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The "Discrete Occupational Identity" of Chaucer's Knyght

Popular critical opinion favors reading the pilgrim Knyght of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* as the representative of the idealized chivalric knight; however, the pilgrim Knyght bears the hallmark of the early professional soldier that began to evolve as early as the eleventh century. Both Chaucer's experiences as a soldier plus his exposure to English troops seem likely sources for this portrait of the professional warrior. A soldier himself, Chaucer too had fought in "his lordes werre" (*The Canterbury Tales* li. 3, 24) in King Edward III's siege near Reims (December to January 1359-60), only to be captured and briefly imprisoned by King John of France. Chaucer probably admired the Black Prince, Edward III, who had distinguished himself in battle and become a national hero (Bisson 134), as well as other soldiers such as Sir Hugh Calvely, one of the period's most important military figures and a one-time crusader in John Gaunt's unsuccessful military campaign circa 1386. As a former soldier and the king's comptroller, Chaucer also understood that a king's war was an expensive enterprise. As comptroller of the export tax for Edward III, he accounted for the wool taxes that not only paid for government expenses and subsidized the royal court but also made possible Edward's costly wars in the 1340s and 1350s and military attacks in the 1370s and 1380s.

To narrowly read Chaucer's pilgrim Knyght as only a chivalrous medieval knight is to ignore his complexity. First, Chaucer, as the author, uses abstract language to construct the image of the pilgrim Knyght as a warrior who was emblematic of the early military professional. Second, Chaucer's use of the double entendre is at play in the pilgrim Knyght's description. In fact, the construction of the pilgrim Knyght's image as a professional soldier is reinforced when the Knyght invokes his own warfare experience using verbal cues. For example, during his narration of Palamon and Arcite's tale, the pilgrim Knyght subtly presents the realities of both war and chivalry in his description of Mars' temple. Doing so represents the reality of the chivalric ethos as "'both a force for good . . . [and] a cover for military banditry'" (McGlynn qtd. in Trim 34). For instance, the Knyght as narrator also embeds revelations about his profession in the description of Mars' temple. This further illustrates his military service under the various lords as part of the "noble armee" which had been to "mortal batailles" where the pilgrim Knyght had always "slyn his foo" (*The Canterbury Tales* li. 60-3, 24).

In reference to the medieval army, historically the knight and the soldier were synonymous occupations, even though it is “likely that in the period 1400-1700 full professionalism [of the soldier] was *never* reached” (Trim 12). Yet, characteristics of military professionals existed and are exemplified in Chaucer’s pilgrim Knyght: as a soldier, he has a “discrete occupational identity” that “creates separateness between [himself] and the community”; he exists in the “formal hierarchy” of a military organization, which has “permanence”; presumably he is compensated through some kind of “formal pay structure” since English troops serving on royal campaigns were rewarded for their service; he received “formal training” and demonstrates an “expertise” in his vocation; he has demonstrated an “efficiency” on, and perhaps off, the battlefield; and he has a “distinctive self-conceptualization” that is somewhat based on the “mythology and culture” that “views [his] activities characteristic of [his] profession” (Trim 6-10).

A series of abstractions influence this conception of the pilgrim Knyght’s ethos and paint an ambiguous picture of his persona to reinforce these occupational characteristics. For example, the Knyght reveres “Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie” (*The Canterbury Tales* l. 46, 24). But Chaucer’s choice to use “was” at least six times in lines 47-77, suggests that because of his warfare experience, these feelings ascribed to the pilgrim Knyght have possibly changed. In fact, his love of “chivalrie” as describe in his prologue (*The Canterbury Tales* l. 45, 242) is complex and denotes not only a “moral ethos or code” ascribed to the professional soldier but his participation in “warfare” and the “warlike enterprise” (*MED*). Using the past tense again, the prologue’s narrator says that he also once “loved chivalrie” (*The Canterbury Tales* li. 45, 24). Possibly the pilgrim Knyght is now disillusioned with chivalry and the reality of war. In this same line, the Knyght “was” a “Ful worthy” soldier who fought in many a “lords werre” (*The Canterbury Tales* li. 47, 24). This line suggests that he is a free agent who has fought under various lords. Yet it is not clear whether the pilgrim Knyght is bound to one particular lord through some sort of tenurial obligation. While it remains unclear whether the Knyght is propertied or among the knights on horseback and among the men at arms who fought during the period, the rich clothing of his son the Squier, whose prologue and tale follow, indicates that they are perhaps landed. Even so, this Knyght, like other military professionals at the time, would have been compensated for his battlefield service.

Among the marks of the military professional is the reward for service. For this pilgrim Knyght, “Worthy” (*The Canterbury Tales* li. 47, 24) denotes his monetary value, though it also suggests his respected “rank” or the more popular “noble virtues” usually assigned to his character (*MED*). Translators of Chaucer’s text also assume that the descriptor “Sovereyn prys” identifies the pilgrim Knyght’s “outstanding reputation” (*The Canterbury Tales* l. 67, 24, 24). Synonymous with “Sovereyn” are the words “free,” which denotes his own love of “freedom,” and “independent” that appeared earlier in the text (*Middle English Dictionary*). As a noun, “Sovereyn” also refers to the power of a lord, a king, or God as well as a military leader. The use of “prys” draws a parallel between the pilgrim Knyght’s “monetary value” and his “exchange value and price” as a soldier, in addition to the “payment” or “reward” the Knyght receives for his service (*Middle English Dictionary*). Consequently, Chaucer’s double entendre accounts for the pilgrim Knyght as a paid professional soldier of some rank who is compensated for his service. Risking the criticism of Chaucer scholars like Lee Patterson who traditionally read the

Knyght as the exemplar of chivalry or as a complex figure that explores the “crisis of chivalry” (qtd. in Bisson 141), Terry Jones’s *Chaucer’s Knight: the Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* posits that the pilgrim represents the opportunistic fourteenth-century mercenary. As such, the pilgrim Knyght, as an ironic figure of chivalry, explores the ethical complexities that existed between the chivalric ethos and the warrior ideal.

Since the medieval soldier’s uniform had social significance, according to the *Routledge Companion to Medieval Warfare* (290), the lack of any markings on the pilgrim Knyght’s costume, including the cross of the holy crusade, further suggests his professionalization. Colors were also significant as they identified a soldier’s company just as heraldry was usual to a warrior of the medieval battlefield. The pilgrim Knyght, “late ycome from his viage,” sports neither. He is simply dressed in a rust-stained habergeon. This indicates that he rarely removes his armor and is further evidence of his status (*The Canterbury Tales* l. 77, 24). Bearing the marks of his long “viage” to the Tabard Inn, the pilgrim Knyght is both coming and going. Looking to the *Middle English Dictionary* once again, these brief but multi-layered lines can be decoded. Assuming that Chaucer is again playing with the double entendre, the Knyght’s “viage” is not simply “a journey by land or sea” or just a “pilgrimage”; he is returning from “a military expedition or martial undertaking” which parallels his eventual “spiritual journey through life toward heaven” (*Middle English Dictionary*). If this is the case, the Knyght’s coarse costume suits the pilgrim headed toward absolution.

Visual interpretations of Chaucer’s pilgrim Knyght favored by medieval illustrators create a likeness that represents the traditional chivalrous image of the knight of the “Knyght’s Tale.” *Luminarium*’s online archive has available a selection of illustrations and engravings of Chaucer’s “Knyght’s Tale” from fifteenth century manuscripts. These illustrations show a knight dressed in shining armor astride his equally impressive destrier, instead of the soldier fresh from the battlefield. Of these painted and engraved images of Chaucer’s pilgrim Knyght, only the *Ellesmere Manuscript*’s illustrator’s conception bears a likeness to the professional soldier. In this illustration, the Knyght is dressed in a gray doublet and wears a burgundy hat and burgundy gloves, though his gold spurs are prominent. This bearded figure straddles a chestnut warhorse, whose flanks are covered with simple straps. Later engravings, however, evolve from this basic image of the pilgrim Knyght on his warhorse into the more recognizable figure of the armored knight of the Knyght’s tale astride an impressive destrier in ornamented trapper. In fact, this is the image favored by Caxton, Pynson, Godfrey, and Kynston-Wight. By 1485, printer William Caxton’s engraved image of the knight dresses him in plate armor and equips him with a prominent sword that hangs from his side. He straddles an equally impressive destrier.

Pynson’s 1492 engraving of the knight is similar to Caxton’s expression of medievalism. This knight is also dressed in armor and is astride an elaborately costumed warhorse. By 1592, Godfrey’s engraving produces a knight in the full flowering of his knighthood. Encased in what looks like an especially heavy suit of armor, this knight rides a destrier outfitted in an elaborate trapper that includes a highly decorated headdress with a large plume. But by 1561, the woodcut in the Kynston-Wight edition of the text has devolved into a slender knight dressed in a short tunic, similar to that worn by an early Roman soldier. On the knight’s head sits a helmet with a prominent plume that hangs down the length of his back. Unlike the earlier images of the

elaborately costumed knight on his equally imposing destrier, he holds a shield without markings and a simple lance. His warhorse is outfitted in a simple crupper. Fifteenth-century illustrators preferred the image of the dashing armored knight to that of Chaucer’s “besmotered” pilgrim Knyght (*The Canterbury Tales* li. 76, 24) of the *Ellesmere Manuscript*, who represents the soldier-knight of the “middle and early modern chivalric armies” who were becoming professionalized (Trim 5, 13).

Using both the Knyght’s prologue and tale, Chaucer gives agency to the medieval military professional experience. Periodically, his pilgrim Knyght as narrator slips into first person during his description of Mars’s temple where “saugh I first the derke ymaginyng” (*The Canterbury Tales* li. 1995, 53). This unaffected use of first person further suggests that the Knyght is sharing stories of witness. This, in fact, reveals the professional soldier’s conundrum—the conflict between the chivalric ethos and the warrior ideal, though the two were synonymous. The Church did not draw a distinction between the “general code of chivalry” practiced by the nobility and the “the law of arms” or “martial code actually followed by warriors,” . . . although . . . certain ideals might be stressed at the expense of others” (Wright qtd. in Nicholson 35). Whereas warfare as a spiritual cause was “permissible and necessary,” excessive violence was condemned by the Catholic Christian Church (Nicholson 21-2). Reverting to experience, the pilgrim Knyght is troubled by his experiences in war: “Saughe I Conquest, sittynge in greet honour, / With the sharpe swerd over his heed / Hangynge by a soutil twynes threed” (*The Canterbury Tales* li. 2027-2030, 52). Not only is conquest the motivation behind the military campaigns fought during his career, but the pilgrim Knyght has seen first-hand the bloody cost of conquest identified in Mars’ temple in the images of: “tresoun,” “cold deeth,” “Armed Compleint, Outhees, and fiers Outrage . . .,” the “careyne in the busk, with throte ycorve,” and “A thousand slayn” without a “qualm” (*The Canterbury Tales* li. 2001, 2008, 2012-13). The Knyght’s descriptions of warfare are an interesting parallel to a passage on the mechanizations of Mars, the god of war, found in *Picatrix*, an Arabic mystical text from the eleventh-century:¹

evil and warped judgements, oppressions, anguish, people’s deaths and damage . . . , destruction, . . . misery, pains, wounds, prisons, misery, flight, . . . treachery and every cursed thing which comes about without sense or moderation . . . ; [furthermore, the horrors of war consist of] illegal actions, false oaths, sexual depravity, [the] killing infants in their mother’s womb, ‘and everything remote from truth and legality.’ (Nicholson 21-2)

Soldiers, such as Chaucer’s pilgrim Knyght, experienced the “personal horror” of war, which could be “difficult [or] perhaps, impossible to reconcile with professional structures,” though this did not prevent the soldier from taking his “professional vocation seriously” (Trim 28, 31).

¹Picatrix, a book of magic and astrology, was first translated in the later part of the thirteenth century and subsequently reproduced in English, French, and Italian and read by the “educated elite” for its “magical” curiosities, according to Helen Nicholson (21). Including a reference to *Picatrix* is not to argue that this book was on Chaucer’s radar but is only meant to point to the curious parallel between Chaucer’s pilgrim Knyght’s description of the temple of Mars and the passage in the *Picatrix*.

Based on the Knyght’s account of these horrors and his part in numerous military campaigns, absolution seems the likely motivation behind his “viage” to Canterbury.

While chivalry was “about ethics—of the treatment of prisoners and non-combatants” and part of military professionalism (Trim 5), military professionalism itself was about the construction of this vocation as an occupational identity and a culture’s ability to buy into the mythology of the vocation of knighthood and soldiering. In matters of his persona, his costume, and, more importantly, his eyewitness account of war, Chaucer’s pilgrim Knyght exhibits the qualities of the professional soldier evolving during the Middle Ages.

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