

## Wisdom and Chivalry: Chaucer's Knight's Tale and Medieval Political Theory

**Review Number:** 1057

**Publish date:** Tuesday, 1 March, 2011

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**ISBN:** 9789004176249

**Date of Publication:** 2009

**Price:** £101.60

**Pages:** 329pp.

**Publisher:** Brill

**Place of Publication:** Leiden

**Reviewer:** Christine Carpenter

Many years ago this reviewer attended a meeting of the Cambridge interdisciplinary medievalists' group at which Terry Jones, who had recently published his debunking book on Chaucer's knight, bravely crossed swords with Derek Brewer, then the foremost Chaucerian scholar, in front of an audience which included numbers of the university's teachers of medieval English literature. Once this audience started chipping in and the discussion became more general, the historians grew increasingly restive and their unease was finally expressed by the then Professor of Medieval History, J. C. Holt, who said with characteristic bluntness, 'It seems to me that the problem with this entire discussion is that no-one has tried to define irony'. And that really summed up the frustration experienced by many historians when reading studies of medieval literature: that there is little or no attempt to retrieve the mindset of those who wrote it or for whom it was written and that too much is refracted through the modern prejudices and assumptions of the critic. Indeed, irony itself is central both to Jones's reassessment of how we are to view Chaucer's knight and to Chaucerian studies more generally. As Rigby points out, the belief that great art is differentiated from lesser works by being subversive, sceptical, ironic has been applied with particular force to Chaucer by a wide variety of critical schools. That this includes the New Historicists, who purport to place literary works within their historical contexts, is one of the abiding mysteries of modern literary criticism.

Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, even more than the pen-portrait of the teller, has been subjected to contrary interpretations. What Rigby sets out to do is to bring a historian's trained eye or, as he puts it, quoting an art historian, 'a period eye' (p. 10) to his analysis by using writings with which Chaucer would have been directly or indirectly familiar. This is in fact what a historian would have hoped that a literary historicist would do but in practice seldom does. The medieval writer whose ideas have most preoccupied literary critics' work on *The Knight's Tale* has been Boethius because Boethian ideas are a significant addition made by Chaucer to his original source, Boccaccio's *Teseida*. Rigby argues, however, that Boethian ideas were not confined to philosophers but absorbed into more general beliefs on how men should live. And, because the man at the centre of *The Knight's Tale* is a ruler, Rigby takes as his main source Giles of Rome's *De Regimine Principum*, a product of the Aristotelian revival of the late 13th century and one of the most influential works of political theory in late medieval Europe. His exposition of Giles is supplemented by a dazzling amount of reading in medieval thought and literature. By this means, although Giles is central to his analysis almost throughout, Rigby is able to show that Giles's ideas were part of the common pool of

thought for educated men at this time (and some women: one of his writers is of course Christine de Pisan). Thus, although Rigby admits the uncertainty as to whether Chaucer had read Giles, whether he did or not is immaterial because Giles' ideas and those of the writers who influenced him so permeated European thought and literature in this period. Indeed one of the pleasures of this book is not just the exhibition of the interchange between Chaucer and the ideological tradition with which he grew up but also of the way literary works across much of Europe, whether in English, French, Italian or Latin, in the period up to and including Chaucer, refracted and reflected this tradition, sometimes passing it between themselves. In fact, given the number of copies of Giles known to have been in circulation in England at this time, it is highly likely that Chaucer did read it.

Rigby's starting point is that it has been generally agreed that, through the focal point of *The Knight's Tale*, Theseus, duke of Athens, 'the tale presents the duke to us "as part of a literary structure embodying ... a certain view of life"' (p.1: Rigby quoting the literary critic A. C. Spearing). The disagreement is over the nature of the 'view of life'. The interpretations are many and various, encompassing amongst other things Theseus' conquest of and relations with Hippolyta, his war on Creon, his delight in hunting, his treatment of the heroes and rivals Palamon and Arcite and of Hippolyta's sister, Emily, with whom both fall in love. The tale has even been read in reductionist fashion as an allegory of politics in England in Chaucer's time, which is in itself problematic since there is no certainty about when he wrote the version we have now. The questions concerning the work are summed up in three main interpretations: that Theseus is wise, his wisdom reflecting the knight's; that Theseus is 'cruel and ignoble', even 'Machiavellian or ... tyrannical' (p. 6), so Chaucer's commendation of his actions is ironic, just like the description of the knight; that we are invited to take a 'dialogic' view of his actions, choosing our own perspective. Then, using a sustained exegesis of Giles's work as his analytical tool, Rigby shows how *The Knight's Tale* can be absorbed into the moral framework deployed by Giles but also commonplace in thought at this time: the rule of the self, of the household and of the kingdom and the desirability that 'the good rule of the self and of society should be modelled on the rightful order of the natural world as a whole' (p. 24). The great merit of this approach is that the interpretation ceases to be merely in the eye of the beholder and subject to some modern political or literary theory but is firmly grounded in the understanding that Chaucer himself is likely to have had. It is therefore as objective as it is possible to be. Inevitably, as with any historical endeavour, there will be objections to Rigby's interpretation and use of his evidence but they should be made on his own grounds, not for ideological reasons or on grounds of literary theory. He has laid down a challenge to literary critics of the period to be less ahistorical and more sensitive to the meaning of the words they study which they would do well to take up. His analysis of the *Tale* is a tour de force.

The last frontier and the one hardest to cross is where we started: irony. It might be possible to agree with everything Rigby tells us but still to argue that this is Chaucer the ironist. Rigby presents us with a *Knight's Tale* and a Duke Theseus which endorse the political and personal morality propounded by Giles and others, in which, for example, a war waged violently and to us repugnantly may still be just and Theseus may act harshly but still not be a tyrant. Anyone with any historical sensitivity will be persuaded of this after reading this book but must we also accept Rigby's opinion that Chaucer means us to accept these as, so-to-speak, the only views in town? The morality espoused by the knight is, as all agree, only one among several different voices and moral views that we meet along the road to Canterbury but maybe this is one point where the argument for irony in Chaucer is worth considering. What if, within the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole, Chaucer is keeping his tongue in his cheek, not so much inviting us to choose a moral standpoint as refusing to let us know where he himself stands? The trouble with great literary geniuses, especially those with a gift for comedy and for enjoying human frailty, is that, however much we succeed in placing their works in the thoughts of their time, we can rarely be quite sure that they haven't decided on occasion to cock a bit of a snook. This is not to suggest for a moment that Chaucer was capable of anticipating feminism or any other modern 'ism' but he might be capable of making fun with generally accepted platitudes. Perhaps Rigby is too ready to accept that the alternative views implied by other tales – the miller's for example, which shows the kind of 'dysfunctional household' (p. 278) which Giles and *The Knight's Tale* would condemn – are deliberate contrasts to endorse proper rule rather than a sly hint that Theseus should not necessarily have the

last word. Rigby is absolutely right in saying that late 14th-century literature need not reflect the political, economic, social and religious divisions of the time but maybe he is too willing to recruit Chaucer as a cheerleader for an elite that sought to restore a sense of order in a world where many things were out of order.

We do already have an alternative Chaucer who is not the product of anachronistic analysis: a 'sport' in both the jocular and the genetic sense but who remains embedded within his own time. There is the Chaucer whom Jill Mann atomises in much the same way as Rigby does, by studying his work within the conventions and thought of his own time. Thus, in her *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (1), she shows how he does his own, often rather cheeky, thing with this literary tradition. Equally, there is the Chaucer suggested in Scattergood's essay, 'Literary Culture at the Court of Richard II' in *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages*. (2) According to this view, he is not a court poet, for the court of his time enjoys French and Latin works: the French ones of a rather old-fashioned kind. Chaucer on the other hand is seen as part of a highly literate and literary coterie, of 'career diplomats, civil servants, officials and administrators who were attached to the court and the government' (p. 39): men like John Gower, who may have been a lawyer, Thomas Hoccleve, writer and privy seal clerk, and Ralph Strode, London lawyer and official. For Chaucer and Gower, writing in English is, as Scattergood puts it, an avant garde exercise, while both writers are au fait with the latest trends from France, as practised by Machaut and Deschamps. Presumably their friends, who one way or another also lived by the written word, were equally well up in the latest French literary fashions. How did the members of this group interact? As Rigby notes, the habit of attributing unorthodox ideas to great writers like Chaucer is accompanied by assuming that lesser figures must be conservative. This does conjure up rather splendid images of Chaucer inveighing against the evils of the hegemonic class while Gower, the Kentish enemy of the peasants – the original 'Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells' in fact – reads his Telegraph, smokes his pipe and grunts his revulsion at his friend's revolutionary tendencies. It is much more likely that, when this group of men were in each other's company, they fed, perhaps outrageously at times, off each other's wit and that the wittiest and most outrageous of them all was Geoffrey Chaucer. So perhaps, when we can see, without resorting to anachronism, that he is putting forward alternative ways of seeing, he was sometimes playing games and refusing to endorse one specific way, even if he did believe in one. This would be less a matter of asserting that great writers must be subversively ironic than recognition that some of them may indeed be ironic in the sense of being elusive and polyvalent. That would not make Chaucer a revolutionary who saw beyond his time but a man with a fertile and dazzling wit: in many ways in fact the Chaucer who comes off the page six centuries after his death and makes himself still so readable.

As this review has made clear, Rigby's intended audience is the world of literary scholars. Has he anything to say to historians? The really great debt any historian of this period owes him is his masterly exposition of Giles, the Aegidian tradition and the wider medieval world of philosophy and political theory within which he situates both Giles and Chaucer. Perhaps he is occasionally guilty of sweeping pre- and post-Aristotelian thought together into a single medieval basket but he rarely uses earlier writers to make his point without demonstrating that much of the Thomist/Aristotelian world view was pre-figured in these earlier writings. There are only two points on which a historian might want to argue with him. One is his readiness to use the now rather outmoded idea of ascending and descending theories of government. The other relates more to a particular place and time: his handling of certain key political concepts in late medieval English politics and political ideas, notably tyranny. Much of the most significant work on these themes has come from historians who have made extensive use of legal records. In England, with the early development of the king's law, or 'common law', as a system available to all freemen (i.e. those permitted to use the law) and designed to protect their property, law and property were at the heart of much of the discussion of tyranny. Thus, the association in medieval thought not only of tyranny and will but also of will and flouting of the law was commonplace in writings on the law in England. By the same token, that the tyrant rules in his own interests rather than for the common good, a central concept in Giles, chimed well with the idea that the law existed primarily to defend property and that a king should not take his subjects' property without due process and for the common good. Hugely well read as Rigby is, it is in this particular area that he is perhaps least well versed in the literature. This becomes most apparent in his handling of the faults of Chaucer's own

king, Richard II. What ultimately brought about Richard's downfall was not, as Rigby suggests, his failure to consult his magnates but the king's overriding of the law. By the same token, it was not wilfulness pure and simple which made him a tyrant in his last years but rule by will as opposed to law, combined with complete contempt for the property rights protected by that law. These principles regarding the king, law and property had been enshrined in English political consciousness since Magna Carta, where they had first been clearly enunciated, and Magna Carta features more than once in the Deposition Articles for Richard II. Moreover, the Articles begin with a statement of the Coronation Oath which Richard had sworn, three of whose four clauses were about upholding the law and rendering justice to the king's subjects.

But it would be churlish to end on a negative note. This is a splendid book. One hopes that students of medieval literature will give it the serious attention it deserves and learn from it but it also has a great deal to offer to medieval historians.

## Notes

1. Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire* (Cambridge, 1973).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. V. J. Scattergood, 'Literary culture at the court of Richard II', in *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. V.J. Scattergood and J.W. Sherborne (London, 1983).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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