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► **To cite this version:**

Maria K Greenwood. What he heard and what he saw: past tenses and characterization in Chaucer's "general prologue". *L'articulation langue-littérature dans les textes médiévaux anglais 2*, Jun 1999, Nancy, France. pp.143-162. hal-04674646

HAL Id: hal-04674646

<https://hal.science/hal-04674646v1>

Submitted on 21 Aug 2024

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Maria K. Greenwood
 Université de Paris VII

**What He Heard and What He Saw:
 Past tenses and characterization
 in Chaucer's "General Prologue"**

Just as in the Prologue to *The Travels of Marco Polo*¹ the medieval author insists on the two sources of information, hearing and sight, which attest the veracity of the traveller's account of foreign countries, so does Chaucer's "General Prologue", the pilgrimage story and main frame of *The Canterbury Tales*, demand to be taken seriously as the author's real-life experience of what he heard and what he saw. The literary mode of this frame is what today we call realistic fiction, but which the fourteenth century audience would have categorized less neatly. To them it would simply have been the mode that imitated everyday speech and was meant to be taken as a trustworthy way of speaking the truth rather than of soliciting wonder for the marvellous, or of inventing untruths. Indeed one could assert that the entire point of the pilgrimage story, and perhaps of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole, is the search for truth in this practical sense: how far can stories be accepted as true reports, and how far can stories which are obviously not reports still convey truths about living.² For reports are easily recognizable, can be taken literally and are clearly accounted for by the person speaking; the reporter speaks in the present and vouches

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1. See Robert Latham (trans.), *The Travels of Marco Polo*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958.
 2. C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964 / Canto ed. 1998.

for the past. Stories on the other hand tell of the past; the story-teller speaks of people other than himself and relays what they told him about themselves or about others, so that stories depend on hearsay as much as on experience.³ In the pilgrimage story frame, the "General Prologue" and the link-passages between the tales, Chaucer's Narrator, before going on to the more obviously marvellous (fictitious) stories told by the various pilgrims, claims to speak from his own experience and to tell the simple truth. He then creates the pilgrim characters as realistic persons who may or may not themselves be telling the truth, but be fabulating, exaggerating or even lying in specific ways.

The passage from the realism of the "General Prologue" to the fantasy of the tales is effected chiefly by the use of tenses. Indeed, the English system of tenses allows Chaucer to make the sort of characterization of his pilgrims that everyone necessarily makes of others in real life. References in Chaucer's text to real, *ie* datable time, create the illusion of real-life talk, whereas the lack of such references and the use of conventional literary formulae immerse listeners / readers in the immeasurable time of imagined story. In the portraits of the characters in the "General Prologue" datable and undatable notions of time mingle as they evidently always do in literature and even in actual living.

Focussing on the subject of time in literary texts (as treated by such critics as Robert Myles, Umberto Eco, Mikhail Bakhtin),⁴

3. The discussion of "authority versus experience" runs through the corpus of Chaucerian criticism, but by describing "authority" as "hearsay" we attempt to divest the term of its in-built reverence. See Larry Scanlon, *Narrative, Authority and Power: The Medieval Exemplum and the Chaucerian Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
4. Umberto Eco, *Six Promenades dans les bois du roman et ailleurs*, trans. into French by Myriam Bouzaher, Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1996, re-edition of original English, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1994; Robert Myles, *Chaucer's Realism*, Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994; Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin, and his World*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990.

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I examine below the system of tenses at the start of the "General Prologue" to see precisely where the tenses of verbs refer to real or datable time and where they refer to vague or undatable time. The opening paragraphs of the pilgrimage story, constructed around the Present, are compared with those which introduce the characters, constructed around the Past. The grammatical terminology used below distinguishes the undatable, vague notions of time (allowing for fiction), from the datable, precise notions of time (claiming to relay witnessed fact). The table of tenses (the non-continuous forms),⁵ can be set out as follows:

- (a) Present Simple of action, **datable**, = "I do, habitually or recurrently, to-day, this month, this year", *eg.* "I go on pilgrimage every year."
- (b) Present Simple of situation, **undatable**, = "I am in the state or condition of a particular person" *eg.* "I am a pilgrim."
- (c) Present Perfect of action, **datable**, = "I have done it to-day, this month, this year" *eg.* "I have gone on pilgrimage this year and every year since 1984."
- (d) Present Perfect of situation, **undatable but precise** since it is related to the Present of enunciation, = "I have been" (my entire life up to this moment of speaking), *eg.* "I have been a pilgrim my whole life", or in opposition to the Present of enunciation *eg.* "I have been a pilgrim in the past, but I am one no longer now."
- (e) Past Simple of action and situation, **dated**, a realistic, experienced past = "I did / was at a precise moment in the past" *eg.* "I went on pilgrimage / was a pilgrim in 1499."

5. By always referring to the moment of utterance of statements, the continuous forms of verbs in modern English give an even clearer notion of time than the non-continuous, but the former had not yet developed in Chaucer's time. See Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, in: Larry D. Benson (general editor), *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., Oxford : Oxford University Press, (1988) 1990, Introduction, p. xxxvii.

- (f) Past Simple of action and situation, **undated**, a vague past permitting unclear memory, supposition or invention = "I did / was once" *eg.*: "I was once a pilgrim and went on pilgrimage"; or "I dreamt / imagined / pretended I was a pilgrim and went on pilgrimage."
- (g) Past Perfect of action and situation, chronologically **precise** by relating to another verb = "When I had done / been something, I did / was something else", *eg.* "When I had saved up the money, I went on pilgrimage", or as **Indirect Speech** with the verb of reporting, *eg.* "I told him that I had gone on pilgrimage in 1499."
- (h) Past Perfect of action and situation, chronologically **imprecise**, the "legendary past" which refers to no clearly datable or real past and relates to **no other verb** = "I had done / been once", *eg.* "I had been on pilgrimage in my dreams" or in **Free Indirect Speech**: "He had been on pilgrimage in his dreams."

This last, the Past Perfect, is the most important of the Past tenses for the following analysis since, as (g), it is the most precise. With another verb it conveys a chronologically precise notion of the order of events and, as Indirect Speech, refers to a unique moment of enunciation. As (h), however, when it is unsupported by any other verb mentioning two actions in a series, the Past Perfect becomes the vaguest of the Past tenses, and its anteriority disappears. Used without another verb, the Past Perfect refers vaguely to separate moments in the past by relating separate actions to separate moments of utterance.

The conjunction of consecutive verbs in the Present tenses gives the same precise notation of time as in the Past Perfect (g), and in a similar way permits the use of the "when / then" constructions which convey a very clear notion of real time. It is precisely in this way

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that Chaucer's *General Prologue* introduces a clear notion of time in its opening by starting with the word "when", or *whan*:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote (l. 1),

repeating it in a subsidiary clause:

Whan Zephyrus eek with his sweete breeth (l. 5)

and finally introducing the main verb of the sentence by the word "then" or *thanne*:

Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages. (l. 12)

Thus notions of real time, the calendar month of April and the flowering of the Spring season, the lived time of common experience, are conveyed by the relation of the Present Perfect tense (*c*) of the first verb *Whan [...] April [...] hath perced [...]* to the main verb in what I call the Present of situation (*b*): *then [...] men [...] longeth*. Thus the vaguer Present (*b*) of *longeth* becomes the more clearly timed or dated Present (*a*) by conjunction with another verb and the "When / then" construction. The general truth conveyed is grounded on recognisable fact and is thus easily acceptable to listeners / readers who readily concur. The single concept of the Present-as-a-tense and the present-as-a-time is firmly established and then points to an equally acceptable next step in time, a foreseeable future, in the ensuing phrases *folk [...] longen [...] to go on pilgrimages, to seken straunge strandes, to seke [...] the hooly blisful martyr*. The Present (tense and time) implies dialogue, agreement or disagreement, question and answer in an exchange in which the two persons necessary to a communication are physically confronted. The "when / then" pattern makes this basic dialogue simple to discern by its implied questions and answers: "What happens when? What happens then? What happens later?" The ordered nature of real time where one thing leads to another and past, present and future are clearly accounted for, sets up the dialogue between the author and his audience in the shared Present of the act of listening / reading in an agreeable mood of social complicity. The social linguistic strategy

of arresting attention and soliciting agreement is achieved (as usual) by talking about the weather, if on a cosmic scale, and for the first three paragraphs, the tone is that of intelligent, reasonable talk of those sharing their experience of life in a definite time and place. Thus in the first paragraph, the dialogic principle⁶ can be seen acting in a two-fold way: firstly, within the social situation between author and audience, between tellers and told and, secondly, within the grammatical system of tenses, between the notions of time conveyed by adding or contrasting Present and Past tenses, and these tenses' Simple and Perfect forms.

When the Past Simple is used for the first time at the end of the opening paragraph:

[...] whan that they were seeke (l. 18)

we pass from the shared Present to what is virtually also a shared (because really experienced) past. Every individual's past is inaccessible to others unless recounted or shared as life-experience, but everybody knows, sadly, what it is like to be sick. So although the Past necessarily introduces ideas that are no longer, like the Present, automatically builders of consensus, in this case its introduction is not disruptive. As long as statements refer to datable time we know precisely what we are talking about, we can transform the Past into the Present and understand the link between them. For the Present, and realistically speaking only the Present, moves into the other tenses and times, revealing intentions for the future and intentional assessments of actions in the past.⁷ Thus *men longen* in the present *to go on pilgrimages* in the future; to pray in the future to saints that have helped them in the past. This is the time-framework of really lived experience.

6. As defined by Mikhail Bakhtin. See Michael Holquist, *Dialogism*.

7. For a discussion of "intentionality" and Chaucer as "intentional realist" see Robert Myles, *Chaucer's Realism*, chap. II.

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Then, in paragraph two, this time-sequence leading into and out of a clear Present is developed in the Past, with the author taking up the role of Narrator and giving him a recognizable character. As in conversation, the Narrator tells about his former life-experience in the Past Simple of narration (*e*), or the datable past. His account is meant to be factual, realistic and believable, but in order to avoid the dryness of a police report with every minute accounted for, it enjoys, as is normal in talk, some of the vagueness about time of the imaginatively stimulating mode of the Past Simple (*f*). The second paragraph starts with that chronologically vague impersonal phrase that is a conventional story opening:

Bifil that in that seson on a day (l. 19)

but then stresses the realistic mode by giving clear information as to time and place:

In Southwerk at the Tabard as I lay (l. 20).

Modern English might use the Past Continuous for two simultaneous actions in the past, not "as I lay" but "as I was lying," but undoubtedly the Past Simple, which is less precisely situated at a moment of time than the Past Continuous, gives a more general sense to the fact of the Narrator's presence at the inn, the impression (indispensable to a good story) of things happening by chance and not being planned or calculated deliberately. So the Narrator continues easily in the Past tenses of personal narration, all referring to an experienced present which the Narrator had shared with anybody he spoke to and which in every case made possible the use of, on the one hand, the Present Perfect for what was already accomplished and, on the other, forms conveying notions of what remained to be done. The pilgrims that he talked to, like himself, intended, *wolden* (l. 27), to go to Canterbury the following morning, so that their shared present pointed to a shared future through a common goal. On the spot observation developed this shared present and after a precise lapse of time the Narrator had amassed enough

information to feel that he had got to know each of his companions:

And shortly, *whan* the sonne was to rest
So hadde I spoken with hem everichon. (ll. 30-31)

These lines repeat in the Past the "when / then" pattern that had been used earlier in the Present tenses, so that the Narrator continues and stresses the realism of his account. With his first use of the Past Perfect (l. 31) we notice the grammatical precision of the time given, conveyed here by *whan* / *So*. The next line:

That I was of hir felawship anon (l. 32)

confirms that the time taken to meet the pilgrims integrated the Narrator socially into the group, so that he henceforth shared their common present as he had previously shared the individual present of each pilgrim.

At the end of the paragraph, the Narrator returns to the shared Present,⁸ of the teller with the told, the listeners / readers of the text, and reminds them *as I you devyse*, that he is giving a credible account of what happened. Then, to confirm the accuracy of his words, he thinks it reasonable (since reason, not fantasy, guides his statements) to introduce the characters, while the realistic mode of the shared Present is still at his disposal, the present time and space of reality.

But natheless, whil I have tyme and space,
 Er that I ferther in this tale *pace*,
 Me *thynketh* it accordaunt to resoun
 To telle yow al the condicioun
 O ech of hem, so as it *semed* me [...] (ll. 35-39)

With the last words quoted (l. 39), the Narrator stops talking in the Present and goes back to the Past tense of his experience *then*, at that point in time when the sun had set and he had just finished speaking

8. I distinguish by the use of the initial capital the Present of tenses, from the present of time, but blend the two meanings in the shared Present of the act of reading.

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to the pilgrims. Significantly, by his switch to the Past, the Narrator makes it clear that he has not revised or elaborated his opinions about the characters through reflecting on his initial impressions, but that he will simply report these impressions as they occurred to him in those particular moments of the then shared Present that is now in the past. He gives conventionally greater importance to what he *heard* the pilgrims tell him about themselves: their *condicion, profession and degree*, and conventionally lesser importance to what he had *seen* for himself of their appearance.⁹ So his remarks about the characters, his portraits, must be understood to be a mixture of, on the one hand, his independent thoughts and impressions based on actual observation and, on the other hand, a re-telling and even a repeating in Free Indirect Speech of the accounts that the pilgrims gave him of themselves.

Before ending the third paragraph, the Narrator returns to the shared Present of the act of listening / reading, thereby reinforcing the common expectations of himself and his audience by bowing to the conventions of social and no longer purely chronological order. Thus *And at a Knyght than wol I first bigynne* (l. 42) has almost the force here of "At a knight then **should / must** I first begin". He may not in actuality have started his interviews with the Knight, but he takes care to present his characters with the most socially important personage first. Concurrently, the Narrator intimates that he is passing from the mode of realistic dialogue with its precise notations of time, into the much vaguer mode of conversational monologue narrative, again following the accepted social and literary conventions.

9. To appreciate the relative social importance of what is heard and what is seen when the subject of observation is a social superior, one can recall the Hans Anderson fairy-tale of "The Emperor's New Clothes" where only the child is impolite enough to remark on the Emperor's nudity.

I have already argued elsewhere¹⁰ that the break between lines 42 : *And at a knyght than wol I first beginne*, and 43: *A Knyght ther was, and that a worthy man*, is a plunge into the narrative past of story-time so sudden and thorough that we find ourselves in a different world of signification without recognizing that the transition has been made. The literary use of *A knyght there was* is as frequent in romance as "Once upon a time" in fairy-tale: both are literary devices that shift us, almost bodily, into the romantic world of imaginative musing and out of that of the interpretation of facts. By using the formula, the Narrator frees himself and his audience from the contingencies of actual time and place in favour of the *chronotopes* of myth.¹¹ The audience of the Narrator's shared Present of line 42 (who can respond to his speaking in the Future), immediately forgets in line 43 that the Narrator is still talking of a character that he has just purported having met in the realistic Tabard Inn situation. Thus the audience is prepared to take on faith, as in a fairy-tale and with due Suspension of Disbelief,¹² the first lines about the Knight: [...] *and that a worthy man*. Nobody on a first reading thinks to question this statement.

If however, we make the mental effort of putting the two lines (42 and 43) together, we will respond to the second in the more realistic and more critical way of present-moment dialogue, which the author, through his Narrator, was initially at such pains to establish. This present-moment dialogue of the very act of reading has inserted us once and for all into datable time which can be accounted for. So while, as close and conscientious readers, we recognise that the Knight's description makes him appear legendary,

10. In Maria K. Greenwood, "Chaucer et Byron : les narrateurs dans le début du *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* de Chaucer et dans le début de *Don Juan* de Byron", *Bulletin des Anglicistes Médiévistes*, 43 (1993), 700-725.

11. The Bakhtinian term which is one of this critic's most developed concepts.

12. As discussed by Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria*, Ch. 13.

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we also remember the reality of his meeting with the Narrator, the Narrator's prior ignorance of the Knight and the fact that the whole description necessarily depends on whatever the Knight himself revealed as well as on what the Narrator saw with his own eyes. Thus the initial epithet, "a worthy man", read in the realistic mode can provoke questions that in the fictional, romantic mode, no one thinks to ask: "When?... How?... Why?... was he worthy." Once we realize that these questions are meant to occur to us, we also notice that the description is structured to answer them.

Firstly, "When was the Knight worthy?": the answer is "Always" conveyed by the Past Simple of situation (*f*), that vaguest notion of undatable time. We then continue with a Past Simple:

That fro the time that he first **bigan**
To ryden out [...] (l. 44)

which would seem to make more sense were it a Past Perfect: "That from the time that he had first begun [...]", more open to the questions of "When was that exactly? How old were you at the time? Does the statement still hold good to-day?", questions arising naturally in a dialogic situation in the shared Present but, by convention, unaskable in narrative. For in a story we take as given what we would otherwise question, and here, especially, the qualities attributed to the knightly hero proclaimed in the next line. Indeed the claims now made for him, and which he necessarily originally made for himself, are breathtakingly wide in scope:

[...] he loved chivalrie
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curtesie. (l. 44-45)

By the end of the sentence we are convinced that the knight was always worthy because his heart was in the right place from the first. Then, secondly, the question, "How was he worthy?" is here answered by claiming that the Knight loved unwaveringly and always the noble principles of chivalry. And, thirdly, the question "Why was he worthy?" is also answered tautologically. Thus prepared, or primed, listeners / readers accept the account of the Knight's deeds

as bearing out this good impression created by tautology at the start. Yet the account of the deeds is attached to an unreal, undatable past which gives them an aura not of real experience but of legend. Were the first lines put straightaway into the Past Perfect, some notion of datable time would survive: "From the time that **he had first** begun / To go on raids, he **had loved** chivalry [...]" (*my translation*),¹³ and moreover, the Past Perfect would suggest, by implying chronological order, that his love of chivalry had possibly changed or developed during the course of his life.

Only the firmly established Present of the act of reading and the Present-based, datable Past of the Narrator's personal story provide us with a more logical way of reading these lines as Free Indirect Speech, and to distinguish between the literary formulae of legendary *appearance* and the logical *reality* of the information conveyed. For everything that refers to the past of the Knight and of the other characters cannot logically be part of timeless myth but must be part of datable life-experience. Thus the whole description and the whole account of the battles can be read as coming from the Knight himself.

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13. One can compare translations of these lines into modern English by Wright and Coghill (British) or Morrison and the Hieatts (American).

David Wright (trans.), *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 2: "Who from the moment that he first began / Campaigning, had cherished the profession / Of arms",

Nevill Coghill (trans.), *Geoffrey Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, (1951) 1955, p. 20: "Who from the day on which he first began / To ride abroad had followed chivalry",

Theodore Morrison in: *The Portable Chaucer*, revised ed., New York: The Viking Press, (1949) 1975, p. 54 "Who from the earliest moment he began / To follow his career loved chivalry",

A. Kent Hieatt and Constance Hieatt, *Chaucer, Canterbury Tales: Tales of Caunterbury*, New York: Bantam Books (Bantam Dual-Language Book), 1964, p. 5, "from the time when he had first begun / to venture out, had loved chivalry".

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So although his words in lines 44-45 about that time in the past, when he first rode out to battle with all the knightly ideals filling his mind and heart, might convince on a first reading, they could equally well fail to convince. If the Knight's actual words to the Narrator are imagined to have been something along the lines of "I am a true / worthy knight, who has always loved the knightly ideals of truth, honour etc. from the time I began my career on horseback", his credentials can be suspected of being meagre.

Significantly, the word "time" appears in line 43 as a simple grammatical pointer to past time, but devoid of its links with the realistic time of "when / then". It can be understood vaguely as conveying the idea of "when I was young", implying the enthusiasm and sincerity of that stage of life. The description continues in the vague Past Simple that precludes questions or precision (*f*), before passing to a Past Perfect that lacks the clarity of chronological order (*h*):

Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre (l. 47)

And thereto hadde he riden, no man ferre (l. 48)

In these lines the Past Perfect is introduced in its loosest sense (*h*), since we are left to wonder what was the chronological order of the two events and what notion of time their juxtaposition conveys. From this point in the text, this loose usage of the Past Perfect is repeated throughout the account of the Knight's past in seven cases,¹⁴ so that we lose any sense of real time or chronology. The final sentence of the account of worthy deeds emphasises the blurring of particular events into a general Past Simple of situation, (*f*), which stresses the notion of "always" with the textual word "evermore" :

And evermore he hadde a sovereyn prys. (l. 67)

Added to this disappearance of precise times, the places mentioned seem equally unreal. For the average English-speaking

14. Ex. *he had the bord bigonne* (l. 52); *had he reysed* (l. 54); *hadde he be* (l. 54); *had he be* (l. 60); *hadde he been* (l. 61); *had been also* (l. 64).

listener / reader, Lettow or Pruce or Tramysene could just as well, for all the reality that they evoke, be Camelot or Avalon. This vagueness about times and places historical and geographical suggests a loose everyday conversational use of the Past tenses while, as regards the Knight's glorious past, the use of Free Indirect Speech evokes the banal boasting of the common veteran. Right up to the summing up of *He was a verray, parfit, gentil knight* we can understand that the Knight is imposing on the Narrator his own inflated opinions of himself in the best traditions of the bragging soldier.¹⁵

After this statement about the Knight of purely rhetorical persuasion (*ie.* not rationally argued, but playing on the audience's ready reverence for a social superior), the last six lines of the description bring back the shared Present of the act of reading:

But for to tellen you of his array (l. 73)

with the Narrator speaking no longer of what he heard but of what he saw. His comments on the Knight's appearance contrast with what we have been told about his deeds and while the former sounded impressive, the latter does not. The Knight's horse or horses were "good" (efficient carriers) but not "gay" (finely turned out) (l. 74). The meaning of the line is controversial since it is hard to see who or what the pronouns refer to, and we can paraphrase in two distinct ways: "His horse or horses were fit and muscular, but he / they were not gaily set out" or "His horse or horses were finely groomed, but the Knight's own appearance was plain." If we take the second meaning, (my preference), the discrepancy between horse and rider leads us on to consider another point about the Knight's appearance which is straightforwardly repulsive: the soiled fustian tunic, *bismotered*, in some way by the *habergeon*, the coat of mail. Thus

15. Seen as a boaster, the Knight becomes one of the comic heroes who stem from anti-heroic comedy and in particular *The Braggart Soldier* by Plautus. See *Plautus: Four Comedies*, trans. with intro. and notes by Eric Segal, Oxford / New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

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the sight that the Narrator reports on is singularly lacking in brilliance and we can imagine his gaze as anything but admiring. So in the last two lines, when we again go into the Knight's personal past and therefore into Free Indirect Speech, we can understand that the Knight is explaining, excusing the unkempt appearance that seems not to tally with the previous boasts of acknowledged worth and invariable success:¹⁶

For he was late ycome from his viage
And went for to doone his pylgrymage. (ll. 77-78).

With the Squire's description, the Narrator's reports of what he heard and what he saw are juxtaposed almost from the beginning. Faced with a mere Squire, the Narrator is presumably less disposed to hear the young man out before coming in himself. But as with the father, the Narrator begins with what he *hears* from the son, information about his life and identity:

Wyth hym ther was his sone, a yong Squire
A lovyer and a lusty bachelor, (ll. 79-80)

and continues without a break with the description of what he *sees* for himself:

With lokkes crulle as they were leyd in presse. (l. 81)

The Narrator then surmises, since apparently he is not told, that the young man is about twenty (*I guess*, l. 82). The comments that follow on the young man's stature, agility (*delyvere*) and strength must be a mixture of what the Narrator could see with his own eyes, the remarks he might have thus been induced to make, and the replies of the young man: "Your hair is finely styled" "Yes, but I'm very strong and agile as well, and good at fighting", for the account then goes on to the young man's feats of arms, with the significantly

16. See Maria K. Greenwood, "Idealised Chivalric Knights: Chaucer's Knight in the 'General Prologue' to the *Canterbury Tales* and Sir Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *Bulletin des Anglicistes Médiévistes*, 19 (1995), 127-139.

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vague time-notation *sometime* and the passage to the vaguest Past Perfect (*h*) adding the legendary touch:

And he had been somtyme in chevauchie. (l. 85)

Heroic legend veers rather disappointingly into mere romance when, by the end of the sentence, we learn that the outcome of the Squire's soldiering is not to win honour but ladies' favours. The Narrator, realising that the son is not interested in living up to his father's professedly heroic ideas of chivalry, and that his campaigns in Flanders and Picardy sound rather unexcitingly unexotic, returns again to appraising his appearance:

Embroidered was he [...] (l. 89)

The further information that the young man then gives on his life-style and on his reputation, his singing, his fluting, his Maytime freshness, seems to be going along with the remark about his "embroidered" appearance, as if he were enthusiastically agreeing that he is indeed the perfect Courtly Lover in person. The next remark on his clothes (about the shortness of his gown and length of his sleeves) is more laconic and may come from the Narrator or the young man himself, depending on the amount of approval this information is meant to arouse. The comment that follows on the Squire's horsemanship is more clearly approbatory:

Well koude he sitte on horse and faire ryde (l. 94)

but unclear as to who of the two, Narrator or Squire, is at its origin. Perhaps the Narrator is a capable judge of riding skills, perhaps not: whereas the Squire is likely to be capable of telling good horsemanship from bad. In the next lines, however there is no ambiguity about who gives the information:

He could songes make and wel endite
Juste and eke daunce [...] (l. 95-96)

for now, with the the Squire speaking of his accomplishments, we are clearly in the Past tense of Free Indirect Speech, as is confirmed by what follows. The time of his sexual exploits is realistically, not

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romantically, rendered by the word *by nightertale*. Unlike the conventional lover of romance pining sleeplessly from unfulfilled romantic longing, the real young man is not shy of boasting that his sleeplessness is not for reasons of frustration but of active sexual prowess. The last two lines again must come from the Squire, who, perhaps realising that he has been carried away in his confidences to a stranger, recalls his more respectable qualities and duties as his father's son: politeness, humble bearing and ready helpfulness, as well as useful skill in menial manual tasks like carving, filial qualities which add up to a Boy-Scout image.

When the Yeoman is introduced, there is some doubt as to which of the two, the father or the son, this man actually serves,

A Yeman **hadde** he and servanz namo
 At that tyme, for hym liste ryde so,
 And he **was** clad in cote and hood of greene, (ll. 101-103)

although most readers take the *he* to mean the father.¹⁷ The allusion to the particular moment *at that tyme* clearly indicates Free Indirect Speech, with the Knight or Squire explaining that the scarcity of followers is a matter of choice rather than of necessity to the Narrator, who then takes over with his own observations on the Yeoman's appearance. Unlike the Knight and the Squire, the Yeoman does not seem to introduce himself, but has to be accounted for by his superior. The first comments that might come from the Yeoman, or perhaps are still those of the Knight / Squire speaking about his servant, are those which convey approbation of his arrows, which :

Under his belt he **bar** full thriftily.
 (Well **koude** he dresse his takel yemanly), (ll. 105-106)

where we can distinguish between the Past Simple (*e*) of datable time of the "bearing" or "wearing" of his arrows (something the Narrator could see for himself) and the Past Simple (*f*) of vaguely general

17. This is the opinion in *Riverside*, p. 25, note 101.

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time in *koude he dresse*, which suggests an account. This last refers to the many unspecified occasions which, added up together, prove the possession of a skill (something the Narrator had to be told). The close-cropped head and the sun-burnt face of the Yeoman are similarly part of the Narrator's observations, but the next line about the Yeoman's skill in woodcraft is the last thing told, a remark which either the Yeoman himself or the Knight / Squire could be thought to be making about the Yeoman's past life or identity. Since he is not given any further information, from then on the Narrator develops his observations on appearance and so, by the last line, interprets the plethora of arms (arrows, armguard, sword and shield, expensive dagger) as well as the pure silver St. Christopher medal and the horn on its green strap, as indications that the Yeoman is a forester, although the Narrator cannot be certain:

A forster was he, soothly, as I guess. (ll. 117)

His hesitation, the juxtaposition of *soothly* and *as I guess* induces doubt, and one can end up wondering even further than the Narrator himself whether the Yeoman with his excessive accoutrements is really the simple forester that he seems to be.¹⁸

The "General Prologue" continues with the portrait of the Prioress, and I have already dealt with the wealth of meaning generated by interpreting the text along the lines of the Narrator "being told and having seen."¹⁹ The same method of reflecting on the tenses can guide our interpretation of all the portraits that follow. Thus, with the Monk, the next pilgrim to be presented, the first line tells of his appearance:

A Monk ther was, a fair for the maistrie, (l. 165)

18. See Terry Jones, *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary*, London: Eyre Methuen, (1982) 1980, p. 211.

19. See Maria K. Greenwood, "Trust and Chaucer's Prioress: the Secrets of Her Success", André Lascombes (ed.), *Identités et différences : actes de l'atelier Moyen Age du congrès de la S.A.E.S. à l'Université d'Aix-en-Provence 1991*, Publications de l'AMAES, 17, 1992, 27-43.

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and the second of what he reveals about himself in his speech:

An outridere, that lovede venerie. (l. 166)

Here again the Past Simple (*e*) of the precise moment of the Narrator's sight of the Monk, is followed by the Past Simple (*f*) which is, in Free Indirect Speech, what the Monk revealed about his social identity and personal tastes. The line that follows clearly expresses assessment and approbation:

A manly man, to be an abott able (l. 167)

but cannot be clearly put down to either the Narrator or the Monk. This indeterminacy, however, suggests the social collusion between the two of them on the subject of the Monk's reputation (what the other monks say about him in his abbey) and sounds the note developed throughout the portrait of the Monk's complacent self-satisfaction.

Similar remarks apply to the Friar, whose first epithet, describing him as *a wantowne and a merye* (l. 208), could come from either the Narrator or the Friar speaking of the reputation that he had made for himself in his community: "I'm known to be a jolly fellow." What we learn about these two characters' appearance or visual image creates a more positive impression than what we learn of their actions and mind-set. However much one disapproves of the Monk on principle for neglecting and despising his monastic vows, or of the Friar for distorting the religious rules that he is supposed to live by, one can well be attracted by the Monk's evident care for his horse who is *As brown as is a berry*, (l. 207) or the Friar's sparkling eyes that twinkle *As doon the sterres in the frosty night* (l. 268). In contrast to the Knight, the Monk and Friar *look* more attractive than they *sound*, and if one refers to the datable Past of the Narrator's meeting with them (easily transformed into a Present of actual encounter), one can understand that they possess a fair amount of social charm which they exploit for their own ends.

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Most importantly, the Monk and the Friar create an atmosphere of jolly fellowship by their frank worldliness, their lack of pretence that they are better than they are. Because they twist the accepted rules of morality openly, they can be believed to be telling the truth.²⁰ And it is this frankness about one's past life and deeds which finally culminates in the outrageous revelations of a Wife of Bath or a Pardoner, although one can argue that in these extreme cases the revelations act in opposite ways, that the frankness of the Wife of Bath is finally endearing while that of the Pardoner is repulsive. For these characters as for all Chaucer's characters, we form an image of what they are like as persons from what they say about their pasts, and how they appear and act at the actual (present) moment of meeting with the Narrator.

To conclude, I would like to stress the point I have been making throughout: that it is above all by prolonged reflection on Chaucer's use of tenses and notions of time, that listeners / readers of the "General Prologue" will arrive at a richer, more coherent characterization of the pilgrims. For this reflection on the text permits a kind of reconstruction of each character's realistic life and moral, or immoral, stature, social success or inadequacy. In the end, every listener / reader has to decide what he / she prefers, in private or in public, a person of moral or immoral life-style, of socialising or anti-social manner, and whether pretending to be a saint is preferable to admitting being a rogue, or *vice versa*, when it comes to the choice of companions for a pilgrimage in the real world.

20. It is probable that critics that hold the traditional Protestant view that the Monk and the Friar embody wickedness would not agree with this assessment. See for instance Robert B. Burlin, *Chaucerian Fiction*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977.