as a husband because he posses all the qualities of a worthy knight. All of Athens mourns Arcite's death, but over time the mourners heal except for Emily and Palamon. Theseus suggests that the two should stop grieving and get married because everyone must die, and refusal of death is foolish. Emily and Palamon realize the wisdom of Theseus' advice and enjoy and long, loving, and happy marriage.

Chaucer's Knight's Tale is a reworking of Boccaccio's *Teseida*, an Italian poem written about thirty years before the *Canterbury Tales* (Philips 46). The tale is a romance that captures the themes, motifs, and ideals of courtly love. Broken up into four parts, it is longest story told on the pilgrimage. Romance tales of Troy, Greece and Rome were popular from the twelfth century on (46). Their heroes, as warriors and lovers, provided models for late medieval myths of chivalry: nobility as the embodiment of courage, honour, courtesy, and leadership (46). As Gillian Rude writes, " Depending on one's view of the Knight himself, the ensuing romance is either a prime example of a chivalric tale appropriate for a courtly figure, or a clever use of

a high style to assert social superiority,” both of these examples reflect on the Knight’s description in the Prologue, and the perception of the Knight Chaucer intended (110).

The Knight’s Tale perfectly fits the Knight himself. He chooses a story filled with knights, love, honor, chivalry, and adventure. The Knight’s tale is a tale built on opposites. Love involves both harmony and suffering, while war brings both honor and destruction (Philips 47). Just as the tale involves contradictions, the Knight is also a walking paradox. A man whose job is to kill other men and conquer other cities, is a meek, gentle, and most respectful character. The tale also emphasizes the qualities of a good knight, just as Chaucer relays the importance of chivalry through the Knight. Before Arcite dies he tells Emily that if she is to marry again, she should take Palamon into consideration because he is a noble man. Arcite says:

“ And may Jove’s wisdom touch the soul in me / To speak of love and what it’s service means / Through all the circumstances and the scenes / Of life, namely good faith and knightly deed, / Wisdom, humility and noble breed, / Honour and truth and openness of heart, / For, as I hope my soul may have its part / With Jove, in all the world I know of none / So worthy to be loved as Palamon, / Who serves you and will serve you all his life / ... Forget not Palamon, that great – hearted man.” (Chaucer 77-78).

proving the point that Palamon is a chivalric man. The good qualities Arcite makes about Palamon coincide with those good qualities Chaucer describes the Knight to possess In the Prologue, the words Chaucer uses to describe the Knight,“ Truth, honour, generousness and courtesy / ... he was wise / And

in his bearing modest as a maid,” are reiterated in Arcite’s speech to Emily (Chaucer 4-5). Between the description of the Knight in the Prologue and the Knight’s Tale, chivalry is the heart of Chaucer’s Knight, and a crucial aspect Chaucer conveys through him.

In the last part of the tale, the Knight goes into great description of the banquet and the elaborate decorations of the stadium, as well as the funeral rituals at the end of the tale. This type of richness and magnificence would appeal to a man of such distinction as the Knight, with its special emphasis on form, ritual, and code of behavior, the elements upon which knighthood is based. The central point of the Knight’s Tale relates with justice. A person who has control of his or her emotions and reason is someone who acts honorably in dealing with others. For example, Palamon and Arcite’s love for Emily controls their behavior, and in instances where their emotions run astray, fighting occurs. It is not until Theseus, the positive model of marital power, intervenes and order is restored through justice and reason. The Knight, like Theseus, is also a symbol of justice. This is shown when the Host and The Pardoner have their quarrel and the Knight breaks it up, forcing the two to make peace. Theseus and The Knight are connected in which they both portray how those in power should act. This is an important aspect of the Knight who despite being constantly surrounded by violence, has a level head. The qualities of level headedness and justice are those of importance in knighthood, which the Knight, of course, possesses.

Douglas Brooks makes a suggestion that the Knight’s Tale would indicate more sorrow if it were connected to a particular time in his life (27). The

Knight may be conscious that his own career as a soldier might be near its end (27). With whatever reluctance, he must face the onset of age and the necessity of turning to a more peaceful occupation (27). It is perhaps no coincidence that he tells a story of an outgrowing type of war that passes from formal combat, then to a tournament, and finally to peace (27).

Remembering that the wise, meek Knight is transitioning to a newer age; perhaps going on the pilgrimage has a more serious meaning for him than for some of the other pilgrims (27).

Chaucer's Knight is the perfect cavalier, an archetype to restore the good name of the knight. In the medieval period knights were assumed to be heroic gentlemen in shining armour, but realistically those ideals were not fully lived out. In the Canterbury Tales, the Knight's chivalric, meek character and his tale, revives the important aspects of knighthood. Through his knight, Chaucer rekindles the expected behavior of medieval knights, while also reestablishing the good name of a knight.