

THE EDUCATION OF THESEUS IN *THE KNIGHT'S TALE*

Considerable agreement has been reached on the general aesthetic of the *Knight's Tale*, in which complexities arise from conventionality and the very two-dimensionality of characters like Palamon and Arcite make them vehicles of compelling themes of order and destiny.¹ And yet we have not reached such agreement on Theseus, the tale's central character. Is he to be taken as a type of Jovian wisdom, presiding over and resolving the disorderly passions of the other characters?² Or is he himself emotionally unstable, sadistic in his worst moments and Machiavellian in what appear to be his best?³ Is his closing theodicy successful and definitive, an honest failure, or a deliberate deception?⁴ Each of these positions has been persuasively maintained, as have other positions in the rather large spaces between them.

I would like to suggest that in evaluating Theseus's character we recognize a quality that he shares with no others in the Tale, the ability to change over time in response to experience. Medieval fiction - much of Chaucer, for example - tends to represent character as static. It is this quality of Palamon and Arcite that so disappoints the unprepared modern reader. And yet the dynamic character who grows and changes as he achieves deeper insight is not uncommon in medieval fiction. He most frequently appears in the first person as a narrator-protagonist like Dante or Langland's

¹ Prominent exponents of these qualities have been Muscatine, Underwood, Jordan, Burlin, and Kolve.

² See Gaylord, Robertson (260-66), Bolton, Cooper, (79-81).

³ See Neuse, Webb, Aers (174-95), and Jones; Jones condemns Theseus and his approving Knight-narrator, assuming an identification of viewpoints that the present study questions.

⁴ Instances of the first view are Gaylord and Ruggiers (161). Underwood and Salter represent the second view. Neuse and Jones represent the third view.

Will, two of the numerous progeny of Boethius.¹ (In contrast, Chaucer's own *persona* in his early poems seems a deliberate antithesis to this dynamic convention in his sturdy resistance to growth and insight.) The dynamic character sometimes appears in the third person as well. Notable examples are Gawain in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and, I would argue, Theseus in *The Knight's Tale*. Theseus grows from the rather naïve self-assurance he first displays on his return from Scythia to a soberly ironic detachment that finally approaches that of the Knight-narrator himself.

Let us first examine the Knight-narrator, whose vision in the story, like Saturn's power in the universe, encompasses all the rest. His attitude toward the characters in his fiction seems oddly ambivalent. He frequently describes them and their doings with the traditional superlatives of romance. For example, the laments of the Theban women are such

That in this world nys creature lyvyng
That herde swich another waymentyng...
(901-02)²

Arcite's sorrow in exile surpasses that of any "creature/That is, or shal, whil that the world may dure" (1359-60). When the knights assemble for Theseus's grand tournament,

... ther trowed many a man
That never, sithen that the world bigan,
As for to speke of knyghthod of hir hond,
As fer as God hath maked see or lond
Nas of so fewe so noble a compaignye.
(2101-05)

And so on.

And yet, as many critics have pointed out, there is an ironic detachment that transcends this naïve wonder and forces the latter's mere conventionality on our attention.

¹ In terms used by Schless (209-10, in discussing *Troilus and Criseyde*), Palamon and Arcite are instances of "character revelation" while Theseus is an instance of "character development," a more "organic" process of change.

² I follow the text of Benson.

This can express itself gently, as when the Knight assures us that the charming occasion of Theseus's tournament would draw as many noble knights today as it did then:

Ye knowen wel that every lusty knyght
That loveth paramours and hath his myght,
Were it in Engelond or elleswhere,
They wolde, hir thanks, wilnen to be there -
To fighte for a lady, benedicitee!
It were a lusty sighte for to see.
(2111-16)

The last couplet expresses the viewpoint of a spectator rather than a participant, a retired athlete content to watch and perhaps criticize younger men taking the field.

A few lines later, in the catalogue of arms, there is a hint of something routine and no longer of vivid interest, confirmed when the Knight cuts it short:

Ther is no newe gyse that it nas old.
Armed were they, as I have yow told,
Everych after his opinioun.
(2125-27)

A long life enables one finally to assimilate the vision of long centuries of history, in which all becomes flat, stale, and repetitious.

The conspicuous use of explicit transitions and of the figure called *occupatio* has a diminishing effect on characters and events, right from the beginning when Theseus appears amid the trappings of his Scythian victory only to be brushed aside:

And thus with victorie and with melodye
Lete I this noble duc to Atthenes ryde,
And al his hoost in armes hym bisyde.
(872-74)

"And certes," the knight goes on, "if it nere to long to heere," he would have told us all the wonderful deeds that so impressed Boccaccio, Chaucer's source, deeds ticked off like headings in a table of contents or - perhaps

better - like marginal cues in a manuscript one riffles through quickly. A reader of old stories and of life learns performe how to skim:

I have, God woot, a large feeld to ere,
And wayke been the oxen in my plough;
The remenant of the tale is long ynough.
(886-88)

I will take my cue from the Knight and consign most of the other examples of this skimming to a note.¹ Readers of Chaucer know them well and know that they reinforce the pattern set in this one.

These transitions and *occupationes* make a peculiar virtue of necessity. When Chaucer's Knight says that he is skipping material, he speaks literally for his creator. Chaucer gives us the whole plot of the *Teseida* in about one fifth the lines of verse.² So of course he must pull us from place to place, always a bit out of breath and watching the clock. But this serves his theme as well. The dismissive curttness with which he treats Theseus, Palamon, and Arcite suggests that their grand exploits and gestures are only so much posturing, that if we dwell on them too long they will become boring. It seems that we simply cannot afford to take these heroes as seriously as they take themselves.

The deprecation implied by the use of these formal devices reaches a disturbing extreme in the accounts of Arcite's death and funeral. Arcite's dying speech, with its cries against fate ("What is this world? What asketh men to have?") and its noble resignation of Emily to Palamon ("Foryet nat Palamon, the gentil man.") is followed by a ghastly account of his body's collapse (2798-2807). Then comes a cruelly abrupt *occupatio*:

His laste word was, "Mercy, Emelye."
His spirit chaunged hous and wente ther,
As I cam nevere, I kan nat tellen wher.
Therefore I stynte; I nam no divinistre;
Of soules fynde I nat in this registre,

¹ Lines 994-1000, 1187-90, 1198-1201, 1459-61, 2197-2208, 2261-64, 2809-16, 2919-66. I discuss the last two in detail.

² See the "Explanatory Notes" in Benson, pp. 827, 828, 831, 834, 838, for correspondences between the Tale and Boccaccio.

Ne me ne list thilke opinions to telle
Of hem, though that they writen wher they dwelle.
Arcite is coold, ther Mars his soule gye!
Now wol I speken forth of Emelye.
(2808-16)

The *occupatio* not only skips over, it negates an ascent to the eighth sphere which Boccaccio granted to Arcite's soul and which Chaucer reserved for Troilus.

The cold dismissal not merely of Arcite but of the appeals against his fate with which we cannot help but identify suggests an almost unearthly detachment. Or else they suggest a defensive strategy in the face of a sorrow that is too great to bear. Charles Muscatine calls this sort of passage "a deftly administered antidote," rightly distinguishing it from "an actively satiric strain" (187) but, perhaps, understating its forcefulness. The point seems to be that tragedy's antidote here must be strong enough to sound like cruel satire. To yield to the tragedy is to become unfit for life which, indifferent to Arcite's tragedy just as it is to Theseus's triumphs, simply demands that we keep on going. The very finality of triumph or tragedy demands our dismissal of them. The narrator's gesture of dismissal suggests that of the characters in the Robert Frost poem responding to the accidental death of a farmboy:

They listened at his heart.
Little - less - nothing! - and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.¹

An even more disturbing *occupatio* occurs at the funeral of Arcite. It is perhaps the best known instance in the tale, and it goes on for an astonishing forty-seven lines. Of course, it calls attention to the details of the eighty-odd *ottave* of Boccaccio's Eleventh Book, which it skims over. But our attention is drawn more clearly to the rudeness with which all this healing ceremony is swept aside like so much rubbish. The negatives that commonly figure in an *occupatio* ("I will *not* speak about this and that because...") are repeated so

¹ "Out, Out --," in Frost: 136-37.

relentlessly that they come to express a larger negation, one of weariness and disgust. To give just a sample, the Knight will not describe

The mirre, th'encens, with al so greet odour;
Ne how Arcite lay among al this,
Ne what richesse aboute his body is;
Ne how that Emelye, as was the gyse,
Putte in the fyr of funeral servyse;
Ne how she swowned whan men made the fyr,
Ne what she spak, ne what was hir desir;
Ne what jeweles men in the fyre caste...
I wol nat tellen eek how that they goon
Hoom til Atthenes, whan the pley is doon;
But shortly to the point thanne wol I wende
And maken of my longe tale an ende.
(2938-45, 2963-66)

The extremity of this passage in its violation of even the somewhat loose decorum of the poem's style suggests the conclusion of *Troilus and Criseyde*, which may have been written at about the same time. There the poignant beauty, the grandeur even in pain and defeat, of an old, pagan world and of the story it yielded are suddenly spurned and mocked by a narrator whose assent to them had been more complex and whole-hearted than the Knight's:

Lo here, of payens corsed olde rites!
Lo here, what alle hir goddes may availle!
Lo here, thise wrecched worldes appetites!
Lo here, the fyn and guerdoun for travaille
Of Jove, Appollo, of Mars, of swich rascaille!
Lo here, the forme of olde clerkis speche
In poetrie, if ye hire bokes seche.
(TC, V, 1849-55)

E. T. Donaldson has shown how the last couplet of this stanza undoes "the work of the five lines preceding it."¹ The lure of the old story outlasts the narrator's trumped-up scorn, and the last lines invite us to a sympathetic contemplation of what the earlier lines indict. The Knight makes no such reversal as he presses on impatiently to the end of his story. He has an old

¹¹ *Speaking of Chaucer*: 99.

man's knowledge that the ceremonies that amplify our deaths are finally as empty as those that amplify our adolescent longings for girls like Emily, that our very mourning, from a sufficiently detached viewpoint, proves to be a form of infatuation. An attachment to these ceremonial trappings and the passions that they seek to dignify must be abandoned for - what? The love of Christ who, the narrator of *Troilus* assures us, "nyl falsen no wight, dar I seye,/That wol his herte al holly on him leye" and who obviates the search for "feynede loves" in this world (TC, V, 1845-46, 1848)? I think not. The Knight's assents to any destiny for the soul beyond this earth are perfunctory and no match for the chilly agnosticism with which he commits Arcite's soul to the questionable guidance of Mars. In freeing us from illusion, the Knight offers us something less exalted but more tangible: a sense of balance, the stoic's poise in a world governed by an inscrutable and unstable Fortune, in which

It is ful fair a man to bere hym evene,
For al day meeteth men at unset stevene.
(1523-24)

With this we can, like Frost's characters, turn to our affairs, knowing that the cruelty of our doing so is a necessary condition of life.

This lofty detachment is what Theseus must approach as the story progresses. It is a fairly distant goal as we first meet him returning from Scythia. His response to the Theban ladies' weeping shows a hearty egotism:

"What folk been ye, that at myn hom-comyng
Perturben so my feste with crynge?"
Quod Theseus, "Have ye so greet envye
Of myn honour, that thus compleyne and crye?
Or who hath yow mysboden or offended?
And telleth me if it may been amended,
And why that ye been clothed thus in blak?"
(905-11)

Theseus quite unselfconsciously takes his own triumph to be a universal condition. He refers all others' feelings to his own, and finds offense, even intentional offense, in the ladies' discordant weeping. When he offers his help, he asserts his sense of universal control and his right to adjust the

scales of joy and woe. The eldest lady's appeal to Theseus quietly puts him in his place:

She seyde, "Lord to whom Fortune hath yiven
Victorie, and as a conqueror to lyven,
Nat greveth us youre glorie and youre honour,
But we biseken mercy and socour..."
(915-18)

Theseus's conquest and his joy in it are as much an accident of "Fortune and hire false wheel,/That noon estaat assureth to be weel" (925-26) as the ladies' woe. The universal order and the scales of joy and woe are in other hands.

Arcite reaffirms the Theban lady's judgment when he comforts Palamon in prison:

"Fortune hath yeven us this adversitee.
Som wikke aspect or disposicioun
Of Saturne, by som constellacioun,
Hath yeven us this, although we hadde it sworn;
So stood the hevene whan that we were born.
We moste endure it; this is the short and playn."
(1086-91)

There is, of course, a telling irony in Arcite's all-too-accurate ascription of their troubles to Saturn, but his remarks also carry forward a consistent pattern by which those who benefit or suffer at the hands of Theseus look past him to a higher agency whose mere instrument he is.

The narrator himself does the same thing when he brings Theseus to the scene of Palamon and Arcite's fight. The poem's most strikingly brusque transition introduces its most Boethian passage:

Up to the ancle foghte they in hir blood.
And in this wise I let hem fightyng dwelle,
And forthe I wole of Theseus yow telle.
The destinee, ministre general,
That executeth in the world over al
The purveiance that God hath seyn biforn,...
For certainly, our appetites heer,

Be it of werre, or pees, or hate, or love,
Al is this reuled by the sighte above.
This mene I now by myghty Theseus...
(1660-65, 1669-73)

He will tell us of Theseus, but instead he spends some time telling us of destiny. Theseus is interesting to us for his actions and their effects on Palamon and Arcite and their unfolding story. But Theseus's actions, at least when viewed as leading to these interesting effects, have their origins elsewhere. The narrator, with an old man's detachment and insight, looks straight through Theseus to explore those remoter origins of his interest and only then shortens his focal length to the Athenian hero.

He does so in a finely ambiguous line - "This mene I nowe by myghty Theseus." The alogical association of his mightiness with the rule of "the sight above" in the preceding line confers upon Theseus the momentary dignity of a "man of destiny."¹ But this dignity is ambiguous as well. To be a man of destiny is, under one aspect, to incarnate a superhuman force, to present to other men the compelling image of their own fortunes. Under another aspect, it is to be the instrument, the mere tool, that lay readiest to hand when Fortune set indifferently to her work. The latter aspect begins to seem the more relevant when we learn Theseus's motives for going out that day to his predestined appointment with Palamon and Arcite. He simply wanted to hunt deer. This disjunction of intention and resultant action characterizes Theseus's role at each turning point of the plot.² He is, in fact, an instance of that general human condition lamented by Arcite in a homely simile:

¹ Stanbury makes a generally similar comment on the ambiguity of Theseus's association with destiny: "'This mene I' refers literally of course to the general coincidence, that Theseus should in effect be ruled by destiny and the driving fatality that should join his desire to hunt with the order of the stars. Yet the phrase also suggests, of course, that Theseus is destiny; that his sight rules. And in a sense, so it does, as the text moves increasingly to arrangements of visual spectacle that are under Theseus' purview. He watches: 'under the sonne he looketh, and anon/ He was war of Arcite and Palamon' (1997-98)." This controlling gaze of Theseus, analyzed by Stanbury in a generally Lacanian manner, achieves its apogee of power in the tournament, "embodied as visual display below the gaze of Theseus in the window - himself in a position of double visibility, poised to view the tournament but also to be seen as well by the people," just before it is to be neutralized by Saturn's bolt.

² A principal point of Underwood's essay.

We faren as he that dronke is as a mous.
A dronke man woot wel he hath an hous,
But he noot which the righte way is thider,
And to a dronke man the wey is slider.
(1261-64)

His rage at discovering his enemies gives way before the tears of his ladies and his own good-humored consideration of Palamon and Arcite's motives. With avuncular condescension he jokes about a passion that he is happy to have outgrown:

“The god of love, a benedicite!
How myghty and how greet a lord is he!
Ayeyns his myght ther gayneth none obstacles....
I woot it by myself ful yore agon,
For in my tyme a servant was I oon.
And therefore, syn I knowe of loves peyne
And woot hou soore it kan a man distreyne,
As he that hath ben caught ofte in his laas,
I yow foryeve al hoolly this trespaas...
(1785-86, 1813-18)

It is a commonplace of medieval thought and a principal theme of the *Knight's Tale* that Venus and Amor are among the principal agents of Fortune. The man who comes under their sway has committed himself to one of the world's corruptible delights with a devotion that resembles (and displaces) the religious. The man who is above Fortune, who places his trust in the goods of the reason or of heaven, is, by the same token, immune to the blandishments of Venus. But it is a false corollary to assume that immunity to these blandishments shows by itself a superiority to the Fortune that they serve. To outgrow one subjection is not to outgrow the other. Theseus's confidence that he can not only forgive Palamon and Arcite but resolve their conflict and save them from the effects of their passion arises in great part from his sense that he is superior to erotic love and from the false inference that he is superior to Fortune as well.

The expression of this confidence is the grand tournament. The “noble theatre” erected for it is a small cosmos in which the contrary forces of Fortune are resolved in a providential synthesis. Shrines to Venus, Mars, and Diana are contained in its larger design, and so, symbolically, are the

contrary wills of their devotees, Palamon, Arcite, and Emily. Within each shrine, the malign effects of each deity are the main themes of their elaborate murals. But these effects, with their tendency toward chaos and dissolution, are themselves resolved into, contained by, the order of art. They, like the tournament itself, are meant to present an esthetically realized image of destiny controlled by Theseus's benign and godlike providence. And, as the tournament is about to begin, Theseus appears "at a wyndow set,/Arrayed right as he were a god in trone" (2528-29).

The sense of godlike creation and controlling power, as well as benevolence, informs his herald's announcement of the tournament's rules:

"The lord hath of his heigh discrecioun
Considered that it were destruccioun
To gentil blood to fighten in the gyse
Of mortal bataille now in this emprise.
Wherfore, to shapen that they shal nat dye,
He wol his firste purpos modifye."
(2537-42)

The rules, of course, will now exclude the weapons that typically bring combat to a mortal conclusion. The herald's language is full of Boethian resonance. Theseus's "heigh discrecioun" as he modifies "his firste purpos" suggests the First Mover of Boethius. And Theseus is confidently disposed to do what only God can do (and what God has chosen *not* to do), to override destiny and "to shapen that they shal nat dye."

But the real order impinges on Theseus's benign alternative order. The grand designs of great men must give way to the petty quarrels of gods. The moment when this happens, when Arcite is cut down in his moment of triumph by "a furie infernal" (2684), is introduced by a curious call to attention:

The trompours, with the loude mynstralcie,
The heraudes, that ful loude yelle and crie,
Been in hire wele for joye of daun Arcite.
But herkneth me, and styteth noyse a lite,
Which a myracle ther bifel anon...
(2671-75)

Who is the Knight-narrator hushing here? Logic tells us that it must be his fellow pilgrims, and that this is one of those periodic calls on the wayward attention of the audience that are so common in the tail-rime romances. But logic is overruled by the immediate context, where the noise - the "loude mynstralcie," the yelling and crying of the heralds - come from within the story. In a calculated breach of dramatic decorum, the Knight looks into his story and into Theseus's arena. The narrative gesture is in its way as eruptive as Pluto's bolt, and its import is the same. Both tell the crowd and Theseus himself that they must stint their noise, that noise is all that their ceremony and their values amount to in the face of the Saturnine reality that now reveals itself.

With the downfall of Arcite, Theseus is called upon to abandon his illusions about controlling destiny. He is called upon to shoulder the burden of wisdom born by the Knight-narrator and revealed in that ironic detachment from all the grand deeds and grand passions of the story.

The call to wisdom is traumatic. For the first time in the story, we see Theseus at a loss, forced to seek the aid and consolation of someone else. His father Egeus offers him and his people the cold comfort that must suffice:

"Right as ther dyed nevere man," quod he,
"That he ne lyvede in erthe in some degree,
Right so ther lyvede never man," he seyde,
"In al this world, that some time he ne deyde.
This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo,
And we been pilgrymes passynge to and fro.
Deeth is an ende of every worldly soore."
(2843-49)

Critics sometimes place Egeus's pilgrimage metaphor in the well-known Augustinian tradition that makes our earthly life a pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem. Our earthly life derives its only true meaning from its transcendent goal, according to this tradition, and so this world, in and of

itself, is a fit object of contempt.¹ This is the wisdom that Egeus would convey to the worldly Athenians, so bemused in their dreams of love and martial glory.

But the Christian's pilgrimage, miserable though it may be in its temporal dimension, is redeemed by the shining clarity of its eternal goal. The alert Christian always has a sense of direction. Egeus's pilgrims, on the other hand, only wander "to and fro." Egeus cannot improve upon the agnosticism we noted in the narrator as he refused to speculate on the destination of Arcite's soul. The wisest voice in the tale conveys that agnosticism to Theseus as the only adequate explanation of the collapse of his grand and well-meant designs.

It is worth noting, too, how much Egeus's fatalism resembles that of Palamon and Arcite. The old man's "pilgrymes passynge to and fro" recall Arcite's man "that dronke is as a mous":

"A dronke man woot wel he hath an hous,
But he noot which the righte wey is thider,
And to a dronke man the way is slider.
And certes, in this world so faren we;
We seken faste after felicitee,
But we goon wrong ful often, trewely."
(1262-67)

So youth and age agree in their fatalism. They differ only in their degree of resignation to it. It is in the age that intervenes, the age of Theseus, that the sense of control over one's destiny emerges. This sense is illusory and yet necessary, for the world demands of some of its children a purposeful will, fruitful in the works of civilization.

These works include, in moments of extremity, gestures of reassurance and consolation. And these are now demanded of Theseus. For the death of Arcite is, to the people of Athens, an intimation of meaninglessness and despair. "Why woldestow be deed," the women of Athens cry, "And haddest gold ynough, and Emelye?" (2836-37) The lament is, at first glance, absurd, and many readers only give it that first glance. But it really differs very little

¹ See Robertson: 374-75, and Huppé: 72-73.

from the more common laments that still greet a young man's death - that he was so young, that he had so much to live for. There is the same naïve but necessary assumption that death comes only to those who are ready for it, that those upon whom we load life's prizes will not betray our exalted sense of what we have bestowed by dying before they can enjoy them. Unfairly, inevitably, we blame the dead for disabusing us.

"Human kind cannot bear very much reality," as Eliot said in a somewhat different connection, and a mature leader must sometimes bear it for his people, offering them something different. The ceremony of Arcite's funeral and the closing theodicy are what Theseus offers. They are his last great constructive efforts. They express not the self-confident optimism of the tournament, but the chastened sense of how great are the needs of his people for order and meaning and how limited are his powers to meet those needs. Both are gestures of consolation. Neither will bear close examination.

We have already discussed the Knight's subversion of Arcite's funeral. The circumstances surrounding Theseus's closing speech and certain details of its argument give rise to a similar questioning. The speech rationalizes and solemnizes the union of Palamon and Emily, but that romantic motive serves a political motive. Theseus and his counselors desired "To have with certain contrees alliaunce,/And have fully of Thebans obeisaunce..." (2973-76), and the marriage of Palamon and Emily is the most opportune means to that end. If we would idealize Theseus, we might be tempted to pass over these lines in embarrassed silence. If we would denigrate him, we could produce it as an instance of his Machiavellian cynicism. Neither approach is satisfactory. Theseus and his people, because they are not the one dead, must turn to their affairs. A statesman like Theseus cannot act from pure motives. Indeed, the effort to do so may be productive of harm. Theseus has learned this in the course of the story. He has learned, as well, that the sense of acting from pure motives is still as necessary to his people as it once was to him. And so, statesman that he is, he represses the political aspect of his proposal, even though it has been the result of public deliberation (2970-74). They will have what they need from him: a healing, happy epilogue to a tragic love story.

A. C. Spearing has pointed out an interesting discrepancy between Theseus's theodicy and what we know from earlier episodes about how the gods actually govern (76-77).¹ Theseus has Jupiter governing all through his fair chain of love. But we have seen that Jupiter could not control the quarrel of Mars and Venus and had to yield to the darker sway of Saturn. We have seen, further, that no love links gods and men. Mars and Venus fear dishonor if they cannot keep promises whimsically given to Arcite and Palamon. Saturn's solution satisfies them - Mars no less than Venus - and Arcite goes to his death.

Some of this seems present to Theseus's mind, because his assertions about universal order are really quite guarded. There is, indeed, a certain poignancy to the opening lines of his speech, coming simply from their being in the past tense:

“The Firste Moevere of the cause above,
Whan he first made the faire cheyne of love,
Greet was th'effect, and heigh was his entente.
Wel wiste he why and what therof he mente,
For with that faire cheyne of love he bond
The fyr, the eyr, the water, and the lond
In certeyn boundes, that they may nat flee.”
(2987-93)²

Nothing in these lines is inconsistent with the suggestion of entropy ever since that grand creative effort so long ago. Nothing forbids the surmise that the First Mover, like Theseus, was disappointed with the way things turned out.

Theseus's assertions about how the Jovian plan works today - the sureness with which our allotted days run out “in this wrecched world adoun” (2995) - really do no more than adorn and palliate the words of

¹ In the same vein, Strohm notes Theseus's “*quest* for a reaffirmation of authority – both earthly and divine – in his *projected* faith in a benign heavenly hierarchy, ruled not by the malign and arbitrary Saturn but by a more even-keeled ‘Juppiter, the kyng.’” adding that “Chaucer takes care that his audience understands Theseus to be wrong...” (133, emphasis added).

² In his prose translation of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, Chaucer correctly translates the source of this passage, Book 2, Metrum 8, in the present tense. See Benson: 420.

Egeus: just as there never died a man who did not once live, so there never lived a man who did not die. The counsel that he draws from this shows a becoming lack of assurance.¹ This is the mature Theseus, no longer out to set all things right:

“Thanne is it wysdom, as it thynketh me,
To maken vertu of necessitee,
And take it weel that we may nat eschue,
And namely that to us alle is due;
And whoso gruccheth ought, he doth folye,
And rebel is to hym that al may gye.
And certainly a man hath moost honour
To dyen in his excellence and flour,
Whan he is siker of his goode name...”
(3041-3049)

The last three lines - and the argument that they introduce - show an edginess, a move to cover all bets, even if the various arguments one makes for an audience's assent are not entirely consistent with one another. Theseus is putting forth a rationalization in which he does not quite believe. He is responding to his people's need for belief and hope. Armed with these, they will greet “with alle blisse and melodye” (3097) the marriage of Palamon and Emily, imputing a benign purpose to the new upward swing of Fortune's wheel.

In Theseus Chaucer gives a unique development to an idea embodied by characters as diverse as Pandarus, Nicholas the Clerk, and the Pardoner. Each of these characters weaves elaborate schemes - depending to a greater or lesser degree on his plausible rhetoric - to control destiny. Each would create a world of his own in which he reigns as a god, ironically detached, pleased by the intricate marvels that lie subject to his will. Each soon learns his folly. The turn of Fortune's wheel reveals the larger order in which the projector's most important role is likely to be as the butt of some cosmic

¹ Lawler cites what “at first glance seem[s] a mere pause for breath” in Theseus's speech (3000-02): “Ther nedeth noight noon auctoritee t'allegge. / For it it preeved by experience, / But that me list declaren my sentence.” Lawlor paraphrases thus: “all this is likely to be perfectly clear to all of you from your experience; it is just that I feel the urge to say what is on my mind.” He finds in the lines “a sudden loss of [Theseus's] customary aplomb, as if he were speaking not so much to instruct others as to work out in words the meaning of his own experience” (86-87).

joke. Some of this general meaning of Pluto's "furye infernal" emerges more clearly when we compare it to Absolon's hot coulter and the blunt obscenity of the Host that silences the Pardoner.

Frequently opposed to this type of character is the man or woman of *trouthe*, that unchangeable integrity that shows to best advantage when Fortune's wheel swings downward. Troilus is the clearest example. True to the end to a love that has proven, like this world itself, to be mere fiction, Troilus's soul is projected by its purity clear beyond the planetary instruments of Fortune's sway. Pandarus, after some frantic last-minute efforts to patch up the fiction he has promoted so enthusiastically, crumples with it.

Theseus is a harder case. Like Pandarus, he has promoted fictions throughout the story. Early in his education by life these fictions center on himself and the sufficiency of his good will. He is the knight-hero who forestalls fate, righting the wrongs of the Theban widows by conquest, untangling the web of passionate love in a grand tournament. But his last fiction centers on something unseen beyond the fixed stars, whose superior force he can no longer doubt and whose good will he must invoke - perhaps invent - in the tentative rhetoric of a ceremonial address. Because he is a governor, he cannot set aside the fictions of order and purpose, nor soar above them like Troilus. But, because experience has brought him the wintry insight of Egeus and of the Knight-narrator, he cannot rest on them either.

I have argued that the contradictory aspects of Theseus's character are resolved in a reading that sees him developing and changing through the story. Different resolutions of these same contradictions have been offered in the comprehensive and subtle analyses of H. Marshall Leicester and Lee Patterson, and it would be useful to distinguish my position from theirs.

Leicester's analysis of the *Knight's Tale* (221-382) takes up more than a third of a long book, and there are many aspects of it which I must simply commend rather than discuss. The following propositions, however, bear on the subject of this paper:

The *Tale* is conveyed to us by a single voice whose contradictions are those discoverable in any single voice that honestly represents the polarities that define the subjective (1-14 and *passim*).

The narrator's voice presents us with a progressively more adequate image of Theseus as governor until, in the "First Mover" speech, the voices of the Knight and Theseus are one. The essential movement here is that of the Knight's voice which *realizes* Theseus as we see him at the close (262-65 and 370-71).

The Knight, in his manipulation of narrative materials, and Theseus, in his decisive exercise of authority, enact throughout the *Tale* parallel programs of "demystification," leading us to identify human agency rather than impersonal fortune as the spring of action and change in our lives (246, 250, 263-64).

I agree with the first proposition, which is an instance of Leicester's central argument for a reconstituted, theoretically more sophisticated version of the "dramatic" way of reading Chaucer. He objects to readings that see some parts of the *Tale* as spoken by the first character described in the *General Prologue* while other parts come from Chaucer the Poet. If the poem came to us simply as *Palamon and Arcite*, as cited in *The Legend of Good Women* (F 420-21), we would struggle to make sense of its shifts of tone and its unstable attitude toward its subject without recourse to the theory that it is haunted intermittently by a voice other than Chaucer's. Chaucer's own attribution of it to the Knight may well have come after it was written, when Chaucer was populating the *General Prologue* and asked himself what sort of character he (Chaucer) sounded like when he gave voice to this tale. The invention of the Knight leaves the voiced integrity of the *Tale* undisturbed, although it does make explicit the obvious difference from the voiced integrity of the probably contemporaneous *Troilus and Criseyde*. This line of reasoning is quite simple, once Leicester has pointed it out.

My disagreement with the second proposition follows naturally from my belief that Theseus grows over the course of the story (which, after all, spans some ten years). This is a development located *within* the story, not on its narrative surface, where, in fact, the Knight maintains a fairly consistent stance *toward which* Theseus moves. We see from the earliest lines the

Knight's confident and explicit stage management of Theseus and the others, and we recognize in this a scope of vision denied to them.

I believe, further, that the Knight's narrative acts, which he so consistently forces upon our attention, differ fundamentally in their efficacy from Theseus's chivalric acts, and so the two cannot be joined in the program of demystification attributed to them by Leicester's third proposition. We cannot evade the Knight's insistence that each turn in his story comes "by aventure or cas." The insights shared by Palamon, Arcite, and Egeus on this point are, as far as we know, correct. The problem, of course, is that they are also disabling. If we are to live in society - that is, if we are to *build* a society - we must construct habits of thought that connect our intentions with our desired outcomes through the medium of our actions. Otherwise, action becomes impossible, and society unbuilds itself.¹ But the constructive activity, bearing as it does on habits of thought, is essentially rhetorical, a matter of discourse that persuades us that our actions are meaningfully related to our goals. This is the task of the mature governor, who deploys discourse rather than armies, who sustains the naïve faith of the community in its institutions from a point outside of its naïveté. His stance is, in Leicester's term, "disenchanted," and Leicester's account of how Theseus performs government in his last speech seems to me to be definitive. My point is that Theseus arrives at this stance late. His earlier actions, as conqueror, as jailer and liberator, as benevolent master of the tournament, participate in the naïveté, the "enchantment," that is the easy target of Saturn's bolt from hell.

Patterson's analysis concentrates on the disenchantment with the chivalric ideal described by Johan Huizinga, arguing that it is this specific order, rather than order in general, that is the object of the *Tale's* attention, and that the attention is one of critique rather than celebration (167-174).²

¹ Cf. Donaldson's comment that the narrator "is, after all, an old soldier who has observed that deaths in battle have no connection with any recognizable system of earthly justice and that to expect a good man to avoid an ill end is to expose oneself to paralyzing frustration" (*Chaucer's Poetry*, 1066).

² Patterson cites Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, trans. F. Hopman (London: Edward Arnold). A new translation by Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mattitzch entitled *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) includes material omitted by Hopman.

Late Fourteenth Century chivalry is a visibly cosmetic artifice, in Patterson's view, and Chaucer exposes the contradictions between its professed ideals and its founding brutality. Patterson's critique also targets a related contradiction "in a different register" between the mastery sought and the sense of determined impotence found in chivalry's obsessive study of astrology (220). In Palamon and Arcite Patterson finds "a chivalric consciousness so narrowed in scope as to have become frozen within a double posture of erotic need and martial violence" (213). Moreover, Theseus's decision-making and the Knight's narrative strategies of "iteration and sectioning" and *occupatio* are, for Patterson, trapped in the same iron ring of constructed fatality and unacknowledged obsolescence. Patterson summarizes his argument with typical clarity and force:

... Chaucer shows that the narrowed consciousness and obsessive fixation of Arcite and Palamon are not the other against which Theseus's and the Knight's rationality is to be defined but a dark version of that very rationality itself. The same ambivalent vacillation between utter helplessness and unconstrained desire that characterizes the Theban lovers marks both the cultural order imposed by Theseus and the narrative organization articulated by the Knight. In their narrow repetitiveness and yearning for finality both Theseus and the Knight unavoidably witness to the form of consciousness that characterizes the Theban lovers. The suicidal rhetoric of the Theban lovers is more subtly reenacted in Theseus's hapless decision making and still more subtly in the narrative strategies of the Knight. And what links all three levels of analysis is the gap between structures of belief and historical experience, between late fourteenth-century chivalric ideology and the facts of life in Chaucer's England. It was noble culture's inability to come to self-consciousness, to rewrite its own ideology in relation to socioeconomic change, that the *Knight's Tale* records. (230)

Patterson certainly grants to the Knight a single narrating voice, an internally consistent subjectivity. Thus he would agree with Leicester in opposing those readers who hear Chaucer cutting in on the party line. But Patterson's version of the Knight's discursive integrity closes the Knight off from the central insights of the *Tale*, leaving them to the privileged inference of Chaucer and his readers.

As a general principle, I think that it is risky to regard as “unreliable” a narrator as shifty as the Knight.¹ When a narrator is of more than one mind about his subject matter (so much so that some readers provide him with more than one head), he is *ipso facto* in a privileged position relative to his all-too-single-minded characters. In telling their story he is likely to convey to us the whole truth that they blindly inhabit. I would argue that the Knight conveys the very truths that Patterson identifies as central to the *Tale*. He does so, moreover, in those very moments of narrative juncture that Patterson sees as evasive subterfuge. For example, in a passage cited near the beginning of this essay, the Knight tells us that he will “lete this noble Duc to Atthenes ride” without the aggrandizing details found in Boccaccio because his narrative task gives him too large a “feeld to ere.” In such a moment Patterson hears the narrator struggling to control recalcitrant material and “to articulate a world from which temporality and contingency have been banished. (213)” But surely Theseus’s heroism has been rendered contingent and temporal (i.e., obsolete) by the impatient modernism of this narrator as he repackages an old story for the shortened attention span of the Canterbury pilgrims.

The Knight’s dismissal of chivalry, expressed most clearly in these transitional passages, is no simple thing. As I noted above, the Knight, looking back on a career as a chivalric practitioner, finds himself of more than one mind about it. He still responds to its gaudy allure.² He can be drawn to “geeste ‘rim, ram, ruf, by lettre” in the classic alliterative manner when he describes the clash of Palamon’s and Arcite’s superlative armies.³ But soon enough he calls our attention to the hollowness that lends volume to this noise, and he cuts it off with the rebuke (“stynteth noyse a lite”) that introduces Saturn’s strike at Arcite. Finally, as I suggested earlier, the long *occupatio* that describes and discredits Arcite’s funeral can be read as a

¹ Wayne C. Booth defines a narrator as “*reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not” (158-159, with further references in the index).

² Cf. Leicester: 225-26, 241-42.

³ The deprecatory characterization of alliterative verse is that of the Parson (X. 43). On the Knight’s alliteration, see discussions cited in Benson, note to 2601-16 (839).

palinode on chivalry's entire elaboration of aggression and desire. And the point that I would stress here, in contrast to Patterson, is that it comes to us consciously and deliberately in the Knight's own voice. Chaucer speaks to us through him, not around him.

We can plausibly speculate on the historical circumstances that called this voice into being and suggested the theme of Theseus's education. Chaucer and his contemporaries could look back some thirty years to the triumphs of Edward III's war against France, triumphs carefully elaborated with the trappings of chivalric myth. Central to these events was the gallant Black Prince, Edward's eldest son who captured King John of France at Poitiers and seemed to incarnate the spirit of Arthurian romance. They could also look back on what followed in the 1360s and 1370s: the reversal of almost every victory of the war, the protracted Egean gloom of Edward's senectitude, and the surrender of the Black Prince to dysentery, a wasting insult to his martial glory that suggests the fate of Arcite.

The voice that responds to this historical context belongs to a knight whose rust-stained tunic shows his indifference to the panoply that filled Theseus's arena, whose resumé skips over the largely canceled glories of Crécy and Poitiers to feature distant struggles toward the always postponed victory of the Crusade. Despite what we know (and what Chaucer knew) about the corruption of the crusading impulse, the Crusade retained its symbolic importance as an irreproachable goal and final cause of the chivalric enterprise.¹ By uniting this enterprise with the grace of the Redemption, the Crusade gave knighthood its only means of transcending the inflexible necessity written in the stars. The devotion that brings the

¹ Fradenburg, in a very challenging Lacanian reading of the Tale finds that it embodies "the fantasy of chivalry... that powerfully recuperates the *jouissance* of aggressivity by rewriting it as incalculable, inscrutable love" (54). Such a mordant judgment can encompass not only the dying Arcite nobly resigning Emily to Palamon but also the Knight soberly, humbly representing the crusading ideal. The question is not whether we can assent to this judgment but whether we can attribute it to Chaucer. If I am interpreting Fradenburg correctly, she implies that we can and thus would seem to come, by a different route, to something like Jones's position, discrediting the Knight (see note 3). I doubt that we can do this. I think that we must consider Chaucer to be sufficiently of his era to posit the Knight's crusading background as a value not to be questioned, as foundational in its way as the piety of his Parson.

knight to this Canterbury pilgrimage expresses his Christian knighthood as clearly as his military exploits did. They represent his distinctive response to the bitter insight attributed to the Black Prince on his deathbed: "We are not lords here. Everything that happens here must happen. No one can turn it aside."¹ But he does not speak of his devotion, whether expressed in prayer or in the siege of Algezir. His narrative imagination – that of a Christian looking back to a pagan time and placing himself just inside the verge of its aspiration – is captivated instead by the struggles of men who have not achieved grace and who cannot transcend necessity. Their struggles do, after all, represent the daily reality of the human condition where the best response to necessity, the one that is both wise and practical, is to make a virtue of it.

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