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## Philosophical Romance: Figures of Venus in “The Knight’s Tale”<sup>1</sup>

*First Place Paper, Spring 2016*

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The Roman goddess Venus seems an unlikely figure to survive the transition from Roman antiquity to the Middle Ages. Catholic Christianity, which grew to be the dominant religion in medieval Europe, is monotheistic. Pagan gods were potential idols and/or rivals to the one God. Furthermore, Venus is a goddess, a powerful female pagan figure. A society in which men were almost exclusively responsible for defining and defending orthodox belief would ostensibly be hostile to goddesses. In spite of this, Venus had a remarkable career in the literature of the Middle Ages, as noted in Theresa Tinkle's *Medieval Venuses and Cupids*, which emphasizes the presence of not one, but multiple medieval Venuses.<sup>2</sup> Though there are commonalities between these Venuses, each particular Venus varied according to the aims of the individual writer. Any investigation of the medieval Venus requires looking at the nuances of individual texts. However, there is a larger trend of goddess figures in medieval literature that can guide our study.

Barbara Newman's *God and the Goddesses* deals with the subject of powerful female figures in medieval texts. In the book, Newman proposes a category of literature called imaginative theology, which she defines as, “the pursuit of serious religious and theological thought through the techniques of imaginative literature, especially vision, dialogue, and personification.”<sup>3</sup> While Venus is not one of the major female figures that Newman looks at in her book, the concept of imaginative theology provides a new way of reading medieval texts that include the goddess of love. Authors who wrote in genres that are not customarily associated with theology and philosophy may actually have been expressing theology in their own way. Geoffrey Chaucer is one such author who used imaginative techniques in his works.

Chaucer was steeped in mythographical and allegorical traditions that dealt with Venus and the subject of love. He knew the works of Virgil, who used the mythological Venus as a central character in his *Aeneid*. Likewise, Chaucer was familiar with Ovid's mythological and love poetry. Chaucer also produced *The Romaunt of the Rose*, a Middle English translation of the popular medieval allegory, *Roman de la Rose*. Venus figures prominently in the *Roman de la Rose* as the generalissimo of Love's army in its attack on the castle which guards the allegorical rose. There she represents female sexual desire, which allows the male lover to overcome the rose's defenses. Dante is another author who greatly influenced Chaucer. The *Commedia* makes extensive use of medieval philosophy and theology in an imaginative setting and while the mythological Venus is only mentioned a couple of times in the poem, Dante includes the celestial sphere of Venus in *Paradiso*.

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Dr. Eve Salisbury for her generous feedback and help on this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Theresa Lynn Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses and Cupids: Sexuality, Hermeneutics, and English Poetry* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Newman, *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 292.

For this reason, it is unsurprising that Chaucer includes Venus in several of his poems. Like his predecessors, Chaucer draws on the goddess's multiple personas. Tinkle's observation about the multivalence of Venus is particularly important when approaching the figure of Venus in Chaucer's poetry. Even in a single poem, Venus may play multiple, intertwined roles, depending on Chaucer's narrative and philosophical goals. His philosophical aims are particularly important in "The Knight's Tale."

Chaucer's other important translation was *Boece*, a Middle English version of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. The *Consolation's* influence on "The Knight's Tale" is clear from the frequent references to Fortune and the content of Theseus's philosophical speech near the end of the tale. Yet "The Knight's Tale" is not typically viewed as a philosophical work, but rather as a chivalric romance. At first glance, romance and philosophy appear to be as at odds as Venus and medieval Christianity. However, the cosmographical role of love is an important part of the *Consolation's* argument, a point which Chaucer makes clear by incorporating it in a chivalric romance. Through an imaginative use of Venus in "The Knight's Tale," Chaucer expounds Boethius's argument that love governs the world.

### Seeing Stars: Astrological Influence in "The Knight's Tale"

In addition to being a goddess, Venus was a planet. During the Middle Ages, she, like the six other planetary gods, was widely thought to influence events on Earth. Arcite's complaint about his and his cousin's imprisonment is one of many references to astrological influence in "The Knight's Tale."

Som wikke aspect or disposicioun  
 Of Saturne, by sum constellacioun,  
 Hath yeven us this...  
 .....  
 So stood the hevene whan that we were born.<sup>4</sup>

Arcite identifies the astrological Saturn, in conjunction with an unnamed constellation, as the cause of their misfortune.

Scholars, including V.A. Kolve and A.J. Minnis, have noted that the personalities of the main characters can be associated with particular planets.<sup>5</sup> Theseus, as a fair and just ruler, has a Jovian temperament, *i.e.* influenced by Jupiter. Emeyle's disposition, with her desire to preserve her virginity and love of hunting, recalls Diana. Arcite has a combative character and can be interpreted as the first to break the bonds of friendship between the cousins, suggesting a martial character, coming from Mars.<sup>6</sup> Palamon seems to be under the influence of Venus since he is the first person to be moved to love in the story and cares little for prowess in battle when he prays to the goddess of love. However, there are plenty of places where the characters break out of their mold, showing that planetary influence is more complex than a "one-to-one equivalence."<sup>7</sup> Free will is not destroyed by the influence of heavenly bodies. Arcite can fall in love with Emelye and Palamon can respond violently when he confronts

<sup>4</sup> "The Knight's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), ll. 1086–88, 1090.

<sup>5</sup> V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1984), 122; A.J. Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982), 109–121.

<sup>6</sup> Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, 112.

<sup>7</sup> Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 122.

Arcite at the grove.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Emelye readily abandons her devotion to chaste Diana when Arcite wins the tournament.<sup>9</sup>

Boethius's description of causality and the stars in the *Consolation of Philosophy* is an important source for Chaucer's understanding of astrology. Book IV, Prosa 6 of Chaucer's *Boece* translation reads,

Thanne, whethir that *destyne* be exercised outhir by some devyne spiritz, servantz to the *devyne purveaunce*, or elles by some soule, or elles by alle nature servynge to God, or *elles by the celestial moevynges of sterres*, or elles by the vertu of aungelis, or elles by the divers subtilite of develis, or elles by any of hem, or elles by hem alle, the destinal ordenaunce is ywoven and acomplissid [*italics mine*]<sup>10</sup>

“Sterres” here include the astronomical bodies we call planets, such as Venus.<sup>11</sup> Their “celestial moevynges” shape human “destyne” and execute “devyne purveaunce.”

Similar language is used when Theseus happens upon the cousins fighting in the woods. Since this is the second chance encounter in the poem, the narrator takes the opportunity to explain how coincidental events occur. He says that, “The destinee, ministre general, / That executeth in the world over al / The purveiaunce that God hath seyn biforn” can make something happen in a day that normally would “fallenth nat eft withinne a thousand yere.”<sup>12</sup> Seemingly chance encounters are really the result of destiny executing divine purveyance. Because Arcite has already complained of Saturn's role in shaping the cousins' lives, it is very possible that planets like Venus and Mars are the means by which this destined meeting was executed. Astrological forces are at work in “The Knight's Tale” in seen and unseen ways. However, the astrological figure of Venus is not the only manifestation of the goddess in the poem for she appears alongside mythological and allegorical Venuses.

### Myth and Allegory in the Gods' Shrines

While mythological and allegorical depictions of Venus occur throughout “The Knight's Tale,” they are particularly significant in the ekphrasis of the gods' shrines in the tournament arena. Literary ekphrasis generally takes the form of a poetic description of visual art, as occurs in “The Knight's Tale.” It bridges the gap between two mediums of artistic expression, the physical and the literal. Because ekphrasis presents visual images in written language, it is a highly imaginative literary technique.

Palamon travels to Venus's shrine at the hour of the day devoted to the planet Venus, which points to the continuing presence of the astrological Venus here.<sup>13</sup> Her shrine contains a statue of the goddess and a painting on the wall. The painting is described first,

Wroght on the wal, ful pitous to biholde,  
The broken slespes, and the sikes colde,  
The sacred teeris, and the waymentynge,

<sup>8</sup> “The Knight's Tale,” ll. 1576-78, 1594-95.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 2680-82.

<sup>10</sup> “Boece,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), ll. 93-101.

<sup>11</sup> Dante similarly refers to the planets as stars in his *Commedia*. He does so most notably in the famous last line of *Paradiso*, “l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle” (“The love that moves the sun and the other stars”).

<sup>12</sup> “The Knight's Tale,” ll. 1663-65, 1669.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, l. 2217.

The firy strokes of the desiryng  
 That loves servantz in this lyf enduren;  
 The othes that hir covenantz assuren;<sup>14</sup>

This is followed by a group of personifications similar to those found in *The Romaunt of the Rose*. There is “Plesaunce and Hope, Desir, Foolhardynesse, / Beautee and Youthe, Bauderie, Richesse” to name a few.<sup>15</sup> “Festes, instruments, caroles, daunces” are followed by Venus’s dwelling on “the mount of Citheroun.”<sup>16</sup> Then the narrator describes portraits of famous people who have been dominated by the influence of Venus. Pagan figures like Hercules and Medea are placed beside the biblical Solomon. Each is presented as an *exemplum* of the negative effects of love.

The statue provides Chaucer with an opportunity to draw on the mythographical handbook genre, which includes works like *Mythologiae* by Fulgentius. Chaucer carefully follows the description used by Fulgentius.<sup>17</sup>

The statue of Venus, glorious for to se,  
 Was naked, fletyng in the large see,  
 And fro the navele doun al covered was  
 With wawes grene, and brighte as any glas.  
 A citole in hir right hand hadde she,  
 And on hir heed, ful semely for to se,  
 A rose gerland, fressh and wel smellyng;  
 Above hir heed hir dowves flikeryng.<sup>18</sup>

Her son Cupid stands before her, blinded and bearing arrows. The depiction belongs to the tradition of Venus *anadyomene* or “of the sea.”<sup>19</sup> Mythographers established an allegorical significance for each of these details, though as Tinkle has argued, the significance could vary with the aims of the mythographer. For example, in Fulgentius’s *Mythologiae*, roses are associated with Venus because roses “both grow red and have thorns, as lust blushes at the outrage to modesty and pricks with the sting of sin; and as the rose gives pleasure, but is swept away by...swift movement...so lust is pleasant for a moment, but then disappears forever.”<sup>20</sup> A short description of a statue of Venus can be full of allegorical significance, though the narrator refuses to fix the meaning by interpreting it for us.

Since the primary focus of this essay is Venus, I will only briefly mention the ekphrasis for the other two shrines in the tournament arena. Arcite visits Mars’s shrine which, belonging to the god of war and strife, is more sinister than Venus. The narrator tells us that “Noght was foryeten by the infortune of Marte.”<sup>21</sup> Likewise, Emelye, who desires to remain unmarried, visits Diana’s shrine. Its description reflects the triune identity of the goddess as chaste huntress, Lucina, the goddess associated with childbirth, and Persephone, wife of Pluto.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., ll. 1919-1924.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., ll. 1925-26.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., ll. 1930, 1936.

<sup>17</sup> Derek S. Brewer, “Chaucer’s Venuses,” in *A Wyf Ther Was: Essays in Honour of Paule Mertens-Fonck* (Liège: Université de Liège, 1992), 32.

<sup>18</sup> “The Knight’s Tale,” ll. 1956-62.

<sup>19</sup> Tinkle, *Medieval Venuses and Cupids*, 80.

<sup>20</sup> *Fulgentius the Mythographer*, trans. Leslie George Whitbread (Columbus, OH.: Ohio State University Press, 1971), 66.

<sup>21</sup> “The Knight’s Tale,” l. 2021.

Venus, Mars, and Diana are equally presented as astrological, mythological, and allegorical figures.<sup>22</sup>

Kolve attempts to make a distinction between the painting part of the shrines and the statues. He says that the murals belong to a tradition of art that depicts the “children of the planets,” people following occupations and behaviors beneath the planetary god associated with them.<sup>23</sup> While this is true, the painting is far more complex. Solomon is a straightforward child of Venus and “The broken slepes, and the sikes colde” are behaviors of those who are in love. However, “Plesaunce and Hope” belong to the *fin'amor* tradition and thus are only tangentially related to the planetary Venus. Furthermore, “the mount of Citheroun” is mythographical in its association with the goddess of Roman antiquity. The description, as elsewhere in Chaucer's depiction of the gods, defies attempts by interpreters to fit it into strict categories.

Another example of Chaucer's tendency to mix versions of the gods appears in Palamon's complaint while in the tower.

But I moot been in prisoun thurgh Saturne,  
And eek thurgh Juno, jalous and eek wood  
That hath destroyed wel ny al the blood  
Of Thebes, with his waste walles wyde.  
And Venus sleeth me on that oother syde  
For jalousie, and fere of him Arcite.<sup>24</sup>

Palamon blames Saturn, Juno, and Venus for his misfortune. The inclusion of Juno here is odd. Statius does depict her in his *Thebaid* as the enemy of Thebes, which is the home city of Palamon and Arcite. However, Juno was never a celestial body like Saturn and Venus. An insistence on a single meaning in this passage would constrain us to interpret Venus and Saturn as only mythological. However, Arcite has already blamed the cousins' imprisonment on the astrological Saturn. Attempts to make a god mean one thing at a time—whether astrological, mythological, or allegorical—are fraught with difficulty. In contrast to approaches such as that used by Kolve, the solution is to recognize that all meanings are possible at the same time.

Chauncey Wood in *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars* argues that such ambiguity in relation to the gods “does not indicate a 'confusion,' but rather a disinclination to distinguish.”<sup>25</sup> Multiple meanings have been conflated. Chaucer is free to emphasize one or all as his narrative demands. When Mars and Venus are in heaven to debate which of the two should be allowed to prevail in the matter of the tournament, the Saturn that arrives to settle their dispute is astrological *and* mythological. He is described as an old man who calls Venus his “dere doghter.”<sup>26</sup> Yet Saturn can also talk about his, “cours, that hath so wyde for to turne” and refer to his baleful influence when he dwells in the astrological “signe of the leoun.”<sup>27</sup> The figure of Saturn here is simultaneously astrological and mythological. Wood's advice to interpreters faced with this ambiguity is to consider the context, rather than assume a fixed

<sup>22</sup> The goddess Diana was associated with the moon.

<sup>23</sup> *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 115.

<sup>24</sup> “The Knight's Tale,” ll. 1328–33.

<sup>25</sup> *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars: Poetic Uses of Astrological Imagery* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), 62.

<sup>26</sup> “The Knight's Tale,” l. 2453.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, ll. 2453, 2462.

meaning.<sup>28</sup> The context in which the god or goddess appears will suggest the possible range of meanings.

A similar opinion to that of Wood is found in an article by James Dean. Though exploring Chaucer's use of allegory, Dean recognizes the poet's tendency for ambiguity. Dean argues that Chaucer will often "shade into an allegorical mode without" the narrative becoming a full-fledged allegory.<sup>29</sup> Writing in a quasi-allegorical manner and using symbols with rich allegorical potential are techniques that Chaucer uses to add depth to his narrative. "For Chaucer makes use of allegory, or something approaching allegory, to refine, color, and ornament his narratives, but not as an end in itself."<sup>30</sup> Approaching Chaucer's texts with a perspective that something is either a full allegory or not one at all is unhelpful. An interpreter must follow Chaucer's allegory as far as he takes it but no further.

Chaucer's technique is both flexible and powerful. He can suggest allegorical meaning, as with the statue of Venus, without providing a fixed interpretation. This invites the reader to participate in the act of interpretation. Likewise, using Venus as a multivalent figure allows him to present a much more complex story than if the goddess had been limited to a single meaning. Such is Chaucer's narrative technique in "The Knight's Tale." Now we will turn to what the tale is trying to do through the goddess Venus.

### Theseus's Speech and the "Faire Cheyne of Love"

Prior to announcing the marriage of Palamon and Emelye, Theseus makes a Boethian speech about causality and the First Mover. Initially, a discourse on philosophy seems an odd way to lead into a wedding announcement. Yet when we consider the speech in light of the argument that Chaucer is advancing through the narrative, the wedding announcement becomes surprisingly appropriate.

Theseus begins his speech with these lines:

The First Moevere of the cause above,  
 When he first made the faire cheyne of love,  
 .....  
 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.<sup>31</sup>

This is strikingly similar to the final section of the second book of *The Consolation of Philosophy*. In *Boece* this occurs in Book II, Metrum 8. The relevant portion says that, "al this accordaunce [and] ordenaunce of thynges is bounde with love, that governeth erthe and see, and hath also comandements to the hevене."<sup>32</sup>

According to Boethius's argument in this section, love binds the physical world together. Without Love, chaos erupts, for "yif this love slakede the bridelis, alle thynges that now loven hem togidres wolden make a batayle contynuely."<sup>33</sup> If love relaxes its hold, the elements that

<sup>28</sup> Chaucer and the Country of the Stars, 68.

<sup>29</sup> "Spiritual Allegory and Chaucer's Narrative Style: Three Test Cases," *The Chaucer Review* 18, no. 4 (April 1, 1984): 274.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> "The Knight's Tale," ll. 2987–88, 2991–93.

<sup>32</sup> "Boece," ll. 13–16.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., ll. 16–18.



make up the world will come into conflict because of their “contrarious qualites.”<sup>34</sup> Boethius then jumps from macrocosm to microcosm. What is true at a cosmological level is true for human relations: “This love halt togidres peples joyned with an holy boond, and knyttetth sacrements of mariages of chaste loves; and love enditeth lawes to trewe felawes.”<sup>35</sup> The same love that binds the elements of the world together also holds people together, whether in marriage or in true friendships. The marriage between Palamon and Emelye, which will unite two people and the cities of Thebes and Athens, is an expression on a human level of the way the “faire cheyne of love” unites contradictory elements on a cosmic one.

The power of love, both to unite and to order the affairs of the world, has been a theme throughout the tale, with the figure of Venus as its primary representative. Venus and Mars promised their respective supplicants that they will grant their requests. The result is a squabble in heaven, in which both parties argue before Jupiter that their side should prevail.

And right anon swich strif ther is bigonne,  
For thilke grauntyng, in the hevene above  
Bitwixe Venus, the goddess of love,  
And Mars, the stierne god armipotent  
That Juppiter was bisy it to stente,<sup>36</sup>

Jupiter is powerless to stop the conflict until Saturn arrives. Saturn is in a unique position of authority since he is the mythological father of both Venus and Jupiter. He resolves the conflict by promising that Palamon, “Shal have his lady... Though Mars shal helpe his knyght.”<sup>37</sup> Arcite is allowed to win the tournament, but as he is exulting in his victory, Pluto, acting on Saturn's request, sends a Fury from hell to spook Arcite's horse. The horse falls saddle downward on Arcite, crushing him and, despite the best efforts of doctors, causing his death. On his death bed, Arcite praises the knightly attributes of Palamon and tells Emelye that “if that evere ye shul ben a wyf, / Foryet nat Palamaon, the gentil man.”<sup>38</sup> The division between the cousins that was caused by their love for Emelye is repaired. Arcite gains the victory, but Palamon wins Emelye.

Commentators on the poem have noted that each young person technically gets what they prayed for at the gods' shrines.<sup>39</sup> Arcite's prayer to Mars focuses on achieving victory in the tournament. He finishes it by petitioning the god of war to, “Yif me [victorie]; I aske thee namore.”<sup>40</sup> Palamon's prayer to Venus is so centered on possession of Emelye that he tells the goddess,

Ne I ne axe nat tomorwe to have victorie  
Ne renoun in this cas, ne veyne glorie  
Of pris of armes blowen up and doun;  
But I wolde have fully possessioun  
Of Emelye...<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., ll. 2-3. The four elements: earth, air, water, and fire, each had the quality of either being hot or cold and dry or wet. Earth was cold and dry, water cold and wet, air hot and wet, and fire hot and dry. Cold and hot and dry and wet are contradictory qualities.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., ll. 19-25.

<sup>36</sup> “The Knight's Tale,” ll. 2438-42.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., ll. 2472-73.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., ll. 2787-90, 2796-97.

<sup>39</sup> Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity*, 136.

<sup>40</sup> “The Knight's Tale,” l. 2420.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., ll. 2239-43.



It is only Saturn's strictly literal interpretation of the prayers that provides reconciliation. Even so, the intent of Arcite's prayer is not answered. The argument between Venus and Mars shows that the gods both interpret fulfillment of the requests as victory *and* possession of Emelye. Arcite's consequent winning of Emelye is extremely short lived. Saturn's solution favors his daughter and her petitioner far more than it does Mars. The "goddess of love" comes out as the final victor in her heavenly battle with the god of war.

The narrator has already hinted at the power of love in the poem. He makes an observation in the ekphrasis of Venus's shrine that has no parallel in the other descriptions. "Ne may with Venus *holde champartie* / For as hir list the world than may she *gye*. / Lo, alle these folk so caught were in her *las*" [italics mine].<sup>42</sup> The *Middle English Dictionary* defines "holde champartye" as "to hold one's own..., contend successfully."<sup>43</sup> This plays out vividly in the conflict between Venus and Mars over whose supplicant should have his petition granted. As noted in the previous paragraph, Venus is the true champion in the heavenly squabble. Palamon receives exactly what he wants, while Mars is only able to deliver a hollow victory to Arcite.

"Gye" is also significant and ranges in meaning from guide to rule over.<sup>44</sup> It occurs in a few other places in the text, but most notably in Theseus speech before the marriage of Palamon and Emelye. There he uses it when discussing the futility of going against Jupiter's will: "And rebel is to him that al may *gye*" [italics mine].<sup>45</sup> Two different gods are posed as guiding or ruling over the world. Theseus presents Jupiter, while the narrator points to Venus. The omnipotence of Jupiter has already been undermined by his failure to stop the argument between Venus and Mars. Saturn, who is the father of Jupiter and Venus, is the only one with the ability to stop the conflict. He does so by providing a solution that favors his daughter. Venus, not Jupiter, is presented as the one that truly guides the world.

"Las" is also a significant word, meaning a cord or occasionally a net.<sup>46</sup> The "las" is a strikingly similar object to the "faire cheyne of love." Venus with her "las" mirrors the "Firste Moevere" with his "faire cheyne of love." At the same time, Venus, as the allegorical, mythological, and astrological cause of love, can be identified with the "faire cheyne of love" itself. She is one of the means by which God exercises his "devyne purveance." Her influence causes the young knights to seek marriage just like love does in *Boece*. She also overcomes the god of war as Boethian love keeps contrary elements from "batayle." Neither humans nor the gods nor the elements can contend with love. This accords well with Book II, Metrum 8 in *Boece*: "O weleful were mankynde, yif thilke love that governeth hevene governede yowr corages!"<sup>47</sup> Love is the power that governs the heavens and the material world, while humans must choose whether they will submit of their own free will. Whether willing or not, every character in "The Knight's Tale" is brought under the governance of love by the end.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., ll. 1949–51.

<sup>43</sup> "Champartie," *Middle English Dictionary* (University of Michigan, 2001), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED7211>.

<sup>44</sup> "Gien," *Middle English Dictionary* (University of Michigan, 2001), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED18525>.

<sup>45</sup> "The Knight's Tale," l. 3046.

<sup>46</sup> "Lās," *Middle English Dictionary* (University of Michigan, 2001), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED24706>.

<sup>47</sup> "Boece," ll. 25–26.

### Venus and the One God

As noted in the introduction, Barbara Newman examines the ways that female figures are drafted into the service of medieval theologians and philosophers in *God and the Goddesses*. One of these female figures is love, which often becomes a symbol for divine Love. She writes,

Lady Love, on the other hand, “ascends.” In texts governed by this goddess, sacred and secular rhetorics converge, elevating themes and tropes of courtly eroticism to a high sacrality, until the figures of Caritas, Dame Amour, Frau Minne become not just personifications of human loving, but also names or emanations of the One God.<sup>48</sup>

The figure of Venus in “The Knight's Tale” has a similar two-fold nature. In her mythological and astrological guise, she inspires the young knights to fall in love and aids Palamon in his quest to acquire Emelye. Through these actions, she becomes identified with romantic desire and emotion. At the same time, the image of Venus with her “las” is very similar to the “First Moevere” and his “faire cheyne of love.” Venus, the goddess of love, becomes in the poem an emanation of the First Mover, the one God of medieval Christianity.<sup>49</sup>

Newman considers the above an example of what she calls imaginative theology. Though the definition of imaginative theology was given earlier, it is worth repeating here. Imaginative theology is “the pursuit of serious religious and theological thought through the techniques of imaginative literature, especially vision, dialogue, and personification.”<sup>50</sup> Chaucer's presentation of Venus and Boethian philosophy in “The Knight's Tale” includes these imaginative techniques. Furthermore, he relies heavily on ekphrasis, an imaginative technique that Newman does not list. Ekphrasis is highly imaginative, standing at the intersection of visual and literary art.

The concept of imaginative theology also suggests the reason why Chaucer chose to include Boethian philosophy in a chivalric romance. Just as Theseus recognizes the appropriateness of a Boethian discourse before a marriage announcement, so a romance is a fitting place to expound Boethian ideas about the function of love in the world. Venus is not the only one who “ascends.” Chivalric romance as a genre is itself elevated to the level of theological and philosophical discourse. “The Knight's Tale” becomes a philosophical romance.

### The Many Faces of Venus

One might object that Venus is the root of conflict in “The Knight's Tale.” Rival love for Emelye is the cause of Palamon and Arcite's hatred and jealousy. Does not Venus divide rather than unite? The power of love to be both positive and negative is an ambiguity stretching back to Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>51</sup> Human love can ennoble and unite people in the bonds of friendship. At other times, it can provoke them to jealousy. We must also recognize that love is not the only power acting on the cousins. Each has free will to rebel against the

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<sup>48</sup> *God and the Goddesses*, 291.

<sup>49</sup> This again recalls Dante's “love that moves the sun and the other stars” which fuses the image of the First Mover with that of divine Love, the one God of medieval Christian theology.

<sup>50</sup> *God and the Goddesses*, 292.

<sup>51</sup> Barry Windeatt, “Afterlives: The Fabulous History of Venus,” in *Traditions and Innovations in the Study of Medieval English Literature: The Influence of Derek Brewer*, ed. Barry Windeatt and Charlotte Brewer (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013), 271.

impulse to love, hence the recommendation above from *Boece* that humans allow love to rule in their “corages.” Furthermore, the presence of Venus does not exclude the influence of Mars. Both cousins display the effects of the god of war in their actions.

Another explanation can be found by returning to Tinkle. She has aptly pointed out that medieval authors freely used Venus in complex and contradictory ways, even within a single text.<sup>52</sup> Writers were more interested in their moral or philosophical goals than establishing a single unchanging interpretation of the goddess. As a figure for human love and desire, Venus could very well cause conflict between human beings, but as an image of the First Mover, her effect is to bring unity. Her multivalence allows her to be many things at once, depending on the demands of the narrative.

In “The Knight's Tale,” Chaucer uses Venus to give imaginative expression to Boethius's argument that love governs the world. Chaucer does so by drawing on Venus's multivalence as an astrological, mythological, and allegorical figure. Whether using ekphrasis or allegory, he suggests meaning, while refusing to provide a fixed interpretation. His imaginative technique invites the reader to discover the deeper meaning present in the romance. It is this which explains Venus's remarkable survival in the Middle Ages. Chaucer and other writers have found a way to incorporate her into the intellectual framework of monotheistic Christianity. Venus becomes the means of her own reconciliation with the one God.

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<sup>52</sup> *Medieval Venuses and Cupids*, 88–89.

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