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AS DIFFERENT AS NIGHT AND DAY: PALAMON
AND ARCITE RECONSIDERED

by

William Hamilton

A Thesis
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements of the
Degree of Master of Arts
The Medieval Institute

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
December 1999

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1999

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Thomas Seiler, without whose encouragement, advice, and many valuable conversations I could not have finished this thesis. Thanks to my committee members, Dr. Paul Szarmach and Dr. Larry Syndergaard, for taking the time from their busy schedules to read this unexpectedly long work and for their many valuable suggestions. Thanks to Dr. Richard Emmerson for his continued encouragement and for helping me with this thesis in its infancy, when it began as an unexpectedly long paper. Thanks to Dr. Nicholas Margaritas for being a continued inspiration and for teaching me how to read. Thanks to John Kerr for his friendship and always illuminating conversations (may our research coincidentally cross paths again). And, lastly, thanks to my wife Patricia for listening to draft after draft, for sharing in my triumphs and enthusiasm, for suffering my many anxieties and frustrations, and, most of all, for believing in me.

William Hamilton

AS DIFFERENT AS NIGHT AND DAY: PALAMON AND ARCITE RECONSIDERED

William Hamilton, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 1999

Through an analysis of characterization and the sub-text of infernal allusions to the myths of Orpheus and the ravishment of Proserpina, my thesis demonstrates that the Theban cousins Palamon and Arcite are not only distinct but diametrically opposed characters who are more central to *The Knight's Tale* than the present critical consensus allows. Chapter I analyzes Charles Muscatine, who so convincingly put an end to the once lively debate over the characterization of the cousins that the proposition that they are indistinguishable remains an *a priori* assumption in the criticism of the poem to this day. Chapter II analyzes the characterization of the cousins, principally in dramatic terms, showing that Palamon's actions are patently villainous and Arcite's heroic and that Arcite's love for Emelye is genuine and Palamon's feigned. Chapter III explores the allusions that underscore the cousins' differences, showing that Palamon is likened to Pluto while Arcite pursues Emelye in the manner of Orpheus and Perseus for Eurydice and Proserpina, respectively, and dies as Proserpina in Emelye's place. The concluding chapter presents, in brief, a larger argument that explores the characterization of the cousins in the context of the tale as a whole, ascribing the failure of critics to fully recognize the cousins' differences to the interpretive failures of Theseus and the tale's narrator, the Knight.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In *The Knight's Tale* Palamon and Arcite are first introduced in terms of balance and symmetry that are so pronounced that the two seem as one. The scavengers find them as

*Two yonge knyghtes liggyng by and by
Bothe in oon armes wrought full richely,
Of whiche two Arcite highte that oon,
And that oother knyght highte Palamon.* (1011–14; my emphasis)¹

It seems far from poetic accident that in the last of these lines the meter rises and is suspended briefly in the rhymed spondee of the central foot, from which it emerges, in a metrical reversal of the trochees of the previous line where Arcite is named, descending into iamb and trailing pyrrhic as Palamon is named in turn. This metrical balance is underscored by the chiasmus of “Arcite highte that oon” and “that oother . . . highte Palamon,” and, as a subtle example of form in the service of content, together they present each of the cousins more sharply as though reflecting the other in a mirror. Indeed Palamon and Arcite appear to be more than cousins, for their likeness is that of twins who are not merely identical but, having fallen on the field together, of the deepest fraternal bond; and promptly recognized by the heralds as being “Of Thebes, and of

¹Line numbers of Chaucer's texts refer to Larry D. Benson ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).

sustren two yborn" (1019; again, my emphasis), their symmetry is underscored by symmetrical mothers from whose wombs they seem to have emerged at the same time as though from one, just as together they are delivered bloody and lifeless from the *taas*. Found, identified, and later imprisoned as a unit, to hear them speak we might expect them to finish each other's thoughts and to sound like two halves of a single mind.

There is no arguing that here the cousins are rigorously devoid of characterization, but nowhere else in *The Knight's Tale* are they so portrayed, because nowhere else do they play so small a part in their own portrayal. It is astonishing to realize that rather than being wholly indicative of the cousins throughout the poem, our introduction to them is calculated more for local effect within it. It is only as objective and reliable a portrait as that of any of the *Canterbury Pilgrims*: unavoidable facts of character are no doubt here revealed, but they are more striking for the highly individual and subjective light in which they are cast. What we have been given is a deceptive instance of Chaucerian perspectivism that, like the General Prologue portraits, tells us as much if not more about the observer than about those observed. To be more specific, the cousins' introduction tells us more about their captors' fears than it does about the cousins themselves or any real danger they might pose—to which end Chaucer's departure from Boccaccio is abundantly clear.

In the *Teseida*, though wounded and near death, the cousins are found awake and vocal. They despair of their wounds (II, 85)² and in word and demeanor at once

²All references to the *Teseida* are to stanza numbers, which are consistent for both the Italian and English editions quoted throughout. Quotations from the Italian refer to *Teseida Della Nozze di Emilia*, Alberto

announce their disdain for Theseus and confirm the danger of their Theban descent: they bear “[un] altiero aspetto / che dio nell’ira lor facea dispetto” (II, 86) [[a] haughty expression, that seemed to challenge God in their wrath] and,

I qua’ Teseo come gli ebbe veduti,
d’alto affar li stimò, lor dimandando
se del sangue de Cadmo fosser suti.
E l’un di loro altiero al suo dimando
rispose: — In casa sua nati e cresciuti
fummo, e de’ suo’ nepoti semo; e quando
Creon contra di te l’empie arme prese,
fummo con lui, co’ nostri, a sue difese. — (II, 88)

[When Theseus saw them, he reckoned that they were of high rank, and asked them if they were of the blood of Cadmus. One of them, indignant because of the question, answered, “We were born and grew up in his house. We are of his grandchildren. When Creon took up his ruthless arms against you, we were with him and with our men in his defense.”]

In *The Knight’s Tale*, Chaucer has replaced this open and unquestionable hostility with the silent symmetry of the cousins’ introduction, and the change speaks no better of them—indeed, they are even more charged with foreboding potential. Their discovery breaks the morbid hush of the Theban landscape more eloquently than in the *Teseida*, where they maintain the presence of Thebes in a continued sounding of its albeit enfeebled voice. Since Palamon and Arcite are the sole surviving heirs to the Theban throne and bear the same if not identical claim to their heritage, their miraculous survival of what seemed a total and unsparing slaughter qualifies the confident victory of Athenian chivalry as being much less definitive or resounding than we might at first

Limentani, ed., *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, v. 2 (Verona: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1964. Quotations in English refer to Bernadette Marie McCoy, trans., *The Book of Theseus: Teseida delle Nozze d’Emilia* (New York: Medieval Text Association, 1974).

have supposed. Having endured far more than Boccaccio's cousins, they appear upon discovery as eerily silent portents. Their introduction reveals them as equal and complicitous agents of a force fundamentally more threatening than the opposition to Athens in which they were engaged when they fell, and more threatening, merely, than Creon's egregious act of cruelty. More than Boccaccio's cousins, Palamon and Arcite threaten the return of the tyranny and strife that was crushed with Creon's defeat, and their threat is confirmed by their gruesome entry into the narrative: for, "torn from the taas" of the day's wreck and carnage, their emergence is reminiscent of the warriors sprung fresh from the harvest of the Caedmian field.³

This portrait of the cousins is no doubt familiar to most readers, and no doubt representative of the cousins whom they understand to inhabit *The Knight's Tale*. Yet it is easily overlooked that the cousins play a singularly inactive role in this portrait's formation. In their liminal state, "nat fully quyke, ne fully dede," (1015) they are unconscious and unable to give voice. Prevented thus from speaking for themselves, they are allowed neither to confirm their harsh portrayal nor to defend themselves against it. Left to speak in their stead are the dumb accoutrements of war, the proud arms of Thebes, and the understandable enmity of their captors, and they combine to make rather damning testimony—testimony that in the *Teseida* is the cousins' own. Given the legacy of Thebes and the unsettling sign heralding the cousins' discovery, surely the decision

³Winthrop Wetherbee, "Romance and Epic in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 2 (1990): 318. See also William F. Woods, "Up and Down, To and Fro: Spatial Relationships in *The Knight's Tale*," in *Rebels and Rivals: The Contestive Spirit in The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Susanna Greer Fein, David Raybin, and Peter C. Braeger (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), 39–40.

of Theseus to imprison them perpetually without ransom is cruel but not without cause. But his measures are based purely on evidence of circumstance and a pattern of family conduct and not, as in the *Teseida*, on an open confession of hostility. To Theseus, the cousins are dual expressions of a single threat, though, whether or not their introduction does them justice, it reliably represents only how Theseus sees them.

This essay is a revisitation and revival of the long-dead debate concerning the differentiation and characterization of Palamon and Arcite in *The Knight's Tale*. It is a debate that seems, at this time in Chaucer studies, a strangely difficult one to broach. Nearly fifty years ago, Charles Muscatine brought forward the portrait of the indistinguishable cousins in his famous essay "Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*," against the then active debate among scholars concerning their characterization.⁴ His efforts, which would be followed some years later by his influential book, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, were a near death-blow to the debate.⁵ Since then, Muscatine's proposition that the cousins' initial indistinguishability and lack of characterization is the product both of the poem's essential medievalness and of the peremptory prescriptions of romance has so thoroughly pervaded the field that it would take too much time and space to chart it here. Indeed, so strong are the critical preconceptions that hold sway over *The Knight's Tale* that for most of today's critics the indistinguishable cousins are *a priori* to most readings of it. Even in *The Riverside*

⁴Charles Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*," *PMLA* 65 (1950): 911–29.

⁵Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956).

Chaucer, the current standard edition of Chaucer, it is the exclusive and unquestioned reading presented to the new Chaucer student approaching the poem for the first time. In describing romance, the genre of which *The Knight's Tale* is presumed to be a pure exemplar, the parameters of understanding the poem are thus laid out:

Romance is in many ways the exact opposite of its successor, the realistic novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. . . . The romancer is consequently little concerned with providing realistic motivations for the actions; these are controlled by thematic necessity rather than a lifelike chain of causes and effects; they usually have less narrative importance than the emotions to which they give rise, and often add less to the advancement of the plot than to the creation of the balanced, symmetrical structures that inform the more sophisticated romances. There is little attempt at creating lifelike characters: the invariably noble heroes and heroines are more types than individuals, and their actions, manners, emotions, and speech represent an ideal of aristocratic conduct. . . . [T]he effect at which the romancer aims is not that of a convincing representation of life but rather of an ideal image of what life might be if all behaved as nobly as the heroes and heroines of the romance.⁶

Though this description may be true of romance generally, it is, unfortunately, a misrepresentation of both *The Knight's Tale* and the unique complexities of Chaucer's art. It is a powerful testament to the extent of Muscatine's influence that he should be so glaringly present and at the same time so completely effaced from it and from so many works of criticism that assume, with equal silence on matters of provenance, the indistinguishability of the cousins. As a young Chaucer student myself, my own discovery of this assumption, which seemed to me then a tacit conspiracy on the part of the field—or what E. Talbot Donaldson has called “a categorical imperative upon the

⁶Larry D. Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 7.

critic to operate in a certain way regardless of how the poem is telling him to operate”⁷—led me on a search that brought me to Muscatine and beyond him to the sources on which his dictum on characterization was based. Yet, curiously, though many of the bases for Muscatine’s position on the poem have since been either dismantled or called seriously in question, the indistinguishable cousins remains, with few exceptions, an unquestioned fact. What I offer here is not only a serious challenge to this supposed fact but also the strongest argument for characterization and the recognition of the cousins’ differences yet made. It pretends, however, to be no more than a reading. Just as Muscatine’s essay, “Form, Texture, and Meaning” presented a critical challenge, on textual grounds, for a revision of the then prevalent assumption in the reading of the poem, so too does mine. And, like his essay, mine offers no theory of Chaucer’s poetics nor especially a general theory of medieval literature that would account for characterization in *The Knight’s Tale*. Since at this time our understanding of Chaucer is still expanding, such an attempt would be premature, and, in any case, Chaucerians had to wait six years for Muscatine’s theory in *Chaucer and the French Tradition*. This study must suffice as an essay upon the evidence Chaucer himself provides toward the understanding of his poetics and, necessarily, of medieval literature, which at times employ a realistically conceived characterization, not because an overly persistent anachronistic aesthetic wants to find it there, but because, in fact, it is there.

⁷E. Talbot Donaldson, “Patristic Exegesis in the Criticism of Medieval Literature: The Opposition,” in *Speaking of Chaucer* (Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, 1983), 135. Reprinted from *Critical Approaches to Medieval Literature: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1958–1959*, ed. Dorothy Bethurum (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960).

Chaucer has not made Palamon and Arcite indistinct throughout *The Knight's Tale*, he has merely made them indistinct exclusively to the judging gaze of Theseus. As a consequence, their introduction by no means does them justice: it neither recognizes their differences nor accurately represents either of them individually. *The Knight's Tale* reveals more of the cousins to its audience than Theseus ever sees of them. When they are reintroduced—or, rather, when they are first made capable of introducing themselves—the portraits they give us are anything but indistinct and their portraiture has been realized entirely with the careful brush-strokes of characterization. When we revisit them in the tower dungeon, where they are safely imprisoned and theoretically no longer a matter of Theseus' concern, they are awake and restored to health: no longer limp and lifeless, each is allowed to give voice to a distinct character that is dramatically conceived and achieved with astonishing economy. As characters, Palamon and Arcite are not only distinct but as different as night and day, and all the ethical implications of the analogy obtain. Whether or not critics have found them to be identical, they have been unanimous that Palamon and Arcite are the same insofar as they love Emelye, though, for some, each manifests different loves. But to find them both to love is to credit Palamon with too much. There is no doubting the sincerity of Arcite's love, but it is difficult to find that Palamon loves at all; and though the danger of Thebes anticipated by their discovery is realized in the cousins' conflict, it is attributable only to Palamon, while Arcite remains entirely free of guilt.

When Muscatine redefined the critical debate over the tale, he did so, in part, in

terms of the opposing forces of order and disorder—terms that, as Lee Patterson observes, “have continued to govern the critical discussion until the present moment.”⁸ Its theme, he argued, is the pursuit of the noble life, a pursuit that defines and realizes itself in “the struggle between noble design and chaos.”⁹ Since the cousins’ conflict repeats the strife between Etioles and Polynices in Statius’ *Thebeid* and thus the fratricidal legacy of Thebes, if it is understood that they both love and that their conflict is love’s destructive consequence, it is easy to locate them together on the side of disorder and thus in opposition to the efforts of Theseus, who strives in turn to curb their destructive impulses and to yoke their illicit desire with marriage. But what few critics have noticed, and none to its fullest extent, is that this conflict between order and disorder is most active in the cousins’ conflict itself. Palamon does not love, he merely adopts a pretense of love to disguise his fears and to justify his violent tendencies. He is the principal source of disorder in *The Knight’s Tale*, and his false proclamations of love, of which he seems eventually even to convince himself, all too easily compel love’s condemnation as one of the poem’s moral themes. But Arcite genuinely loves and it is his love that makes him the hero of the tale. Love liberates him from the dark compulsions of his Theban blood and exonerates him of the crimes with which his lineage associates him. Love restrains and orders him and makes him the example

⁸For a valuable survey of the place of Muscatine within and influence upon the criticism of *The Knight’s Tale*, see Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 165–67.

⁹Muscatine, “Form, Texture, and Meaning,” 929.

against which Palamon must be judged. Love leads Arcite along a difficult path of “the noble life,” though it is not a path that Muscatine had in mind. In the end that path proves all too difficult, if not terribly cruel, whereas the dark path that Palamon follows leads him eventually to forgiveness and reward. We shall see that it is the tale’s overwhelming irony that it ends with Arcite as its tragic hero and Palamon as its comedic villain.

Arcite’s heroism and Palamon’s villainy run deeper, however, than the drama of their actions, and thus so too does the extent of their differences. That the poem runs with the undercurrents of Statius and the philosophical moralizing of Boethius is clear. But more subtle, more active, and largely unnoticed and unexplored is the confluence of Boethius, Ovid, and Claudian that comprises the dark and highly allusive frame of infernal descent and ascent for love. One aspect of the descent is Orphic, and, though drawn from Boethius’s famous recounting of that myth in the *Consolation of Philosophy*, it has been recast in *The Knight’s Tale* where it serves as commentary upon both its anti-amatory moralization in the *Consolation* and the tale’s own use of the Boethian system generally. Chaucer employs the myth to valorize love and to present it as an ordering principle that surpasses the very philosophy that admonishes against it. But Arcite does not merely pursue Emelye as Orpheus did Eurydice: once released from prison upon Perothius’ request, Arcite also pursues Emelye as Perothius did Proserpina, descending to the Underworld to free her from Pluto. The Proserpina myth is crucial to understanding *The Knight’s Tale*: it not only underscores the nature and quality of

Arcite's actions but also makes us appreciate the threat to Emelye that his actions, in part at least, unwittingly avert. For the Proserpina myth is not complete without Pluto, which is Palamon's role to fill. But is not Ovid's Pluto, enamored by the prick of cupid's arrow, whom Palamon plays; Palamon, who acts not out of love but out of pride and a profound sense of injustice, is suited more to Claudian's Pluto, who, more out of rage for the injustice of his bridelessness than out of any real desire for a bride, threatens chaos and war upon heaven if he is not given his due. Nor is the Proserpina myth complete without the threat of *raptus*, which Palamon must inevitably fulfill. But it is both a testament to Arcite's love and a mark of his heroic and tragic success that the tale's impending *raptus* is fulfilled with him as its victim in Emelye's stead. Emelye is not spared her marriage with Palamon any more than Proserpina is spared hers with Pluto, but if some sense of *raptus* is still preserved in her arranged marriage, at least it is not the violent marriage Palamon originally intended, for Arcite has carried the violence for her. With *raptus* fulfilled in Arcite, so too is Palamon's wrath, leaving the victorious cousin a mellowed and fitting husband when he is given Emelye in the end. Here, no doubt, some semblance of virtue is made of necessity. But we should come away feeling not a little troubled and feeling as well that Theseus' ending platitudes, while no less necessary, fall as so much hollow sentence.¹⁰

¹⁰Perhaps the strongest opposition to Muscatine's reading of *The Knight's Tale* has been to his optimism. Many have argued for the dominance of disorder in the tale. See Elizabeth Salter, *The Knight's Tale and the Clerk's Tale* (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), 9–36, Joseph Westlund, "The *Knight's Tale* as an Impetus for Pilgrimage," *Philological Quarterly* 43 (1964): 526–37, and Kathleen A. Blake, "Order and the Noble Life in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*?" *Modern Language Quarterly* 34 (1973): 3–19.

To read *The Knight's Tale* as the present critical consensus reads it is to approach Palamon and Arcite as Theseus approaches them and to come away no more acquainted than he is with those very different, very vital characters. It is no wonder that so many critics have seen such lifeless characters in the cousins when, like Theseus, they seem never to have looked beyond their introduction. Ultimately, the theme of order and disorder to which Muscatine alerted us is less influential than the ends to which he put it. Armed with order and symmetry as the stylistic and thematic matter of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, Muscatine brought a measure of order and unanimity to the welter of scholarly opinion by presenting a highly convincing version of Chaucer's poem that, shorn of scholarly accretions, benefitted greatly from its elegant simplicity. By his strength as a critic and his succeeding influence, Muscatine has become so formidable a presence that he is a stronger barrier by omission. Thus before we can show that in fact there are figures in the carpet, we must delve a little into Muscatine's works and assumptions. Before we can return the cousins to center stage where they belong, we must learn how they were forced into the wings and why.

Muscatine argued that those "who find the differentiation between Palamon and Arcite to be a central feature of the poem," are guilty "of seeking fine distinctions in what may not be meant as distinct, of seeking realism of action (or of characterization), for instance, in a poem not written under the assumptions of realism of method."¹¹ The *Knight's Tale* is a romance whose content, by definition, does not call for the realistic

¹¹Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning," 911 and 913.

and detailed delineation of character and whose style and form preclude it. Its form, texture, and meaning, though different in substance, are inseparable and bent together to the same artistic end: the poem's theme of order and disorder is reflected in and by its ordered composition, marked by balance and symmetry, and the grand sweep of its design is "neither a story, nor a static picture, but a poetic pageant."¹² Thus he rightly responded to what he saw as an anachronistic aesthetic in the desire to place the cousins and characterization at the center of the poem by replacing them there with the poem itself. But his insistence on the representational methods that so precluded characterization in *The Knight's Tale* betrays some inconsistencies when we look closer at his response to one of the principal critics of his challenge.

J. R. Hulbert found *The Knight's Tale* marred by the absence of characterization. To the poem's detriment, Chaucer erred from his source: "the greatest weakness in the *Knight's Tale*," he said, "is the lack of characterization of the chief persons of the story. . . . In the original, on the other hand, the characters are distinct."¹³ Recasting Boccaccio's Renaissance poem in a decidedly medieval mode, Chaucer eliminated characterization to pose his courtly audience a *demande d'amor*: "which of the two young men, of equal worth and with almost equal claims, shall (or should) win the lady?"¹⁴ According to Muscatine, Hulbert's unflattering assessment of the poem came

¹²Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning," 919.

¹³J. R. Hulbert, "What What Chaucer's Aim in the *Knight's Tale*?" *Studies in Philology* 26 (1929): 377.

¹⁴Hulbert, 380.

from asking the wrong questions of it.¹⁵ If characterization is not a feature of medieval literature, Muscatine observed, to hold its absence as a liability of the poem is to hold the poem to irrelevant standards of judgement. Nevertheless, Muscatine himself noted a change in *The Knight's Tale* from its source that is similar to that noted by Hulbert:

By selection and addition he produced a poem much more symmetrical than its source. Chaucer even regularizes the times and places of the incidents in Boccaccio, and many further instances of an increase in symmetry could be cited. The crowning modification, however, is the equalization of Palamon and Arcite.¹⁶

Thus equalized, the cousins' distinctions are blurred, yet, contrary to Hulbert, their equalization is part of Chaucer's artful program to reduce them to a merely contributing element of the tale's design. Balanced equally on moral scales, each with no more or less compelling a claim to Emelye than the other, the cousins were for Muscatine emblematic of Chaucer's method in the tale generally. Muscatine is not explicit about the portrayal of the cousins in the *Teseida*, but we can determine something of his opinion. Since he believes that Chaucer's program was to equalize the cousins, he must also believe that in Chaucer's source they are, in some way, unequal. And for an explanation of this absence of equality, Muscatine's statement concerning the stylistic and representational traits of Boccaccio's "Renaissance" *Il Filostrato*, is telling:

Boccaccio's realism and sensualism already approach in the *Filostrato* that remarkably graceful compromise with French refinement which is his typical characteristic. . . . It uses much of the rhetorical figuration of

¹⁵For Muscatine's critique of Hulbert, see "Form, Texture, and Meaning," 912-14, and *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, 175-77.

¹⁶Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning," 918. See also *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, 180.

the high style. Yet it can bend easily, and in short space, to a relaxed, moderately realistic description, with no suggestion of disharmony between imaginative elevation and realistic immediacy. It is thus much a Renaissance poem.¹⁷

It is thus not too much to infer that Muscatine, like Hulbert, saw in the *Teseida* a Palaemon and Arcites¹⁸ delineated and differentiated in a markedly realistic manner, and that, like Hulbert, though without the adverse judgement, he saw in *The Knight's Tale* both the medievalization of the Renaissance *Teseida* and the elimination of characterization as a result. It is an opinion whose currency remains strong to this day.

Because Boccaccio makes no effort to silence the cousins in their first appearance before Theseus, with the immediate and rather boisterous expression given them in the *Teseida*, we might expect to hear the early lineaments of the characterization to which Hulbert and Muscatine allude. The cousins, however, are as indistinct and of a kind in their audience before Teseo as they appear in Chaucer's drastic revision of their introduction. They would have revealed as much about their differences had they said nothing at all. After Teseo enquires about their lineage, "*l'un di loro altiero al suo dimando*" (II, 88; my emphasis) [*one of them*, indignant because of the question] speaks in answer. Here the identity of the speaker is withheld so that one might speak for them both. Surely it serves Boccaccio to make them of a kind in their pride and hatred for Teseo, yet later, when they are presented to Peritoo, Boccaccio's only attempt to make

¹⁷Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, 126.

¹⁸In order to better avoid the confusion of Boccaccio's cousins with Chaucer's, I have opted to refer to the former as McCoy renders them in her translation rather than as they appear in the Italian.

them distinct is in Teseo's presence as well. In an effort to distinguish the two, they are given portraits, but their distinctions run only skin deep:

Era Palemon grande e ben membruto
brunetto alquanto e nello aspetto lieto,
con dolce sguardo e nel parlare arguto;
ma ne' sembianti umile e mansueto,
poi che fu innamorato, divenuto;
d'alto intelletto e d'operar secreto,
di pel rossetto e assai grazioso,
di moto grave e d'ardir copioso.

Arcita era assai grande ma sottile,
non di soperchio, e di sembianza lieta;
bianco e vermiglio com rosa d'aprile,
e' cape' biondi e crespi, e mansueta
statura aveva, e abito gentile;
gli occhi avea belli e guardatura queta;
ma nel parlar gran coraggio mostrava,
e destro e visto assai a chi 'l mirava.

(III, 49–50)

[Palaemon was tall and well built, somewhat dark complexioned and cheerful of countenance. His glance was sweet and his speech witty. But since he had fallen in love, he had become modest and meek in his manner. He had keen intelligence and was discreet in his behavior. His skin was rosy and very comely. He was serious in speech and abounded in courage.

Arcites was very tall but slender, yet not to excess, and cheerful in appearance. He was as white and red as an April rose, and had curly blond hair and a meek bearing and a noble manner. His eyes were beautiful and had a quiet gaze. But he showed great courage in his speech and seemed quick and clever to those who looked at him.]

These portraits are the extent of Boccaccio's "characterization," if indeed that is what we should call it, for, as Albert Marckwardt has noted, "throwing the spotlight on them

is one thing, and differentiating them in character is quite another.”¹⁹ Boccaccio’s effort to make the cousins distinct does nothing to develop them as characters and adds nothing to his poem but ornament and perhaps the depiction of Emilia’s not so crucial dilemma: which of the two young men, of equal worth, is more attractive? And, in terms of characterization, the portraits are minimized further by the absence of confirming dramatic evidence throughout the poem. The cousins are both described as cheerful, courageous, and meek in manner—which qualities should go without saying in such a mannered and courtly work as this—and both, it could be argued, display these qualities admirably well. But Palaemon never acts more intelligently than Arcites, nor more sweet or serious of speech, nor does Arcites ever act in more quick or clever ways than Palaemon; and Arcites’ putative “quickness” and “cleverness” would be difficult to distinguish from Palaemon’s “intelligence” in any event. Never giving voice in distinct or individual ways, the cousins are as good as glimpsed and spoken of in rumor but never truly known. In the end we are left only with a slender blond and a less slender brunette.

And, when later in their confinement they each express their love for Emilia, it is no more important which of Boccaccio’s cousins is speaking than before: they are still of a kind and speak as well from once voice as from two. Unlike in *The Knight’s Tale*, in the *Teseida* the cousins do not immediately enter into a heated rivalry over Emilia. Rather, each shares his love with the other in an act of mutual sympathy and commiseration. Though Arcites is the first to see her, it is not until later, when the issue

¹⁹Albert H. Marckwardt, “Characterization in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*,” *University of Michigan Contributions to Modern Philology* 5 (1947): 5.

is forced, that he marshals the fact to buttress his claim against Palaemon. Instead he summons Palaemon to join him:

E ritornato dentro pianamente
disse: — O Palaemon, vieni a vedere:
Vener è qui discesa veramente!
Non l'odi tu cantar? Deh, se 'n calere
punto ti son, deh, vien qua prestamente!
Io credo certo che ti fia in piacere
qua giù veder l'angelica bellezza,
a noi discesa della somma altezza. — (III, 13; my emphasis)

[As he turned back in he said softly, "O Palaemon, come and see. Venus has truly come down here. Do you not hear her singing? O if I mean anything to you, come here quickly. I believe for certain that it will please you to see the angelic beauty down there which has descended *to us* from the sovereign heights.]

Just as they are one in their animosity toward Teseo, now they are as one recipient of this apparent visitation. And what follows, after Palaemon is smitten as well, is lengthy and effusive praise from them both. After two stanzas from Arcites, Palaemon takes the baton: "Il simile m'avene / che to racconti" (III, 22) [the same thing that you are saying has happened to me], he says, and proceeds to elaborate on his cousin's sentiment. When he is done, Boccaccio says:

Così ragionan li due nuovi amanti,
e l'un l'altro conforta nel parlare;
né san se questa è dea ne' regni santi
che sia qua giù venuta ad abitare,
o se donna mondana; e li suoi canti
e le bellezze li fan dubitare;
per che; ignoranti di chi sì gli ha presi,
molto si dolgon, da dolore offesi. (III, 26)

[So the two new lovers talked in this fashion and each spoke words of comfort to the other. They did not know if this girl was a goddess of the

holy kingdoms come to dwell on earth, or a lady of this world, for her singing and her beauty made them unable to decide. Because they were afflicted by pain and did not know who had taken hold of them, they grieved the more.]

The cousins do not develop their feelings individually but together, each building on the sentiment of the other until they end in a harmonious state of accord. Revealing together the singular condition shared by them both, their dialogue is, in effect, a soliloquy in two voices. Even when they eventually quarrel, the differences that have developed between them are purely circumstantial. Palaemon is incited only by his eventual discovery that Arcites has entered Teseo's service with the apparent intention of winning Emelia's favor: his jealousy results naturally out of the realization of the privilege and opportunity denied him, not out of any unique particulars of character. There is thus no reason to suspect that Arcites would have become any less jealous if Palaemon had been released in his stead. Boccaccio's efforts to distinguish the cousins may help us to identify them in a crowd, but, beyond the accidents of appearance, they emit personality as from a single substance. The differences that develop between the two at best reveal how one character would act in different circumstances.

In *The Knight's Tale*, in contrast, we are witness to two characters who act differently in identical circumstances. Thus not only is precisely the opposite of Hulbert's and Muscatine's formulations in fact the case, but the state of characterization in the *Teseida* is so conspicuously reversed that one would be hard-pressed to ascribe the departure to anything other than Chaucer's own conscious, poetic choice. He was not a slavish translator of the products of one milieu into his own. No arguments on generic

grounds can fully account for why the changes Chaucer worked in the area of characterization are among the most striking of the many differences between *The Knight's Tale* and the *Teseida*. Though the poem's representational realism seems to have been pursued less for its own sake than as a necessary and functional tool for the realization of its unique and complex matter, it seems also that Chaucer was not beyond indulging himself. In demonstrating his command of conceiving characters in wholly dramatic terms—by letting them reveal themselves to us through their own words and actions—he so clearly advertises the elegance and extent of his revisionary program that he seems concerned as much with turning his efforts into an extravagant artistic statement as he is with stylistically re-presenting Boccaccio's story. For Chaucer so thoroughly reversed the terms of Boccaccio's representationalism, or lack thereof, that, whereas Boccaccio provided portraits of the cousins but never developed them as characters, Chaucer created starkly individuated characters, though we are never told what they look like.

Appearing again some years later in *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, Muscatine's discussion of *The Knight's Tale* was somewhat reduced and largely reiterative, but its concerns were shared and buttressed by the book's ambitious theme: for its subject was no less than the whole of Chaucer's poetics. The misplaced realism he had observed in the criticism of *The Knight's Tale* had been symptomatic merely of larger trends in medieval literature generally and in Chaucer studies specifically, the correction of which was long overdue. Against the tradition that valued realism in

literature while devaluing what it perceived as stolid conventionalism and the artificial use of rhetoric, Muscatine's program was a successful attempt to give the highly rhetorical and decidedly unrealistic courtly literature of the Middle Ages the credit it was due. It was also a worthy attempt to put Chaucer's seeming realism in context—to wrest Chaucer from post-Victorian criticism and situate him squarely in his own time and milieu.²⁰ Thus he announces at the outset that his study

sees realism as a technique and a convention, not as an end in itself, and it sees convention as a potentially powerful tool, not as something to be avoided or rebelled against, or even necessarily to be remoulded. Rhetoric, too, it takes to be an instrument and not a vice.²¹

With realism as much a convention now as the conventionalism of courtly rhetorical literature, the two became balanced together as medieval styles of equal worth, though characterized by distinctly different functions and purposes. Once again Muscatine argued for the wedding of form and meaning, though his attentions had broadened beyond merely romance: “we speak of the ‘grand’ style and of colloquial style, of formal or artificial style, and of naturalistic style” not merely because they are wont to carry the content of their namesakes but because they have developed hand-in-hand with their respective contents to do so; indeed, styles are sufficient registers of meaning in themselves:

Thus we can say that a style which we instinctively call “elevated” is better adapted than a naturalistic style to support an idealistic attitude

²⁰For more discussion of Muscatine, this time of his place in Chaucer criticism generally, again see Lee Patterson: “The Development of Chaucer Studies,” in *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 22.

²¹Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, 1.

toward experience. The non-representational traits of the former—often called the “conventional” traits—are among the best resources open to the poet who wishes to deal with that level of experience not immediately apprehensible to the senses. Conversely, the adoption in a naturalistic style of certain traits from the idiom of common life, representationalism generally, is a sign of the particular potency of this style in the expression of a phenomenalist attitude toward experience.²²

This description of styles and their functions is a crucial and revealing statement by Muscatine. For him, it serves to distinguish and define the two traditions of Chaucer’s exclusively French literary inheritance, the courtly and the bourgeois, the understanding of which prepares the reader to approach Chaucer with the tools necessary for the proper appreciation of his art. For us, however, it is revealing of a certain set of crucial underlying assumptions and the paradigm on which his study is based. For the function and meaning that Muscatine assigns to those traditions—idealism and naturalism, respectively—betray the Gothic Middle Ages of the Hegelian idealist historian.

Muscatine first evokes this paradigm in his attempt to account for the popularity of Jean de Meun’s lengthy continuation of the *Roman de la Rose*, the greatest of Chaucer’s French literary antecedents. And here he duly notes Max Dvořák and Arnold Hauser, whose *Idealism and Naturalism in Gothic Art* and “The Dualism of Gothic Art,” respectively,²³ are telling sources for the paradigm Muscatine here employs:

The immense popularity of his work, which is hardly accounted for by his poetic talent alone, suggests that it found a responsive element in the

²²Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, 3.

²³Max Dvořák, *Idealism and Naturalism in Gothic Art*, trans. Randolph J. Klawiter (1928; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967) and Arnold Hauser, “The Dualism of Gothic Art,” in *The Social History of Art*, I (New York: Vintage, 1951), 233–44.

culture. It has indeed much of the spirit which historians have found in thirteenth-century politics, art, religion, and philosophy, and which is widely considered to be a second major element in the cultural pattern of the epoch. It is a spirit that in all directions comes up against received authority, confronting the older, transcendental views with realistic, mundane ones.²⁴

The “realistic, mundane” qualities which characterize Jean de Meun’s portion of the poem are reflective of a newly emergent naturalism, the second major element of thirteenth-century culture. And, true to its rebellious tendencies, this element is in opposition to idealism, the implied first major element, characterized by authority and tradition and embodied in Guillaume de Lorris’ opening romance segment of the *Roman de la Rose*. In their separate styles, for Muscatine, both authors present the whole range of the French literary achievement of the Middle Ages. And yet the *Roman de la Rose* goes beyond merely encompassing the stylistic possibilities of the age: it embodies that age itself. It reflects the range of human experience from grass-roots vitality and the experience of common life to refined aristocratic traditionalism. At the same time it represents the range of human society in two representative social groups, the courtly and the bourgeois. These two major elements and their interplay describe the duality which for Muscatine defines Gothic art and Gothic culture generally. Together they are the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the age, evident not only in art, but in politics, religion, and philosophy as well. Here Muscatine’s clearest inspiration is Hauser, who, more explicitly than Dvořák, posits a latter Middle Ages marked by a sweeping unity in all its forms of

²⁴Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, 76.

expression.²⁵ But as a work of criticism generally, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* is, in many ways, *Idealism and Naturalism in Gothic Art* recast and reconsidered as a secular literary exposition. For Muscatine preserved Dvořák's own essential mission. Just as the New Criticism of the former insisted upon reading texts as "independent of historical association,"²⁶ the Hegelian historicism of Dvořák eschewed causal connections between art and history.²⁷ And yet, paradoxically, in announcing themselves as correctives to the depredations of anachronistic aesthetic criteria, both works claimed to offer a more historical understanding of their subjects thereby.²⁸ In the Hegelian historicism of Dvořák, Muscatine found a paradigm that not only served as a convenient descriptive system for Chaucer's poetics but also, as a matter of course, grounded the poet in his time. Since the art of any given period, in addition to its politics, religion or philosophy, must perforce reflect that period's spirit, Muscatine managed to have it both ways: he could at once view Chaucer's poetry with New Critical scrutiny and at the same

²⁵Hauser (240) says: "The Dualism shown in the various social, economic, religious, and philosophical trends of the age, in the antagonisms between consumption-economy and commercial economy, feudalism and bourgeoisie, other-worldliness and inner-worldliness, realism and nominalism, dominating the whole relation of Gothic art to nature and the inner structure of its composition, also manifests itself in a polarity of rational and irrational in art." Dvořák (12) states generally that all the features of medieval art "were naturally not limited to the field of art alone but were common to all movements of the time and to the historical verities upon which the medieval Christian *Weltanschauung*, the fundamental basis for everything here under consideration, exerted an untold influence." He does, however, make more specific connections later between Gothic art and philosophy (105–50).

²⁶Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, 2.

²⁷Dvořák, 12.

²⁸Muscatine's reaction against post-Victorian criticism echoes Dvořák's criticism that medieval art is too often judged by classical or modern standards dating from the Renaissance: "medieval painting and sculpture are judged by standards of a far distant past or a much later development, standards which forget that between these two extremes lay centuries forming a world unto themselves" (7).

time marshal behind him the compelling weight of history in order to return Chaucer to the Middle Ages where he belonged.

In vogue for some time, the Gothic Chaucer surfaced in other, more or less different forms in the works of other eminent Chaucer scholars, but it failed, perhaps, to be fully convincing and has since departed in the silence of disinterest rather than in the face of criticism.²⁹ Even its recent manifestation is more an aberrant haunting than an indication of its present relevance to the field.³⁰ The canard that Art History lags perpetually behind the theoretical innovations of other fields in the humanities, in this instance, at least, is certainly false. Literary studies here suffer from the perpetual lag of cross-disciplinary contact. Among art historians, from whose field the Gothic Middle Ages originates and which was impacted more deeply by it, significant and substantial criticism has been voiced for some time now. Contemporary with Muscatine, Ernst Gombrich, a critic of Hegelian historicism as well as art, offered a sharp critique of Hauser's *Social History of Art*. The ascription of naturalism to the middle class and idealism to the aristocracy, cited more than once by Muscatine in its medieval manifestation, is for Hauser an historical constant, though he proves it an unwieldy

²⁹For some of the more prominent and influential uses of the so-called "Gothic" Middle Ages in Chaucer criticism, see, D. W. Robertson Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer: Studies in Medieval Perspectives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962); Robert M. Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation: The Aesthetic Possibilities of Inorganic Structure* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); Derek Brewer, "The Gothic Chaucer," in Derek Brewer ed., *Writers and their Backgrounds: Geoffrey Chaucer* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974) and *English Gothic Literature* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983); and Donald R. Howard, *The Idea of the Canterbury Tales* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

³⁰The Gothic Chaucer (based largely in defunct scholarship) has been newly resurrected by Lillian M. Bisson, "Double Vision: The Gothic Mind's Eye," in *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1998), 3–22.

assumption that so often runs up against contradictory evidence that, says Gombrich, “one wonders why the author does not simply give up his initial assumption instead of twisting and bending it to accommodate the facts.”³¹ For example, says Gombrich, Hauser argues that:

If an Egyptian King such as Akhnaton initiated a shift toward Naturalism, the movement must be rooted in urban middle classes (p. 61); if the urban culture of Babylon, on the other hand, exhibits a rigid formalism, this must be due to the hold of the priests (p. 65). If the classical age of Greek art is also the age of democracy this can be explained by the fact “that classical Athens was not so uncompromisingly democratic nor was its classical art so strictly ‘classical’ as might have been supposed” (p. 90).³²

Further, says Gombrich:

though I have here called superficially plausible the theory [posited by Hauser] that rigid noblemen will like rigid style and that agile merchants will be eager for novelty, the contrary assumption—that blasé aristocrats love ever new sensual stimuli while strict businessmen, with their “double entry book-keeping” want their art neat and solid—sounds equally convincing.³³

Hauser’s methods are symptomatic of what Gombrich has described as characteristic of the Hegelian approach generally: “Hegel’s historian practices exegetics. His *a priori* knowledge is . . . like that of a devout interpreter of the Scriptures who knows, for instance, that every event described in the Old Testament can be interpreted as

³¹Ernst Gombrich, rev. of *The Social History of Art*, by Arnold Hauser, in *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the History of Art* (London: Phaidon, 1963), 88. Reprinted from *The Art Bulletin*, 35 (1953): 79–84.

³²Gombrich, 1963, 87.

³³Gombrich, 1963, 90.

foreshadowing another event described in the Gospels.”³⁴ Even the eminent Erwin Panofsky received this criticism from Gombrich. Panofsky’s *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, not unlike Dvořák’s *Idealism and Naturalism in Gothic Art* in its search for parallels between late medieval culture and its artistic production,³⁵ is patently Hegelian in method. Panofsky would have denied such a charge, and perhaps in explicit contradistinction to Dvořák’s avoidance of socio-economic and intellectual causes for art, insisted upon causal connections between medieval philosophy and art generally, between Scholasticism and Gothic architecture.³⁶ But, however conscious Panofsky may have been of the dangers of the Hegelian approach, Gombrich notes that he never quite abandoned the Hegelian program: “those who have studied his works . . . know that he never renounced the desire to demonstrate the organic unity of all aspects of a period.”³⁷ Panofsky’s exegetics is perhaps summed up best by William Clark and Charles Radding: “Panofsky’s analysis has little to do with the mental processes of either masters or builders. . . . What he did instead was to view both the scholastic *summa* and the Gothic

³⁴E. H. Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 10.

³⁵See Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 104.

³⁶Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (1951; New York: Meridian Books, 1957), 20–21: “In contrast to a mere parallelism, the connection which I have in mind is a genuine cause-and-effect relation; but in contrast to an individual influence, this cause-and-effect relation comes about by diffusion rather than by direct impact. It comes about by the spreading of what may be called, for want of a better term, a mental habit—reducing this overworked cliché to its precise Scholastic sense as a “principle that regulates the act.”

³⁷Gombrich, *In Search of Cultural History*, 28. See also Holly, 34. John Crossley has criticized Panofsky along similar lines, noting that the cause-and-effect relationship he posits is never adduced. See “Medieval Architecture and Meaning: The Limits of Iconography,” *Burlington Magazine* 130 (1988): 119.

cathedral from the outside, noting what seemed to him, the twentieth-century observer, to be the most salient features of the finished works.”³⁸ To be fair, the criticism of Clark and Radding is just as apt a description of the inescapably twentieth-century vantage point of all scholars and approaches, but Panofsky’s Hegelian approach is particularly culpable for always knowing what it will find before it has even begun its search. Those “salient features,” for example, were elicited deductively by prevenient theoretical assumptions rather than empirically as findings that of themselves called for the conclusions that Panofsky drew from them.

This criticism is particularly relevant in reference to Panofsky’s influential attempt to establish a connection between Pseudo-Dionysian light mysticism and the architectural program of St.-Denis.³⁹ According to Peter Kidson, Panofsky’s forays into Gothic architecture enacted a long overdue corrective program: “Panofsky set out to provide a cutting edge for the full-scale art-historical counter-offensive that had been brewing for the best part of half a century, against the excessive technical views about Gothic associated with the name of Viollet-le-Duc.”⁴⁰ But perhaps because of Panofsky’s urgency to restore Gothic architecture to a criticism based on its own intellectual standards and aesthetic concerns, he overstated the significance of his evidence. To be

³⁸Charles M. Radding and William W. Clark, *Medieval Architecture, Medieval Learning: Builders and Masters in the Age of Romanesque and Gothic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 3.

³⁹Erwin Panofsky, *Abbot Suger and the Abbey Church of St.-Denis and its Art Treasures*, ed., trans., and introduction by Erwin Panofsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948).

⁴⁰Peter Kidson, “Panofsky, Suger and St. Denis,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 50 (1987): 1.

sure, says Kidson, Panofsky had only the best of intentions and was not conscious of what he was doing, but, nevertheless, “what he can be charged with is twisting history to prove his point.”⁴¹ He can also be charged with twisting the meaning of both art and its forms to better conform them to the history he brought to bear. Indeed, whether trying to establish a connection between Pseudo-Dionysian light mysticism and St.-Denis or between scholastic *summae* and Gothic cathedrals more generally, since it was analogies he sought, both halves had to be adjusted in order to elicit the desired correspondence.

This same criticism might be applied to Muscatine. The history on which he drew had already been prepared for him, so Chaucer had to be made to conform to the dualism of Gothic. It would likely have rankled with him to have been called an exegetical critic, especially considering the reference of that term in literary criticism to the work of D. W. Robertson, Jr. and his followers. Robertson also evoked the Gothic Middle Ages in his *A Preface to Chaucer*, but it is a book whose aim is to place the Gothic under the umbrella of a pervasive Augustinian piety—an aim truer to that of Dvořák than Muscatine’s appropriation of it, and more truly exegetic in the proper sense of the term than any merely Hegelian-influenced art historian or literary critic.⁴² But while Muscatine is like Panofsky (and Dvořák before them) in that their works were both

⁴¹Ibid, 2. For further criticism on Panofsky’s work on St.-Denis, See Grover A. Zinn, Jr., “Suger, Theology, and the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition,” in *Abbot Suger and St.-Denis*, ed. Paula Lieber Gerson (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 37–40; and Conrad Rudolph, *Artistic Change at St.-Denis: Abbot Suger’s Program and the Early Twelfth-Century Controversy over Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁴²See Robertson, “The Gothic Period,” in *A Preface to Chaucer*, 171–207.

worthy and much needed attempts to rescue their professions from the perceived depredations of anachronistic criticism, he must also share in Kidson's judgement upon Panofsky: "the sheer self-evident necessity for a shift of historical perspective may have concealed some unsuspecting dangers, the most insidious of which was probably the temptation to rewrite history more enthusiastically than the evidence warranted."⁴³ In the case of Muscatine, however, whose more clearly Hegelian method could demonstrate history from Art, his enthusiasm was directed more to the rewriting of literature. Paterson is right in criticizing Muscatine for distorting or "dehistoricizing" history with his Chaucerian agenda, but wrong in criticizing him for telling us "not how Chaucer is a fourteenth-century poet, but rather how the fourteenth century is like Chaucer."⁴⁴ That Muscatine read Chaucer into a Middle Ages conscripted to save his poetry from post-Victorian dramatic and realist criticism I have no doubt. But it was the history he found and the tidy Gothic paradigm it provided that conditioned his formulation of Chaucer's poetry in turn. Muscatine does not tell us that the fourteenth century is like Chaucer, nor does he merely tell us that Chaucer is a fourteenth-century poet; rather, the implications of Muscatine's parallels leave us with a Chaucer who, metonymically speaking, *is* the fourteenth century. Muscatine could not have made him more of his time than that.

The desire to find aesthetic unity in art, it seems, is sometimes so imperative that much evidence is no doubt overlooked, findings fudged, and great monuments chiseled

⁴³Kidson, 1.

⁴⁴Patterson, "The Development of Chaucer Studies," 26.

ever-so-slightly to yield the much needed measurements. To this end the Hegelian *Geistgeschichte* has proven an accommodating tool. Unfortunately, in the hands of Muscatine it produced a rather narrow and limited Chaucer. It insisted, of necessity, that Chaucer's literary heritage was exclusively French and his stylistic repertoire drawn exclusively from idealism and naturalism—mutually exclusive styles carried by mutually exclusive forms. The “Gothic quality” of Chaucer's poetry, marked by “the tension between phenomenal and ideal, mundane and divine, that informs the art and thought of the period,”⁴⁵ would have collapsed under the weight of other genres and a fuller stylistic repertoire. For Muscatine, Chaucer's only avenue to realism was through the naturalism of the narrow repertoire of so-called bourgeois literature—particularly fabliau. As a result, it could not possibly be present in *The Knight's Tale*, a pure generic specimen of romance. And yet it has been shown that, in Middle English romance at least, naturalism is quite common; and though its presence has led scholars, no doubt under assumptions similar to those of Muscatine, to associate it with a non-courtly audience, we would be mistaken in associating naturalism exclusively with the middle-class.⁴⁶ Nor does naturalism in romance at once preclude idealism.⁴⁷ Even Muscatine noticed realism in romance, but where he finds it, for example, in Chrétien's *Yvain*, it

⁴⁵Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, 168.

⁴⁶See Susan Crane, *Insular Romance: Politics, Faith, and Culture in Anglo-Norman and Middle English Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 9. Crane cites Ernst Gombrich, rev. of *The Social History of Art*, 79–84.

⁴⁷Crane, 210.

is merely a “parodic-realistic excursion . . . a device, or at most a temporary vagrancy” and not, in any case, a stylistic feature that the genre was to maintain and conventionalize.⁴⁸ Yet the paradoxical question should be asked: if Chaucer could not have used realism because it was not yet conventionalized, how could Chrétien have used it if were not yet conventionalized?—which is also to ask: how could Chrétien have used realism before he had conventionalized it himself? Whence Chrétien’s inventiveness? Why could Chaucer not have been equally inventive? Even if there were no precedent for Chaucer’s use of realism in *The Knight’s Tale*, why could Chaucer not have been the one to set the precedent?

Muscatine’s denial of Chaucer’s use of realism beyond the low styles of French bourgeois origin necessitated his denial of Chaucer’s Italian influence. Muscatine found realism well outside the parameters of Gothic dualism in Italy, but he kept it tucked safely away not only geographically but creatively and intellectually in a completely different age from that of Chaucer. For Muscatine, while the Renaissance Boccaccio and the medieval Chaucer are contemporaries, they are worlds apart.⁴⁹ Already we have seen in our brief analysis of characterization in the *Teseida* that Muscatine’s distinctions between medieval and Renaissance are rather problematic. Chaucer problematizes them further. While, according to Muscatine’s criteria, the “Renaissance” Boccaccio can be shown to be a rather striking model of “medieval” style, *The Knight’s Tale* presents an

⁴⁸Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, 54.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 125–26.

equally paradoxical example of the “medieval” Chaucer writing in an apparently Renaissance mode. We should not conclude from such observations that Chaucer was ahead of his time and that Boccaccio had not yet fully crossed the threshold into his own. Rather, we should be left more dubious than we may before have been of the usefulness and validity of such epochal categories, and we should be equally as doubtful of the exclusive attribution of styles to one epoch or another. As John Ganim notes:

it becomes increasingly difficult to speak of a unified “Middle Ages,” or even a “later Middle Ages,” with its Hegelian, and largely Burckhardian echoes. The historiographic innovations of the study of early modern Europe have suggested as many continuities as discontinuities between what we have thought of as medieval and Renaissance centuries.⁵⁰

And though Medieval Studies has yet to fully sever its ties with Burckhard, whose influence is even more resilient than Hegel’s, David Wallace’s recent study is just such an innovation, successfully calling the medieval/Renaissance dichotomy into question, with particular reference to Chaucer.⁵¹ Says Wallace: “No magic curtain separated ‘medieval’ London and Westminster from ‘Renaissance’ Florence and Milan; all sites were interlinked for Chaucer (and, indeed, through Chaucer) as part of a transnational nexus of capital, cultural, mercantile, and military exchange.”⁵² Chaucer did not approach Italy as a callow country bumpkin would the frenetic excitement of the big

⁵⁰John M. Ganim, “The Myth of Medieval Romance,” in *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper*, ed., R. Howard Bloch and Stephen G. Nichols (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 162.

⁵¹David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). See especially 1–64.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 1.

city: he was a cosmopolitan in a cosmopolitan Middle Ages. He ranged beyond France artistically as well as geographically, thus our criticism should be no more bound to France than he was, nor avoid what may have traditionally been excluded from his work for being “Renaissance.” Indeed scholars for some time now have been producing important work towards the expansion of our understanding both of Chaucer’s Italian influences and his much broader generic and stylistic range.⁵³ Yet in light of this growing understanding of Chaucer, the world he lived in, what he read and how he read it, all of which together compromise the theoretical basis for Muscatine’s critical program, that we continue to honor the mummified artifacts of the undifferentiated cousins is a curious phenomenon I hope to correct.

Few studies since Muscatine have attempted to return the cousins to center-stage where they belong,⁵⁴ and theirs has been a losing battle. Even within the tradition of finding characterization in *The Knight’s Tale*, this study occupies a distinctly minority position. Few have found Arcite to be the more worthy of the two cousins. Those who have, in the view of this study, are the only ones to have even remotely gotten it right. In the next chapter, my own observations are to a great extent a reiteration and

⁵³To cite some notable examples on the *Knight’s Tale* Specifically, see Robert S. Haller, “The *Knight’s Tale* and Epic Tradition,” *Chaucer Review* 1 (1966): 67–84; Alastair Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982); Barbara Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the Roman Antique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Winthrop Wetherbee, “Romance and Epic in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*,” *Exemplaria* 2 (1990): 303–28.

⁵⁴See A. V. C. Schmidt, “The Tragedy of Arcite: A Reconsideration of the *Knight’s Tale*,” *Essays in Criticism* 2 (1969): 107–16; John Norton Smith, *Geoffrey Chaucer* (London: 1974), 123–36; and Judith C. Perryman, “The ‘False Arcite’ of Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*,” *Neophilologus* 68 (1984): 121–33. John Halverson, “Aspects of Order in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*,” *Studies in Philology* 57 (1960): 606–21, differentiates the cousins, which is a matter of character, but does not do so in terms of characterization.

expansion upon those of Albert Marckwardt, the best and most neglected critic on the subject, and A. V. C. Schmidt. My study will differ from theirs in that it argues for a characterization more complex than ever before noticed and it presents “the tragedy of Arcite” as being more profoundly tragic. The cousins are more quick than dead in *The Knight’s Tale*, a fact with which we must come to terms if we are to fully understand either them or the poem.

CHAPTER II

THE SHACKLES OF PRISON AND LOVE'S RESTRAINTS

Our first view into the tower dungeon is an instant portrait of the principal players of *The Knight's Tale*, presented now in terms of a balance achieved through the asymmetry of antithetical extremes. And the cousins' prison is an ideal stage for the dramatic unfolding of their characters. To further the poem's dramatic design, Chaucer created a prison far more conducive to acting than the one in his source. His change is marked by the correlation of its physical facts with the deprivation of liberty that imprisonment entails. In the *Teseida*, Teseo imprisons the cousins respectfully in the manner to which nobility in the Middle Ages was accustomed:

e questi due furon riservati
per farli alquanto più ad agio stare,
perché di sangue reale eran nati;
e felli dentro al palagio abitare
e così in una camera tenere,
facendo lor servire a lor piacere, (II, 99)

[And these two were set aside to put them more at their ease because they were born of royal blood. And he [Teseo] made them live in the palace and kept them in this way in a room where they were served at their pleasure.]

Theseus grants no such luxuries. In *The Knight's Tale* the cousins' palace apartment has been transformed into a tower dungeon that stands in grim contrast with the bright and verdant garden. The cousins are not treated according to their station but rather as

common criminals who must suffer such indignities as the shackles over which Palamon later weeps. And the incommensurateness in the *Teseida*, in which the cousins, despite their announcement of hostility, are treated well, is maintained, but reversed, in *The Knight's Tale*, in which they say nothing of their attitude one way or another yet are treated deplorably nevertheless. The effect is to magnify the injustice already done them by Theseus' refusal ever to accept ransom for their release, an effect that the cousins—Palamon especially—feel with considerable poignancy. For the purpose of character development, worsening the conditions of imprisonment provides for Chaucer a harsh environment in which strong reactions, both negative and positive, can be induced. In so doing he also evokes the despairing Boethian prison and thus a Boethian context in which to realize the cousins' differences. Whereas Palamon is consumed by a restless yearning and bemoans the injustice of his lot, Arcite is composed with stoic resignation and takes his misfortune in stride.¹ But what the cousins reveal of themselves is not merely peculiar to their circumstances. In the course of acting in and reacting to the oppressive confines of their prison, they reveal not only the fundamentally distinct qualities of each but also the molds in which their love for Emelye—authentic in one, false in the other—will later be cast. When Emelye becomes a factor of considerable importance in their lives and love replaces the Boethian standard of conduct, the

¹See Marckwardt, 7–8: "Palamon, restive because of his imprisonment, has been lamenting his fate, and . . . in response Arcite counsels patience in adversity, and is inclined to accept the situation philosophically." Peter Elbow, in "How Chaucer Transcends Opposition in the *Knight's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review* 7 (1972): 99, has made a similar observation: "Arcite has the gift of always seeing events with perspective or detachment while Palamon always seems immersed and without perspective—almost overwhelmed by what is going on."

essential differences evinced in their responses to imprisonment persist and deepen as their freedom becomes the stage for the fulfillment of their respective characters.

We first meet Palamon pining for freedom and fraught with the anxieties of imprisonment. The transition of the narrative from the scenic exterior world—large, vibrant, and beckoning, with a brightness and clarity pronounced by accents so strong as to make them stand out above the sun and morning that produce them—to the bleak interior world of suffering and constraint at once pronounces, like the extremes of shade and light of chiaroscuro, the essential qualities of them both, as well as the object of Palamon's singular yearning. Even his movement, following as it does "the sonne upriste" (1051) and reaching its zenith in the "chambre an heigh," suggests that he has risen in answer to a summons from the day. And the parallel cadence and internal rhyme of "Bright was the sonne" and "As was his wone" further presents him and his volition as compelled, through inner sympathies, by nature:

Bright was the sonne and cleer that morwenynge,
 And Palamoun, this woful prisoner,
 As was his wone, by leve of his gayler,
 Was risen and romed in a chambre an heigh. (1062–65)

From a window he looks out upon the Athenean cityscape and the adjoining garden in what must have become, in the intervening years, a ritual frequently and tirelessly observed. But while the view must offer some respite from the claustrophobic press of his cell, it must also be a bitter reminder of what has been lost. With palliative turning routinely thus to gall, Palamon is little changed (sorrow replaces woe and his roaming is repeated), and his despair comes as little surprise:

This sorweful prisoner, this Palamoun,
 Goth in the chambre romynge to and fro
 And to hymself compleynyng of his wo.
 That he was born, ful ofte he seyde, "allas!" (1070–73)

It certainly comes as no surprise to Arcite, for whom the scene of Palamon's admittance to the upper chamber must have become as much a ritual as Palamon's performance of it. Palamon's sorrow, despite his efforts to keep it to himself, should be as apparent to Arcite as it is to us, and at the sound of his cry, Arcite comes to his aid with an urgency born, no doubt, of repeated witnessing of his anguish and suffering:

. . . "Cosyn myn, what eyleth thee,
 That art so pale and deedly on to see?
 Why cridestow? Who hath thee doon offence?
 For Goddes love, taak al in pacience
 Our prisoun, for it may noon oother be.
 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." (1081–91)

He comes with consolation, with good stoic advice in tow, and as distanced as he is from Palamon's restlessness, it is advice that Arcite seems himself to follow. He speaks of the fatalism, resignation, and equanimity of one unperturbed by one's circumstances, no matter how adverse. And the silence concerning his movement—especially when contrasted with the potent image of Palamon "romynge to and fro" like the nervous pacing of a pent-up animal—suggests a quiet state of rest and repose. Already, one scholar's formulation of an "active Arcite" and a "contemplative Palamon" should seem

rather curious to us.² The poem evokes the opposing concepts of activity and contemplation, but assigns them to the cousins differently: Arcite's words contrast starkly with his cousin's actions as though he were Philosophy speaking from the high-ground of stoic enlightenment to the despairing Boethius in his first stages of tutelage in his cell. Indeed, Arcite's advice and disposition exemplify the opening of the fourth metrum of book one of Chaucer's own *Boece*, words spoken by Philosophy herself:

“Whoso it be that is cleer of vertue, sad and wel ordynat of lyvyng, that hath put under fote the proude wierdes, and loketh upryght upon either fortune, he may holden his chere undesconfited.”

(*Boece*, I, met. IV, 1–5)

Arcite's stoic disinterest is opposed to Palamon's over-riding concern for freedom. And though they both languish in a physical prison of Theseus' making, in Boethian terms, the only true prison is the ignorance and emotional constraints we erect in ourselves. Thus, in Boethian terms, the only true prisoner is Palamon, whereas Arcite, it seems, has already succeeded in liberating himself.

But Palamon's personal woes quickly transform to affect his cousin as well, and Arcite's philosophy is not an impervious defense. Upon Arcite's suggestion that Palamon's cry was brought on out of despair for his imprisonment, Palamon not only insists that the prison did not cause him to cry but, in a denial of the very anxieties that brought him to the upper chamber, denies that the prison could have caused him to cry in the first place, that imprisonment has had any effect upon him at all:

²Hoxie Neale Fairchild, “Active Arcite, Contemplative Palamon,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 26 (1927): 285–93. See also R. K. Root, *Chaucer and His Poetry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1906), 170.

“Cosyn, for sothe, of this opinioun
 Thow hast a veyn ymaginacioun.
 This prison caused me nat for to crye . . . ,” (1093–95)

it was, rather, Emelye in the garden below. With undue sharpness he accuses his cousin of jumping to a fatuous and unfounded conclusion when, in fact, Arcite has merely drawn upon the same ample and obvious evidence we have already seen. Indeed, we have seen more than Arcite. V. A. Kolve has duly noted the frequency of the verb “to roam” in the description of Emelye in the Garden.³ Because Chaucer presents her in such pronounced terms of movement, according to Kolve she represents to the cousins the freedom that has been denied them: “they cannot describe her—for they cannot see her apart from the liberty and ease of her movement. From within the prison wall they fall in love with a creature who seems to incarnate a condition the exact opposite of their own.”⁴ Kolve’s observation is perceptive, though his conflation of the cousins is another example of what has become a tacit staple of Knight’s Tale criticism: when the cousins are viewed as indistinguishable, it becomes no longer crucial to distinguish the words, actions, or attitudes of one from the other. Imprisonment is Palamon’s particular concern not Arcite’s—a fact reinforced by the recognition that Palamon is the only one in this sequence to receive the verb “to roam” as well. Such a parallel might be taken as further confirmation of the priority upon which Palamon insists in his claim over Emelye, and

³V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1984), 88–90. See, for example, lines 1069, 1071, 1099, 1113, and 1119. See also William F. Woods, “Up and Down, To and Fro,” 37–57.

⁴Kolve, 90.

further authentication of his love, but the different contexts of their “romyng” invest the verbal parallel with the very semantic opposition that Kolve suggests. Emelye’s freedom in the garden is in pointed contrast with Palamon’s constraint in the tower. She rises, called by the season, to pay her devotions “as was hir wone to do” (1040), whereas Palamon’s movements, however customary, are mediated by his captors: he enters the upper chamber, “as was his wone,” but only first “by leve of his gayler” (1064). We must qualify our sense of Palamon’s ritual with an irregularity introduced by the caprice of his guards. Emelye’s roaming is as free and unconstrained as her decision to do so; Palamon’s roaming is limited not only by the narrow confines of his prison but also by the arbiters of his confinement, whose consent he must acquire if he is to roam at all. Finally, when he eventually spies Emelye in the garden, he does so, unavoidably, “thurgh a wyndow, thikke of many a barre” (1075). His sight of her enjoyment of the free world for which he has been yearning is seen in cruel conjunction with the bars of the window, which, built as they are “of iren greet and square as any sparre” (1076), stand out with a stern and obdurate certitude. Emelye and Palamon have not been brought together by a mysterious simpatico; rather they are juxtaposed as contraries. Palamon cries not because he has been instantly taken by a woman whom he now must have for his own but because he has seen in Emelye the enjoyment and poignant embodiment of the freedom he lacks and for which he yearns.

Emelye has indeed caused Palamon to cry, but the prison conditioned the terms in which he viewed her as well as his response. Thus, though Palamon claims otherwise,

the ultimate cause is the prison, as Arcite assumed. And the defensiveness with which Palamon responds to Arcite—belittling his cousin’s astute concern and making wildly counterfactual claims about his own emotional state—is further underscored by his greater concern for proving that the prison did not cause him to cry than for explaining what in fact did. As a result, he emphasizes Arcite’s assumption rather than discounting it. We should hear in his retort a man brimming with the indignation of one whose composure and prideful self-image have been impeached, a man who, having entered the upper chamber alone “And to hymself compleynyng of his wo” (1072), has kept his suffering to himself so that his brave and stalwart facade might belie the trembling man beneath. Realizing that he has exposed himself to Arcite in a dramatic display of weakness, Palamon cites Emelye as the cause of his outburst, though she is really a feeble defense. And as a defense, Palamon apparently feels that his reference to Emelye needs the kind of reinforcement that only the unimpeachable authority of science can provide:

“This prison caused me nat for to crye,
 But I was hurt right now thurghout myn ye
 Into myn herte, that wol my bane be.
 The fairnesse of that lady that I see
 Yond in the gardyn romen to and fro
 Is cause of al my cryng and my wo.
 I noot wher she be womman or goddesse,
 But Venus is it soothly, as I gesse.” (1095–1102)

But his physiological explanation, a clinical formula presented as text-book proof of his condition in place of the indisputable outward symptoms he lacks—symptoms that Arcite, when later suffering from “the loveris maladye / of Hereos” (1373–74), is the

only one of the two to show—further colors his explanation with an air of excuse. Palamon is not employed here as a tool for Chaucer's delivery of idealized matter; rather, in the realistic context of the cousins' exchange, Palamon's use of the amatory convention is Chaucer's depiction of life trying to imitate art, and Palamon's sentiments come off as sounding not a little rehearsed as a result. When Palamon finally arrives at the source of his causal chain, he reiterates his defense by predicating Emelye in terms of causes much as he predicated her supposed effects: her beauty "is cause of al my cryng and my wo," he says, though now he is excusing more than his single cry of despair. This sight of her has been his first, yet he refers to *all* his crying and his woe in an instant confirmation of the effects he denies imprisonment has had on him. Here he reverses his initial denial of Arcite's concerns: a great deal of woe, which no doubt provoked its share of crying, did indeed precede this instance; but, despite his concession, Emelye is still the cause. No longer denying the long-evident sorrow that was the basis for Arcite's conclusion, Palamon continues to deny that imprisonment is its source because Emelye is still his excuse. Implying that he has seen Emelye many times before now, Palamon is claiming that his ritual view of the free world without the tower has really been a ritual devotion to the unnamed lady in the garden below.

Even the courtly hyperbole with which Palamon ends his explanation betrays his true feelings. His apparent inability to decide whether Emelye is a lady or Venus is at home among the conventions of romance, of which *The Knight's Tale* partakes, and especially in the *Teseida*, where the cousins' enthusiastic use of the conceit is natural

and fitting. But here again Palamon speaks not as the mouthpiece for an idealistic import but in a setting in which his employment of the conceit begs some scrutiny. The indecision that Boccaccio's cousins express concerning Emilia's provenance seems genuine, though, at the same time we sense that they utter the apostrophe with some awareness of its conventionality: for them, to mistake Emilia for Venus is more a testament to her beauty than it is to their belief in her divinity. In the grim world of *The Knight's Tale*, where gods exist as unseen influences and manifest only mysteriously in omens and in dreams, Palamon's profession is no less acceptable as a conceit, but it quickly ceases to be a conceit when he abandons the courtly ambivalence of Boccaccio's cousins and prays to Emelye as though she *were* Venus. His rash arrival on his verdict is not a little equivocal—"Venus is it *soothly, as I gesse*"—and not a little comic. Forced to act out its logical consequences because he has been caught up in the momentum of his own excuse, he overuses the convention and unwittingly turns it to parody. Palamon's eight lines of explanation begin with a description of unseen physiological processes and ends in an assertion of transcendent origins, leaving, Emelye, in the two lines she occupies at the center, as hidden as these putative attributes in which she is nestled. Reference to her factual existence in the garden is overshadowed by Palamon's justification for it.

Palamon's use of his concluding hyperbole also betrays the persistence of the anxieties that provoked his despairing cry in the first place. Though his explanation pretends to a lofty expression of love and sensitivity to beauty, still it is subordinated to

his desire for freedom; indeed his claim that she is a divine visitation is identical with his hope for freedom:

And therewithal on knees doun he fil,
 And seyde, "Venus, if it be thy wil
 Yow in this gardyn thus to transfigure
 Bifore me, sorweful, wrecched creature,
 Out of this prisoun help that we may scapen.
 And if so be my destynnee be shapen
 By eterne word to dyen in prisoun,
 Of oure lynage have som compassioun,
 That is so lowe ybrought by tirannye." (1103–1111)

As Albert Marckwardt observed: "his request . . . [is] wholly consistent with his impatience at the restraints of prison life."⁵ For all of Palamon's efforts heretofore to maintain his masculine pride and composure, imprisonment occupies such a firm place in his mind that he cannot help but expose himself again, this time in an echo of the Argive widows pleading on their knees to Theseus to have compassion on their own downcast lineage, brought low by the tyranny of Creon. The parallel underscores the extent to which Palamon has been emasculated by suffering and despair, and further underscores his weakness by associating him with the tearful complaints of women; and if these associations are any indication of how Palamon believes he has cast himself, no doubt the recovery of his masculine self is imperative now to the extreme.

Palamon's prayer also expands the terms of our understanding of his initial restlessness. He is concerned not only with freedom and, as he has already revealed in his exchange with Arcite, dignity and pride but also with "lynage" and station, both of

⁵Marckwardt, 8.

which have been brought low by the “tirannye” of Theseus—a concern that will manifest later in Palamon as revenge. And as further proof of Palamon’s consistency with his former ritual yearning, his words cast him again as the complaining Boethian prisoner, this time as the example against which Philosophy explicitly advises in the same metrum quoted above:

“Wharto thanne, o wrecches, drede ye tirauntz that ben wode and felenous withouten ony strengthe? Hope aftir no thyng, ne drede nat; and so schaltow desarmen the ire of thilke unmyghty tiraunt. But whoso that, qwakyng, dredeth or desireth thyng that nys noght stable of his ryght, that man that so dooth hath cast away his scheeld, and is remoeved from his place, and enlaceth hym in the cheyne with whiche he mai ben drawen.”

(*Boece* I, met. IV, 11–22)

Later, after Arcite’s release, Palamon recalls this Boethian example again as, wetting with tears “the pure fettres on his shynes grete” (1279), he casts himself as a symbol of his own suffering. And left alone to give open voice to his woes, he maintains the theme of his tyrannical treatment in his complaint to Fortune on the injustice and suffering of men in the world: “What governance is in this prescience,” he asks, “That giltelees tormenteth innocence?” (1313–14), and his question is an echo of Boethius’ complaint in response to the very advice given him by Philosophy above:

“Or elles the forseide dampnacioun of me—made that hem ryghtfulle accusours or no? Was noght Fortune aschamed of this? Certes, al hadde noght Fortune ben aschamed that innocence was accused, yit oughthe sche han hadde schame of the fylthe of myn accusours.”

(*Boece* I, pros. IV, 131–37)

Though this pattern of Philosophical advice and Boethian complaint is ordered after a brief stretch of dialogue from the *Consolation*, the extent to which Boethius serves as

linear script and sub-text in *The Knight's Tale* is limited. Throughout the poem, Palamon's questions and complaints upon the nature of Fortune and destiny situate him firmly in the same benighted state in which we find Boethius at the start of the *Consolation*. Unlike Boethius, however, Palamon makes no climb to philosophical enlightenment in the end. Indeed, as we follow Palamon's emotional journey, he seems only to sink deeper as the tale progresses. Having succumbed to the despair of imprisonment, Palamon next falls victim to pride which, in turn, begets a lie called love into which he will sublimate his many passions in an effort to live the lie as though it were not one. Even after Palamon escapes from his factual cell, both the conflict between himself and Arcite and his fervently adopted idea of love serve only to strengthen the walls and chains of the metaphorical prison in which he remains.

There is comedy in Palamon's obstinate insistence upon saving face. With each successive defense he exposes the weakness of his case while at the same time obligating himself to act out his lie as he roots himself deeper within it. There is also comedy in Arcite's response to Emelye as his stoic repose comes to a sudden, dramatic end and the walls of the prison of love are thrown up instantly around him. It does not speak well for his philosophy that it should be so quickly undermined:

And with that word Arcite gan espye
 Wher as this lady romed to and fro,
And with that sighte hir beautee hurte hym so,
 That, if that Palamon was wounded sore,
 Arcite is hurt as muche as he, or moore. (1112–16; my emphasis)

"And with that word . . .": no sooner does Palamon inform him of Emelye than Arcite

looks for himself. "And with that sighte . . .": no sooner does he see her than he is overtaken. The anaphora imbues the process with a measured inevitability that seems more an imposition upon Arcite than a causal chain of his making. And the process is not fulfilled until his feelings well up, inevitably, in words:

And with a sigh he seyde pitously,
 "The fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly
 Of hire that rometh in the yonder place;
 And but I have hir mercy and hir grace,
 That I may seen hire atte leeste weye,
 I nam but deed; ther nis namoore to seye." (1117–22; my emphasis)

Arcite's admission of love is invested with the poetry, devotion, and breathless enchantment that Palamon's lacks: it says succinctly and directly what Palamon could only imply indirectly through reference to his internal chemistries; it announces a dedication of service that Palamon never makes; and "'The fresshe beauty sleeth me sodeynly'" is not an explanation of causes but a potent statement of effects, made with such finality that we are surprised that his speechlessness does not come sooner. But before "ther nis namoore to seye," Arcite further reveals Emelye's effects (again, as opposed to describing them) by stating what he desires from her because he has lost himself in her. His words reveal a swift and certain change from stoic disinterest to intense and consuming interest, to the exclusion, as we imagine him transfixed, of all else: of his philosophy, of the prison, and, to his cousin's spite, of Palamon and his own admission of love. Love has so overwhelmed Arcite that it has become the exclusive focus of his thoughts and, desiring, if nothing else, at least the privilege of seeing her, his vision as well. His is the single vision we would expect from a lover, and his

subsequent affliction by the “loveris maladye / Of Hereos” is an affliction born from such vision. As Edward Schweitzer notes:

According to medieval physicians, *amor hereos* is a kind of melancholy, and like the disease of melancholy and the mania to which *hereos* can lead, it is engendered from melancholic humor, infecting the middle ventricle of the brain in melancholia and the interior ventricle in mania. *It is caused by thinking continually about the beloved and concentrating on her image, or phantasm, fixed so firmly in the vis imaginativa (which retains and combines the images of sense experience)—that the lover can think of nothing else, at least for long.*⁶

Palamon is never so afflicted because, despite his often rabid insistence that he loves, his concerns for freedom, honor, pride, lineage, and revenge continue to govern his vision and actions in the tale.

Yet it has already been suggested to us, in subtle and significant ways, that Arcite's love is more authentic and sincere than Palamon's. Whereas Arcite's love is described in certain terms, Palamon's is related equivocally. Of Arcite the narrative tells us, without complication, that “hir beautee hurte him so,” yet upon Palamon's first sight of her “he bleynte and cride, ‘A!’ / *As though* he stongen were unto the herte” (1078–79; my emphasis). We should not doubt the authenticity of Palamon's pain, but the attachment of vagueness to a narrative description reliant upon the same physiological authority upon which Palamon later bases his claim seems yet further confirmation that his pain was not caused by love. So too when Arcite's pain is described in relation to that of Palamon's, we are told that “*if* that Palamon was wounded sore, / Arcite is hurt as

⁶Edward C. Schweitzer, “Fate and Freedom in *The Knight's Tale*” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 3 (1981): 23; my emphasis.

much as he, or moore" (1115–16). That Arcite loves and that his love may be greater than Palamon's is definitively stated. Palamon's love, however, remains doubtful, at best only a hypothetical possibility. Yet here the narrative merely corroborates what Arcite's words suggest in themselves. Arcite's proclamation of love has also been—to Palamon's mind—a proclamation of rivalry: to win Emelye's mercy and grace is to win her favor over Palamon's own professed efforts to do the same. Yet Palamon has also heard the tones of authentic love in Arcite's voice and he takes his cousin's sentiments as further disregard of his own. Arcite has once again unwittingly impeached Palamon's prideful self-image, this time denying his cousin's only defense against the first injury done him by Arcite. The comedy of Palamon's insistence continues, and, oblivious to it all, so too does the comedy of Arcite's Boethian fall into the depths of love. Palamon, however, does not find it funny, and as a result, the consequences are as grave as his response.

Arcite has upstaged and disregarded Palamon's admission, and because his sentiments have been spoken so "pitously" (1117) and with such sincerity they provoke from Palamon the opposite extreme. With a deepening of the defensiveness with which he answered Arcite before into a cold look and barely contained rage:

Dispitously he looked and answered,
 "Wheither seistow this in earnest or in play?" (1124–25)

As Arcite answers we can still imagine him transfixed and oblivious to Palamon's challenging tone:

"Nay," quod Arcite, "in earnest, by my fey!
 God helpe me so, me list ful yvele pleye." (1126–27)

Palamon has turned his gaze to Arcite (1124), the true object and focus, now, of his attentions and all his various concerns, who, because of his shaming advice, provoked the pretext of Palamon's invented love and who, as a result of his own instant and indubitable love, has now become a rival for what to Palamon is the only avenue to the reclamation of dignity and pride. Arcite, in contrast, is oblivious of Palamon and his rising rage because, as those same tones of authentic love inform us, he is still intently gazing on the true object of his attentions, Emelye, the sight of whom is his only desire. Thus his devotion brings out Palamon's spite; and thus, unbeknownst to Arcite, even now the legacy of Thebes is bearing bitter fruit. As sworn brothers, the cousins' emerging conflict is the fraternal strife that Theseus means the prison to contain.⁷ Despite Palamon's complaint that his lineage has been unjustly "so lowe ybrought by tyranny," he justifies Theseus' actions and reminds us of the unwitting ambiguity in his use of the word "tyranny": he means for it to apply to Theseus, but tyranny, as the cause of his woe, is no less the tyranny of Creon, for whose crimes the cousins are being punished;⁸ and speaking "dispitously," in echo of Creon's own "despit" (947), Palamon proves that the tyranny that has brought the cousins low is of the congenital kind. It is thus no less his own tyranny for which he has been imprisoned, and, in characteristically Theban fashion, it will quickly manifest in a feud that will threaten destructive ends and result in Arcite's death.

⁷For an excellent discussion of Chaucer's use of the *Thebaid* and the Theban subtext in *The Knight's Tale*, see Robert S. Haller, "The *Knight's Tale* and Epic Tradition," *Chaucer Review* 1 (1966): 67–84.

⁸Haller, 69.

Some scholars, siding with Palamon, have remarked upon Arcite's apparent breaking of his and Palamon's bond of loyalty and brotherhood.⁹ If the cousins are as close as their introduction suggests, bonded, it would seem, through sympathies more deeply rooted than oaths could ever be, the ease and unconcern with which Arcite seems to sever their ties is indeed shocking. And if Arcite is guilty of initiating their conflict, he must share his guilt with love. "Who shal yeve a lovere any lawe?" (1164), he asks in defense against Palamon's charge of disloyalty. Arcite, formerly ordered and composed in the best stoic manner, has been undone by love; and his words are a crucial and potentially damning reference to the *Consolation*. There the question is posed rhetorically in ironic commentary upon the actions of Orpheus, whose descent into the underworld to reclaim his lost love Eurydice is presented as a parable exemplifying the vanity of resisting the natural order of things—a vanity precipitated by the disorderly passion of love. After having pacified the underworld with his music and having won Eurydice's conditional release, the very passions that brought him his victory prove his undoing, as Philosophy relates:

"But what is he that may yeven a lawe to lovery? Love is a grettere lawe and a strengere to hymself thanne any lawe that men mai yyven. Allas! Whanne Orpheus and his wif weren alмест at the termes of the nyght (*that is to seyn, at the laste boundes of helle*), Orpheus lokede abakward on Erudyce his wif, and lost hire, and was deed."

(Boece III, met. 12, 52–59)

He fails to meet the conditions because he cannot, for love, resist looking back upon his

⁹See, in particular, Judith C. Perryman, "The 'False Arcite' of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*," *Neophilologus* 68 (1984): 121–33.

wife before their ascent is complete. And in that backward glance lies the parable's potent moral:

“This fable apertenith to yow alle, whosoever desirith or seketh to lede his thought into the sovereyn day, that is to seyn, to cleerness of sovereyn good. For whoso that evere be so overcomen that he ficche his eien into the put of helle, that is to seyn, whoso sette his thoughtes in erthly thinges, al that evere he hath drawn of the noble good celestial he lesith it, whanne he looketh the helles, that is to seyn, into lowe thinges of the erthe.”

(*Boece* III, met. 12, 60–69)

It is true that, as a parable, love here is more a vehicle for the general lesson outlined in Philosophy's summary commentary than it is a passion of special and pointed concern. In *The Knight's Tale*, however, while the general import of the moral obtains, its real force is in its specificity to love. Whether our sympathies lie with Arcite's profession of love or not, it should come as no surprise that his claim that love is a greater law should have seemed such a shameful admission of treachery and guilt to so many.

But to side with Palamon while at the same time finding both Arcite and love to be the guilty culprits is to accept Palamon's accusation—an acceptance we can hardly give if we have been sensitive to the subtleties of characterization. Since the cousins are not identical, in light of the diametrical differences evinced between them in their response to imprisonment, neither is their bond so intimate or its breaking so surprising. The conflict emerging in Palamon's “despite” is initiated not by Arcite's apparent disregard of their oath but by Palamon's decision to bring it to bear in the first place. Palamon can only save face if he lives the lie of love, and he can only play the part of lover if Arcite lets him. Thus his recourse to Arcite's loyalty is merely an attempt to

override his cousin's sincerity with his own claim of priority; it is also another failed defense. As A. V. C. Schmidt has shown, Palamon's claim regarding Emelye's provenance actually undermines his subsequent demand that Arcite honor his oath to further him in love.¹⁰ When Arcite points out the essential difference between his and Palamon's attitudes toward Emelye—

“Thyn is affeccoun of hoolynesse,
And myn is love as to a creature” (1158–59)

—he is countering his cousin not with “transparent sophistry”¹¹ but rather with the baselessness of Palamon's own accusation. Taking seriously both Palamon's profession of love and his claim of belief in Emelye as Venus, William Frost has argued for the superiority of Palamon's love over that of Arcite on the grounds that their conflict is “not between love and love, but between devotion and desire.”¹² Arcite is very much aware of this distinction, as Frost would admit—Arcite's own words, in fact, are the strongest evidence for it—yet he finds Arcite to have willfully initiated the break with his cousin. As Schmidt notes, Frost has failed to consider properly the distinction in light of Palamon's accusation: “since ‘love of devotion’ belongs to a different order from straightforward human love (which is founded on, or at least intermingled with, desire), how can Palamon and Arcite possibly be rivals?”¹³ Such is precisely the point that Arcite

¹⁰A. V. C. Schmidt, “The Tragedy of Arcite: A Reconsideration of the *Knight's Tale*,” 108–11.

¹¹D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer*, 466.

¹²William Frost, “An Interpretation of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*,” *The Review of English Studies* 100 (1949): 296.

¹³Schmidt, 108–09.

makes. Though it is clear that he now believes that Palamon loves Emelye, nevertheless it was not until his cousin's enraged accusation and thus only after his own profession of love that Arcite has any reason to arrive at such a conclusion. In his prayer to Emelye, Palamon broke the bounds of courtly convention: he did not so exalt Emelye that she seemed to him to be intermingled with the divine; rather, he divested her of her earthly status as "lady" by praying to her as an authentic visitation who commanded awe because she commanded power—power that might be invoked to intervene with misfortune on his behalf. Thus either Arcite believed his cousin's devotion as expressed or he saw Palamon's theatrics for what they were: in either case, Arcite did not act in violation of his oath because, in either case, Palamon never indicated that he loved or that the nature of his devotion had anything to do with Eros. As Schmidt has observed:

[e]ither Palamon is objectively mistaken about the nature and identity of the *Lady* (which is the case); or else he is mistaken—wilfully or not—as to the nature of his *feelings*; or he is *not* mistaken—in which case he could have no better "claim" to the Lady than Arcite or anyone else.¹⁴

Though Schmidt finds that Palamon is mistaken about the nature of his feelings, we know that he was anything but mistaken—that he neither loves Emelye nor mistook her for Venus—though he does, perhaps, succeed in convincing Arcite of his love. But, again, Arcite could only have been convinced at the point of Palamon's accusation, not before. To quote Schmidt again:

[W]e observe him [Palamon] pass, without his seeing the inconsistency, from the stance of religious devotee to that of stricken lover, *tout*

¹⁴Schmidt, 109.

court—from regarding the Lady as a goddess to regarding her as a woman. It is only from the second of these standpoints that Palamon can justly consider Arcite to be wronging him (i.e., by becoming his rival in *love* and so breaking their pledge of brotherhood). However, it is only from the *first* of these standpoints that Palamon can claim that he and not Arcite was the *first* to “love” the lady. He cannot have it both ways.¹⁵

Palamon, of course, must have it both ways or else concede that the prison did indeed make him cry and that, compounding his dishonor, every claim that he has made since has merely been a face-saving lie. Yet ironically, by holding Arcite to his oath, Palamon has broken his own: since Palamon does not truly love, both his insistence upon his own priority and his demand that Arcite further him in love are actually hindrances to Arcite. Thus Palamon, in accusing Arcite, does to Arcite precisely what he accuses Arcite of doing to him.

Palamon’s flaws are so overwhelming and obvious that it is easy to overlook the fact that Arcite’s willingness to accept the breaking of his oath, despite his clear recognition that Palamon does and did perhaps love, does not appear to speak well for him either. And since the allusive context of Boethius’ Orpheus parable presents him as having fallen from philosophy—the initial distinction between himself and his cousin—in Boethian terms Arcite is clearly no better than Palamon, if not just as culpable. Yet *The Knight’s Tale* departs radically from Boethius by giving credence to Arcite’s claim about the primacy of love as a law unto itself that Philosophy would never concede. Love has already proven philosophy to be a laughably ineffectual barrier to its

¹⁵Schmidt, 110.

advances, though it is not a confirmation of the primacy of disorder as a consequence. In *The Knight's Tale*, rather, Chaucer has elevated love from a base passion that the stoic had best avoid to an integral part of the natural order of things that the philosopher knows is as vain to fight as providence and that the benighted foolishly resist. Despite the context of the Boethian allusion, love is not incompatible with philosophy, nor does love wholly replace it. Love does, however, replace philosophy in keeping Arcite from the destructive impulses that drive his cousin, at which task it succeeds admirably. The *Knight's Tale* should be understood as a participant in the medieval tradition of presenting Orpheus as a courtly lover while at the same time being perhaps wholly unique in its use of Boethius' moralized Orpheus account as its source.¹⁶ As John Block Friedman notes concerning the romance Orpheus: "his adventures were more personal than they were in the commentators' portrait of Orpheus, which tended to show him a bit stiffly posed in an Ethical drama."¹⁷ For identical reasons, Boethius' incompatibility with such versions of the story is obvious, and nowhere in his discussion does Friedman give an example of Boethius' having inspired a poet of this tradition. The noble presentation of a lover with a source that devalues his love is a paradoxical success in *The Knight's Tale* achieved through Chaucer's redefinition of Boethius' concept of love.

Even in the commentary tradition, Orpheus' descent is not wholly without virtue. As Ann Astell observes, medieval commentators typically interpreted the descent of

¹⁶See John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 146–210.

¹⁷Friedman, 146.

Orpheus in the terms outlined by Bernardus Sylvestris in his commentary on Book Six of the *Aeneid*.¹⁸ There, Bernardus distinguishes among four kinds of descents, the second and third of which are as follows:

Est autem alius virtutis qui fit dum sapiens aliquis ad mundana per considerationem descendit, non ut in eis intentionem ponat, set ut eorum cognita fragilitate, eis abiectis, ad invisibilia penitus se convertat et per creaturarum cognitionem creatorem evidentius cognoscat. Sed hoc modo Orpheus et Hercules qui sapientes habiti sunt descenderunt. Est vero tercius vitii, qui vulgaris est, quo ad temporalia pervenitur atque in eis tota intentio ponitur eisque tota mente servitur nec ab eis amplius dimovetur. Taliter Eurydice legimus descendisse. Hic autem irrevocabilis est.¹⁹

[The second descent is through virtue, and it occurs when any wise person descends to mundane things through meditation, not so that he may put his desire in them, but so that, having recognized their frailty, he may thoroughly turn from the rejected things to the invisible things and acknowledge more clearly in thought the Creator of creatures. In this manner Orpheus and Hercules, who are considered wise men, descended. The third is the descent of vice, which is common and by which one falls to temporal things, places his whole desire in them, serves them with his whole mind, and does not turn away from them at all. We read that Eurydice descended in this way. Her descent, however, is irreversible.]²⁰

These second and third descents were of particular interest to, among others, Nicholas of Trivet, whose commentary on Boethius Chaucer knew and used for his own translation of the *Consolation*.²¹ Astell argues that Chaucer understood these descents

¹⁸Ann W. Astell, *Job, Boethius, and Epic Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 143–44

¹⁹*The Commentary on the First Six Books of the Aeneid of Vergil Commonly Attributed to Bernardus Sylvestris*, ed. Julian Ward Jones and Elizabeth Frances Jones (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), 30.

²⁰Earl G. Schreiber and Thomas E. Maresca, trans., *The Commentary on the First Six Books of Virgil's Aeneid* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), 32–33.

²¹Astell, 143. The evidence on which Chaucer's knowledge of Trivet is based is in the parenthetical glosses of his *Boece*. See Mark J. Gleason, "Towards a Reassessment of Chaucer's Use of Trivet in the *Boece*,"

as underlying the twofold pattern of Orpheus' descent in the *Consolation*—the first, by which he reclaims Eurydice, being virtuous and the second, by which he loses her, being marked by vice. But it is hard to believe that Chaucer had such a stolid conception of the passion that compelled Orpheus to descend to the underworld in the first place, whether his understanding of the *Consolation* was informed by Trivet or not. Astell rightly finds a parallel between “The double sorwe of Troilus” and the “love that doublide his [Orpheus'] sorwe” (*Boece* III, met. 12, 26), but to understand the first part of the pattern as virtuous (as opposed to just comedic) merely because the narrator of *Troilus* describes it in positive terms—“Fro wo to wele”—is to misunderstand Boethius' parable in its stoic context as much as the narrator of *Troilus* does. In Boethian terms such joy is false because transitory; the lesson lies not in Orpheus' failure to sustain the motives that won him Eurydice but in the loss those same motives inevitably bring him. The same pattern is also evident in *The Knight's Tale*, where Arcite's experience is summed up as the alternation of good fortune and bad, of “Joye after wo, and wo after gladnesse,” (2841). But Chaucer models the pattern after the moralizing of neither Trivet nor Boethius. Arcite falls in love naturally and inevitably with no moralizing commentary and with none of the insidious undertones of the *Teseida*, in which love is administered like poison to the cousins in furtherance of the curse of Thebes and the unrelenting hatred of Juno. And love has not replaced Arcite's philosophy. “I am exiled fro my wele” (1272), says Arcite upon his release from prison. “Exile” alludes, again, to the

in *The Medieval Boethius: Studies in the Vernacular Translations of De Consolatione Philosophiae*, ed. Alastair J. Minnis (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), 89–105; 94–95 are most persuasive.

Consolation, but it is a perversion of exile in its Beothian context. In the *Consolation*, Boethius' sense of exile from his former good fortune is really a yearning for the earthly prosperity that has exiled him from his true home with God:

“For-why, for thow art confunded with foryetyng of thiself, forthi sorwestow that thow art exiled [and despoyled] of thy propre goodes; and for thow ne woost what is the eende of thynges, forthi demestow that felonis and wikkide men ben myghty and weleful; and for thow hast foryeten by whiche governementz the world is governed, forthi weenestow that thise mutacions of fortunes fleten withouten governour.”

(Boece I, pros. 6, 73–83)

Despite his love, Arcite demonstrates no apparent lack of understanding as to how “the world is governed”—through the “purvaeaunce of God” and “of Fortune” (1252)—and though he understands his exile from his “wele” as an exile from earthly prosperity—from Athens and thus from his love—to return to Athens is to achieve in love the same tempering peace that Boethius apparently achieves through philosophical transcendence by the *Consolation*'s end. Arcite is neither confounded nor has he forgotten himself, until his final moments when he famously asks: “What is this world? What asketh men to have?” (2777). Here philosophy fails Arcite again, this time when he is most in need of consolation, not because love has compromised his ability to reason but because of the ultimate inadequacy of reason to comprehend such suffering in a just world. It is uncertain whether Chaucer here is expressing a dissatisfaction with Boethius or whether he is a more astute reader of the *Consolation* than scholars have heretofore realized. Joel Relihan has briefly argued, with promise of a book-length treatment to follow, that the *Consolation* is composed consciously as a work of

menippean form and thus, by definition, undermines itself.²² Philosophy, he says systematically fails to answer any of Boethius' questions in any meaningful way. Thus to the commonly asked question of how the Christian Boethius could have written such a seemingly pagan work, Relihan's reading offers a rather simple answer: philosophy is, in fact, no consolation at all. But if Boethius means for the Christian reader to turn instead to faith in God, Arcite can only turn to love, and it does not appear to have treated him well.

Love, in undermining Arcite's philosophy, may have left him newly restless and full of anxiety, but it proves just as effective a barrier to his destructive Theban impulses as philosophy had before, and confuses Bernardus' second and third *descensi* above. Indeed, at once despite of and because of his new-found interest in the consuming passion of love, Arcite remains unconcerned with all that moves his cousin. Upon his release:

He wepeth, wayleth, crieth pitously.
To sleen hymself he waiteth prively.
He seyde, "Allas that day that I was born!" (1221–23)

It is a further indication of the cousins' differences that love now provokes in Arcite the same despair that imprisonment provoked in Palamon (1073). Love and freedom are their respective concerns, yet, unlike Palamon, Arcite's particular concern continues to keep him in check. When he makes his complaint in the grove, again in echo of Palamon's despair—"Allas," he says, "that day that I was bore!" (1542)—he

²²See Joel Relihan, *Ancient Menippean Satyre* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 187–94.

proceeds to lament the wrong done him, his lineage, and Thebes by the cruelty of Juno. Arcite's words repeat part of the complaint made by Palamon upon his release (1328–31), and, in a further parallel of Palamon's complaint, his ends with a confession of love. But the 31 lines of Palamon's complaint have little to do with love, whereas love puts the entirety of Arcite's complaint in perspective. Palamon begins by speaking in the manner of the complaining Boethian prisoner: he first describes in general terms the characteristic injustice of Fortune of allowing the innocent to suffer the pains of imprisonment—

“What is mankynde moore unto you holde
Than is the sheep that rouketh in the folde?
For slayn is man right as another beest,
And dwelleth eek in prison and arreest,
And hath siknesse and greet adversitee,
And ofte tymes giltelees, pardee” (1307–12)

—and then, moving from the general to the particular, offers his own plight as an example:

“Allas, I se a serpent or a theef,
That many a trewe man hath doon mescheef,
Goon at his large, and where hym list may turne.
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.” (1325–31)

His misfortune consists of being a “trewe man” imprisoned who must suffer the release of the “false” Arcite in his stead, and, beyond these personal affronts, it consists of the injuries done his lineage, homeland, and patrimony by the unjust enmity of Juno and Saturn. Rhetorically, his complaint to Fortune has come to an end, yet his complaint has

two more lines yet, and these he devotes to his ostensible sorrow in love:

“And Venus sleeth me on that oother syde
For jalousie and fere of hym Arcite” (1332–33)

“That oother syde” does not, together with the list of injuries above, fall under the rubric of misfortune; it is, rather, a side apart from his misfortune and thus apart from the 29 lines before it. No doubt Arcite’s unfair freedom contributes to Palamon’s jealousy of him, but rather than claiming that he is unlucky to be in love, Palamon is claiming that he is *both* unlucky *and* in love. Indeed, were Fortune just, he would be free and Arcite still in prison; jealousy would be eliminated, leaving only Venus and, free of rivals, his attempts to fulfill her demands. And yet, in coming last among his host of concerns, the priority love holds in Palamon’s thoughts is decidedly secondary; and his supposed love is so dwarfed by the attention and eloquence devoted to his Theban misfortunes that the terseness with which it brings his speech to a close is spoken with a note of hasty and perfunctory afterthought. And though he now recognizes Venus as an unseen influence, apart now from the lady in the grove, he can still speak of love only conventionally in terms of unseen causes and thus has nothing to say about Emelye herself.

Love, in contrast, is both the subject and summation of Arcite’s complaint. Arcite lists the concerns that are foremost in Palamon’s mind, but they are dwarfed by love. Love, as he regretfully recognizes, has shamed his Theban self and replaced it with a servile lover who, for the sake of love, even now serves his sworn enemy Theseus. And love has propelled him to the abandonment of the name and station he once enjoyed. Love has also left him helpless to redress the wrong it has done him, because, in the

psychomachia between love and his inborn Theban compulsions toward tyranny and violence, love is the victor:

“Ye sleen me with youre eyen, Emelye!
 Ye been the cause wherfore that I dye.
Of al the remenant of myn oother care
Ne sette I nat the montance of a tare,
 So that I koude doon aught to youre plesaunce.”

(1567–71; my emphasis)

Love keeps Arcite from the violent compulsions that Palamon continues to embrace because it has wholly replaced them. And though love by no means provides for him the tranquility that his philosophy provided, in replacing philosophy it continues to prove that he poses no threat to order and that, for him, both imprisonment and exile are unjust where they are in fact not so for Palamon. “But what is he that may yeven a lawe to loverys?” asks Philosophy, “Love is a grettere lawe and a strengere to hymself than any lawe that men mai yyven”: love is blind and deaf to any sense of order other than its own, and leaves the lover disordered and confused as a result. “Who shal yeve a lovere any lawe?” asks Arcite:

“Love is a grettere lawe, by my pan,
 Than may be yeve to any erthely man.” (1164–66)

For him, the law of love is supreme because it has behind it the ineluctable authority of nature. It is greater not merely because of its priority over the man-made artifice of oaths but also because, as Arcite demonstrates, it has even more power than man-made sophistries to soothe and pacify his violent proclivities. Arcite’s love, which is also the love of Orpheus, is very much that of Eros, an earthly passion that, in Boethian terms,

the philosopher should condemn. But Chaucer has elevated Eros to the place of Boethius' more mystical cosmic love:

[The] accordaunce [and] ordenaunce of [all] thynges is bounde with love, that governeth erthe and see, and hath also comandement to the hevene. And yif this love slakede the bridelis, alle thynges that now loven hem togidres wolden make batayle contynuely, and stryven to fordo the fassoun of this world, the which they now leden in accordable feith by fayre moevynges. This love halt togidres peples joyned with an holy boond, and knytteth sacrament of mariages of chaste loves; and love enditeth lawes to trewe felawes.

(*Boece* II, met. 8, 13–25)

Peter Dronke notes an instance in *Troilus* in which Chaucer accords a similar transcendence to such amorous passion. In his address to Love at the opening of Book III, the narrator includes the following stanza:

In hevene and helle, in erthe and salte see
Is felt thi myght, if that I wel descerne,
As man, brid, best, fissh, herbe, and grene tree
Thee fele in tymes with vapour eterne.
God loveth, and to love wol nought werne,
And in this world no lyves creature
Withouten love is worth, or may endure. (III, 8–14)

With the fifth line, Chaucer departs dramatically from Boccaccio and, notes Dronke,

introduces a new perspective, making the sexual urge that is the subject of the stanza a counterpart and reflection of the highest love. For a moment it is the Christian God partaking in his own creating. With the last two lines of the stanza, love is brought close to the concept of the creative force released by Natura, the principle of perfection and of life in all things.²³

And if we wish to look elsewhere to find love occupying such a high, if not transcendent,

²³Peter Dronke, "L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle," *Studi Medievali* 6 (1965): 419–20.

position in Chaucer's fiction, we have only to recall The General Prologue, where love is a force that moves people to both piety and generation, or the *Parliament of Fowls*, where the chorus of birds sings the music of the spheres in Nature's honor at the poem's end. Love not only moves Arcite's inner, libidinous chemistries with the force of natural law but also directs the clockwork motions of the heavens outside him as well.

Palamon, meanwhile, in his response both to Arcite's freedom and later to his own, is once again an example of the violent tendencies that Arcite avoids, perhaps because he lacks the love that "halt togidres peples joyned . . . enditeth lawes to trewe felawes." Indeed, nowhere in the tale are the cousins' differences more explicit. In their response to Arcite's release, each of them longs to be in the other's place because only there and with the options at the other's disposal do they see the fulfillment of their distinctly different desires. But their attitudes are not merely the paradoxical product of circumstance. A statement is not being made concerning the natures of freedom and imprisonment through the single vision of unrequited love. It may well be true that such men will inevitably see their hope in whatever circumstance, be it freedom or imprisonment, is denied them; but here, because only Arcite loves, the cousins' differing responses are an indication of fundamentally different characters. Palamon rightly predicts that Arcite will return to win his love, though he wrongly assumes that Arcite will employ violent methods to do so:

"Of al oure strif, God woot, the fruyt is thyn.
Thow walkest now in Thebes at thy large,
And of my wo thou yevest litel charge.
Thou mayst, syn thou hast wisdom and manhede,

Assemble alle the folk of oure kynrede,
 And make a werre so sharp on this citee
 That by som aventure or some trettee
 Thow mayst have hire to lady and to wyf
 For whom that I moste nedes lese my lyf.” (1282–90)

In freedom Palamon sees the opportunity to avenge not only the injustice done him by Theseus but also the dishonor done him by Arcite. For him, the uses of freedom are viewed in terms of just the violence that Theseus meant to curb with the cousins’ incarceration. Palamon warns again of the legacy of Thebes, apparent in the cousins’ feud and threatening now to be realized by just such violent means. The threat is confirmed by the explicit allusion of Arcite’s exile to the curse of Oedipus upon his sons Etioles and Polynices to suffer the erratic favors of fortune in the yearly alternation of rulership and exile. Having previously considered Arcite’s “exile” in its Boethian context, we can now see in that single word the convergence of Statius and Boethius both. Chaucer, however, has complicated this sense of exile in the *Thebaid* as much as he has in the *Consolation*: for in *The Knight’s Tale*, one cousin’s exile is the other’s rule. Just as Palamon yearns for Arcite’s freedom, Arcite yearns for his lost imprisonment, because:

“Oonly the sighte of hire whom that I serve,
 Though that I nevere hir grace may deserve,
 Wolde han suffised right ynough for me.
 O deere cosyn Palamon,” quod he,
 “Thyn is the victorie of this aventure.

For possible is, syn thou hast hire presence,
 And art a knight, a worthy and an able,
 That by som cas, syn Fortune is chaungeable,
 Thow maist to thy desir somtyme atteyne.” (1231–43)

No more than Arcite considers the pursuance of the violent possibilities that freedom offers does Palamon consider the peaceful opportunities inherent in imprisonment. Neither of them is able to appreciate the virtue of his respective circumstances because, for each, what is a virtue for one is in the hands of the other.

Thus as Part One of *The Knight's Tale* ends with the cousins in their impossible state of yearning, Part Two begins with each actively engaged in reversing his circumstances to achieve the privilege the other enjoys. Arcite's return from exile is the abandonment of the freedom he was granted and the compromising of all that it entailed. He divests himself of name and lineage and dons in their place the constraints of relative poverty and anonymity and the risk of death upon discovery—all for the sake of achieving the same sight of Emelye that his prison once provided. Palamon, meanwhile, violently escapes from prison “with nercotikes and opie of Thebes fyn” (1472), not just in quest of the freedom for which he has been yearning but also to carry out precisely the same plan of war that he wrongly assumed Arcite would carry out, impelled by the very ideals that Arcite forsakes. Palamon heads immediately

To Thebes-ward, his freendes for to preye
 On Theseus to helpe him to werreye;
 And shortly, outhere he wolde lese his lif
 Or wynnen Emelye unto his wyf. (1483–86)

Whereas the pangs of love have so overwhelmed Arcite's being that he must put his Theban heritage aside, abase himself, and start anew as the servant of his enemy, Palamon is still impelled by the Theban habit. He answers the call of war, and war promises to be an effective means to victory over both his enemies at once: the

destruction of Athens and the slaying of its duke will redress the tyranny of Theseus, just as it will allow him to take for himself Arcite's prize in a triumphant confirmation of his professed love. Palamon would take Emelye by force; Arcite would wait with patience upon "chaungable" fortune in hope of earning Emelye's favor, remaining content, in the meantime, only to have her in sight.

When the cousins meet again in the grove the differing priorities that love and honor hold in their minds are again most evident. We have already seen that love overrides in Arcite his many concerns for honor, lineage and station. Palamon, in contrast, upon overhearing his cousin's confession, is brought to the extremes of savagery and ire, in part, by the fact that Arcite has compromised in himself all that Palamon holds dear:

This Palamoun, that thoughte that thurgh his herte
 He felte a coold swerd sodeynliche glyde,
 For ire he quook; no lenger wolde he byde.
 And whan that he had herd Arcites tale,
 As he were wood, with face deed and pale,
 He stirte hym up out of the buskes thikke
 And seide: "Arcite, false traytour wikke,
 Now artow hent, that lovest my lady so,
 For whom that I have al this peyne and wo,
 And art my blood, and to my conseil sworn,
 As I ful ofte have told thee heerbiforn,
 And hast byjaped heere duc Theseus,
 And falsly chaunged hast thy name thus!
 I wol be deed, or elles thou shalt dye.
 Thou shalt nat love my lady Emelye,
 But I wol love hire oonly and namo;
 For I am Palamon, thy mortal foo." (1574-90)

As if it were not enough that Arcite has pursued Emelye contrary to Palamon's demands,

he has changed his name to serve Theseus and has thus dishonored their family:

“And art my blood, and to my conseil sworn,
As I ful ofte have told thee heerbiforn,
And hast byjaped heere duc Theseus,
And falsly changed hast thy name thus!”

The affronts are tallied with a fevered exasperation as though Palamon has not yet fully come to terms with the impossible depths to which his cousin has sunk. But as a tally, we must not lose these four lines amidst Palamon’s repeated insistence upon his love lest we fail to realize that they are the true sum of his concerns and represent the betrayal of all he means to combat when he returns to Athens in force from Thebes. He is consumed with redressing the wrongs done him, and winning Emelye is not an end in itself but the means for darker ends than love. Indeed, for all Palamon’s talk of love, we see and hear a man brimming only with hate.

Palamon’s attack threatens to evoke comparable emotions in Arcite, who draws his sword upon his unarmed cousin and responds “with ful despitous herte” as had Palamon and Creon before him. But his speech is marked by comparative restraint—

“By God that sit above
Nere it that thou art sik and wood for love,
And eek that thow no wepne hast in this place,
Thou sholdest nevere out of this grove pace,
That thou ne sholdest dyen of myn hond” (1599–1603)

—and he does not take advantage of his cousin, choosing instead to save his sword for the following day, when he arms and provisions his cousin for a fair fight. It is difficult to believe that Palamon, for all his talk of honor, would have extended to Arcite the same courtesy had their circumstances been reversed: his sword, as soon as drawn,

would likely have been bathed in his cousin's blood. He certainly shows no such honor when he "hastily" (1714) confesses both his and Arcite's identity and crimes to Theseus. In the *Teseida* the cousins both honorably confess themselves. But here Palamon gives only himself the benefit of confession while burdening Arcite with accusation: he makes Arcite appear in need of accusing, makes him appear both treacherous and impenitent. And deepening his own treachery, Palamon disingenuously insists that Theseus put them both to death in a seemingly honorable recognition of guilt, yet shamelessly insists that Arcite be put to death first. If Palamon is to die, he will die satisfied only if he can watch his cousin go before him.

In assessing the cousins' differences, it is all too easy to interpret their actions retrospectively according to the deity to which they pray before the tournament. Naturally, if characterization is discounted as the means to this end, the tournament would seem to offer the only alternative. Says Mahmoud Manzalaoui:

into the action-poetry of the narrative intrudes largely Original Part III, in which the poem alters manner, becoming pictorial, heraldic, and largely static, and revealing the protagonists, not in horizontal relationship with each other, but in separate, vertical relationships with their tutelary spirits. . . . One of its literary functions is to depict the inward reality of the three protagonists where the narrative method of the other part of the poem left them as flat characters: to reveal the Emelye who is elsewhere a lay figure, and to reveal two young men who are elsewhere scarcely differentiated.²⁴

Thus Palamon has often been seen as the more Venerian of the two, Arcite the more Martian, and, in a tidy coordination of the tale's earthly cast with its divine one, Theseus

²⁴Mahmoud Manzalaoui, "Chaucer and Science," in *Writers and their Background: Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Derek Brewer (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974): 245–46.

is associated with Jupiter, and Emelye with Diana.²⁵ They are “children” of their correspondent deities, acting in accordance with them because “these deities do not merely influence human affairs at random: they have each constant protégés under their special patronage.”²⁶ Yet it is strange that the reader should have to wait until Book III to have revealed the terms on which to understand both the cousins and the rest of the poem’s characters, especially when their preceding actions in some cases resist and in others complicate such an understanding. As Chauncey Wood has noted: “One way of approaching the astrological imagery and the general involvement with the pagan gods that is found in the tale is to abandon the idea of astral determinism for self-determination on the basis of character.”²⁷ The prayers of Emelye and the cousins and the disposition of Theseus in Book III and at the tournament’s start should be read in terms of the developed characters who utter them: the poem does not precede in all directions from the amphitheater at its center; rather, the rest of the poem should contribute to our understanding of the amphitheater as much as the amphitheater contributes to the poem as a whole.

If we consider the characters in terms of both actions and professed service, parallels between the mundane and the divine cast of *The Knight’s Tale* become difficult

²⁵The best articulation of this view is Douglas Brooks and Alastair Fowler, “The Meaning of Chaucer’s ‘Knight’s Tale,’” *Medium Ævum* 39 (1970): 124–30.

²⁶Brooks and Fowler, 125. See also Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, trans. Barbara F. Sessions (London: Pantheon Books, 1953), 69–83.

²⁷Chauncey Wood, *Chaucer and the Country of the Stars: Poetic Uses of Astrological Imagery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 75.

to draw as general to the poem's action. (Only Egeus's likeness to Saturn in terms of his age and relationship to his son, as well as his penchant for dark and dower solutions, appears to be without complication, though, unlike the other characters, Egeus does not appear earlier in the tale.) Emelye prays to Diana, and her profession of past service together with her desire to remain a virgin makes their affinity clear, yet her observance of the May rites also associates her with Venus. Theseus presides over the tournament "as he were a god in trone" (2529), attempts below as Jupiter does above to order the world around him, and, like Jupiter, fails in the end; but Theseus also combats Creon under the banner of Mars and, in a parallel confrontation with the dueling Theban cousins in the grove, swears by Mars to serve them as Creon was served (1708 and 1747); and Theseus also pursues the "grete hert in May" (1675) because "after Mars he serveth now Dyane" (1682). Brooks and Fowler have noted many of these complications, though none concerning Palamon and Arcite, about whom they say: "it is already clear that all the actions of the lovers, at the time of the tournament that sums up their opposition, are performed in accordance with the appropriate planetary influence."²⁸ And, on the assumption that the deities to whom the cousins pray are representative of their respective characters, it is natural to conclude, as Richard Neuse has done, a certain justice in the outcome of the tournament: "both get what they asked for. Arcite has his victory and 'finest hour'; Palamon and Emelye live happily ever after."²⁹ Even Hoaxie

²⁸Brooks and Fowler, 128.

²⁹Richard Neuse, "The Knight: The First Mover in Chaucer's Human Comedy," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 31 (1962): 301.

Fairchild sees the outcome in such terms, though he links the prayers to his thesis of an “active Arcite” and “contemplative Palamon” by arguing that “Palamon thinks of ends; Arcite of instruments.”³⁰ The fact that Palamon prays to Venus after his former apostrophes to the goddess provides some justification for conclusions attesting to his consistent role and dedication as lover, though such readings do not account for the context in which his early statements are made, nor do they account for his constant rage, his mindfulness of Theseus as his sworn enemy, and his long-harbored plans for war. There is no justification, however for the assertion that Arcite’s prayer to Mars is indicative of a fundamentally Martian character, because none of Arcite’s actions preceding his prayer could be characterized as Martian. As we have seen, the decidedly bellicose Palamon is very much in opposition to the amorous Arcite, and it is with these characteristics that, despite the deity to whom they pray, each cousin’s prayer is consistent. Neither is more concerned with ends or means than the other: each, very mindful of ends prays to the deity through whom he might achieve the means by which he might achieve his ultimate desire. Palamon prays to Venus for aid in achieving Emelye, because she is the key to achieving victory over Arcite; in contrast Arcite prays for victory because it is the surest means not of winning Emelye but of winning the opportunity to earn her grace.

Palamon’s appeal to Venus, full as it is with the language of love, also reveals darker motives and darker ends. He swears that he will “holden werre alwey with

³⁰Fairchild, 285.

chastitee” (2236)—a promise that speaks poorly for his professedly single-minded devotion to Emelye and that also does not bode well for Emelye, or any woman for that matter, if he is victorious at the tournament’s end. But his promise does not forecast a turn of character, it merely confirms our present understanding of him; it is as if to say: if I win I shall ever be as I am now. For his plan to lay siege to Athens to take Emelye by force was itself a plan laid for war with chastity, and his prayer to win Emelye for himself is no less a tactic deployed for that end.

“I kepe noght of armes for to yelpe,
Ne I ne axe nat tomorwe to have victorie,
Ne renoun in this cas, *ne veyne glorie*
 Of pris of armes blowen up and down,” (2238–41; emphasis mine)

says Palamon. No doubt triple negatives are not uncommon or unacceptable in Middle English: they carried the cumulative force of emphasis. But here he so emphasizes that he does not want victory that he nevertheless alerts us to victory as a very prominent issue in his thoughts. His insistence comically advertises real motives, and the triple negative leaves him sounding as though stuttering equivocally over his proclamation. We can hear his discomfort as he knowingly denigrates all that he stands for. “*Ne renoun in this cas, ne veyne glorie*”? we have not before now seen him so disinterested in his honor and good name, nor considered them as vain pursuits, and we should expect nothing less of him now, despite his words to the contrary. It is further confirmation of the extent to which his personal score with Arcite has so consumed him that he is willing to sacrifice honor and dignity merely to redress the one dishonor unknowingly done him before. He has shown himself willing to lie, to break his own oath of loyalty, to kill, to

accuse and see his enemy executed, and now, to seek aid, beyond the martial terms of the lists, to win Emelye in whatever way he can. He prays to Venus not because he is a lover but perhaps to convince himself that he is one or because he knows something of her special influence upon her fellow deities and thus upon the hidden forces that, once employed, might tip the balance of his conflict with Arcite in his favor:³¹

“Fynd thow the manere hou and in what wyse:
I recche nat but it may bettre be
To have victorie of hem, or they of me,
So that I have my lady in myne armes.” (2244–47)

He cares not for victory in the lists, because no matter how he wins Emelye, he will have scored a victory over Arcite, which makes all the difference to him in the end.

Arcite’s prayer is full of no such duplicity. He prays to Mars not as a result of an intrinsically Martian character but because, given the martial terms established by Theseus for the resolution of the cousins’ conflict, Mars is the most relevant deity to whom to petition for aid. There is no doubting Arcite’s mindfulness of the ends his Martian aid might bring him. After appealing to Mars with reference to his experience with Venus herself, Arcite simply states:

“And wel I woot, er she me mercy heete,
I moot with strengthe wyne hire in the place,
And wel I woot, withouten help or grace
Of thee ne may my strenghe noght availle.” (2398–2401)

Not only does Arcite show an understanding and acceptance of the terms of Theseus’

³¹See Haller, 69: “Venus is not only a goddess whose special province is love, she is also (as we see later in the tale [and elsewhere in the classical tradition]) capable of moving other gods to find ways of fulfilling the wishes of her devotees.” We know Palamon is no devotee. But even feigned devotion can be effective.

challenge but he also reveals why he does not pray, as did Palamon, to “have fully possessioun / Of Emelye” (2242–43). For Arcite, winning Emelye does not mean possessing her, because even if she is won her “mercy” is still hers to promise; for Arcite, Emelye’s grace must still be earned. Arcite jumps for joy at Theseus’ announcement of the tournament because he now has a sure opportunity to have an opportunity to win Emelye’s grace. His request to Mars—“Yif me [victorie]; I aske thee namoore” (2420)—is not within the context of his prayer revealing of his exclusive desire for martial success, nor does his previous use of the word bear such meaning. When released from prison and coming to terms with ironies of Fortune, Arcite addresses the good fortune of Palamon: “Thyn is the victorie of this aventure” (1235), he says, and there is no mistaking that the victory to which he refers is victory in love. Arcite goes on to ponder over the common theme of the vanity of human wishes:

“Allas, why pleynen folk so in commune
On purveiaunce of God, or of Fortune,
That yeveth hem ful ofte in many a gyse
Wel bettre than they can hemself devyse?” (1251–54)

His own desire for freedom has been granted, but it has left him in a more desperate state than before. Thus, as he recognizes, such wishing lacks foresight as well as the presence of vision to see the benefits of one’s present circumstances. When Arcite makes his prayer to Mars, he clearly has not learned his lesson, for he suffers analogous effects. Arcite receives in answer to his prayer no cryptic omen like those received by Palamon and Emelye before him; rather, his own word—“victory”—echos back hauntingly in announcement of the cruel literalism with which his request will be granted. He will be

held to the letter, not the spirit of his request, just as Palamon will be held to his: the irony of the prayers is that, while both cousins get what they asked for, neither, in fact, gets what he wanted. It is Arcite who wishes to live “happily ever after” while Palamon’s sights have long been on the honor and praise that Arcite garners in death.

As Alan Gaylord has argued, the cousins are not “children” of the respective deities to whom they pray—at least not in the sense of being directed by them ineluctably through astral determinism.³² It is one thing to have appetites and another to be ruled by them, and, according to Gaylord, to be ruled by them is to come under the influence of Saturn. Thus the decidedly unpleasant nature of the iconography of the amphitheater temples is not representative of the aspects of those deities when Theseus serves them; rather, it is representative of the malevolent, Saturnalian sides of their influence: “in effect, then, Saturn is the lord of all those who would remain recalcitrant citizens of Thebes.”³³ With respect to Emelye, we might also add those who would remain recalcitrant citizens of Scithia. When the cousins go to pray in the temples, says Gaylord, “Saturn is a way of figuring forth what the lovers’ wills have come to. . . . Figurally, it is appropriate that he take over the argument between Venus and Mars, which Jupiter ‘was busy . . . to stente’ (2442)—not because Jupiter is helpless, but because the lovers are not prepared for a reconciliation or the rational moderation

³²Alan T. Gaylord, “The Role of Saturn in the *Knight’s Tale*,” *The Chaucer Review*, 8 (1974): 171–90.

³³Gaylord, 175.

offered by Theseus.”³⁴ If by “the rational moderation of Theseus” Gaylord means the tournament that Theseus has devised for the resolution of the cousins’ conflict, we must not forget that Arcite’s prayer is made wholly within the parameters that Theseus has set—parameters that Palamon refuses to obey in his prayer. And Palamon is not being overmastered by Venerian urges in his prayer any more than Arcite is by Martian urges in his. The cousins are not submitting to the influence of tutelary gods to move, in sympathy with planetary influences, to rise and pray at the hours they do; they have, rather, chosen the hours themselves because, astrologically speaking, they are the most propitious times for their intended devotions. Gaylord is right, however, about the malevolent aspects of the temple art. Whether or not Theseus “has built the ‘oratories’ to accord with what he judges to be the ‘condicioun’ of each of the three principals”³⁵ they seem to stand as temptations to the cousins, who must decide to draw on their harsh influence or not.

Only Palamon succumbs. We have seen that unlike Boccaccio, Chaucer gives a dramatic portrait of the cousins instead of a physical one laden with traits asserted by the narrative but never confirmed. But Chaucer does obliquely inform something of the cousins through portraiture: specifically, he reveals the nature of the influence their prayers have enlisted, as “the inward reality,” to quote Manzalaoui again, of each. It has long been recognized that the portraits of Lygurge and Emetreus, derived as they are

³⁴Gaylord, 183.

³⁵Gaylord, 182.

from Boccaccio's portraits of the cousins—the former, fighting for Palamon, is dark-complexioned like Palaemon and the latter, fighting for Arcite, is fair like Arcites—act as surrogate portraits for the cousins, representing, emblematically, something of their dispositions and, in some cases, helping to inform us under the auspices of which gods they act. As Curry has shown, Emetreus is a Martian figure and Lygurge Saturnalian. We might expect from Palamon's prayer that he would have been better represented by a Venerian figure, yet, in the dispute between Mars and Venus, Saturn has sided with Venus and taken her client as his own.³⁶ Yet Arcite has succumbed to his passions many times before his prayer, and Lygurge was in Palamon's service well before his prayer as well. Saturn's protection is most fitting because the destructive nature in his influence has been characteristic of Palamon from the tale's start. "I do vengeance and pleyne correccioun," says Saturn to Venus, "Whil I dwelle in the signe of the leoun" (2461–62), and we might remember Palamon fighting in the grove as "a wood leon" (1656). And, since Palamon has been far more bellicose and as a consequence Martian than Arcite, Palamon is aptly reflected in Lygurge as "King of Trace" (2129), the grim land where, earlier, we were told, "Mars hath his sovereyn mansioun" (1974). Indeed, the question is begged: who of that land is king?

Emetreus is not only described in terms that associate him with Mars, but his

³⁶Walter Clyde Curry, *Chaucer and the Medieval Sciences* (1926; New York: Barnes and Noble, 1960), 131–37. J. D. North, *Chaucer's Universe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 408, notes that the portrait of Lygurge is not without its Venusian elements: "we should not overlook the fact that his chariot had four white bulls in the traces—as sure a symbol of an affiliation to Venus as his hairy old body was of his Saturnine disposition." North, unfortunately, does not say from where such an image would have been drawn.

depiction is much more positive than the dark and gloomy Lygurge. His portrait is in no way suggestive of the dire imagery on the temple of Mars; indeed, in a correspondence similar to that between Palamon and Lygurge, Emetreus also shows some of the traits that Arcite has so far evinced. Emetreus shares Arcite's Venerian qualities:

Upon his heed he wered of laurer grene
A garland, fressh and lusty for to sene (2175–76)

His garland reminds us of those worn alternately by Emelye and Arcite, and its vernal qualities are equally evocative of the season that compelled them to their rites. There is even the same courtly concern with appearance and voice that we see in the portrait of the Squire in the General Prologue, and the same sense of marvel at his youthful energy: of Emetreus, says the Knight "of fyve and twenty yeer his age I caste" (2172); and of the Squire, says the General Prologue narrator, "Of twenty yeer of age he was, I guesse" (82). Emetreus confirms what we already know of Arcite: that he is a lover as well as a knight. Lygurge, meanwhile, confirms all that is unsettling in Palamon's soul.

CHAPTER III

DE RAPTU ARCITI¹

Arcite's statement that love is a greater law may not carry in *The Knight's Tale* the severe judgement of Philosophy in the *Consolation* to which it alludes, but the Orphic mold in which it casts him is no less potent. When Arcite sets out in pursuit of love he is still performing an act of *descensus*, and the heroic and tragic dimensions of his descent underscore his role as the tale's hero just as they underscore Palamon's role as its villain. Arcite's release overwhelms him at first with a profound sense of sorrow for the apparent loss of any chance at winning Emelye's grace:

He seyde, "Allas that day that I was born!
Now is my prisoun worse than biforn;
Now is me shape eternally to dwelle
Noght in purgatorie, but in helle. (1223–26)

But he soon comes to understand that his hell affords him brighter possibilities than his former prison paradise, because hell for him means the freedom actively to try his chance at love where before he was only a passive servant of hope. The natural and noble ease with which he wins the confidence of Theseus and Athens should not belie the real peril into which he descends. His prospects are greatly dimmed by the deadly

¹I would like here to express my indebtedness to John Kerr. His suggestion to explore the role of Claudian and the Persephone myth in *The Knight's Tale* proved the missing piece of the puzzle for me, and the subsequent growth of this chapter benefitted greatly from our many fruitful conversations.

condition placed upon his release, and even more by his dream visitation by Mercury. The god's command to go to Athens, "Ther is thee shapen of thy wo an ende" (1392), is Arcite's inducement to action, but whether the end of his woe is to be positive or negative is ominously ambiguous. And more foreboding is Mercury's "sleepy yerde" (1387), which recalls the *somniferam virgam* with which he puts Argus to sleep before killing him in the *Metamorphoses* (an event that Chaucer captures succinctly with his pun on "sleep" in "whan that Argus took his sleep" [1390]),² and which he carries, in an allusion to Ovid, in Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpinae*.³ There Mercury's single sinister task for Jove is compounded by his singular role as intermediary between heaven and hell:

"Atlantis tegeae nepos, commune profundis
et superis numen, qui fas per limen utrumque
solus habes geminoque facis commercia mundo."
(1.89–91)

["Grandchild of Atlas, Arcadian-born, deity that sharest hell and heaven,
thou who alone hast the right to cross either threshold, and art
intermediary between the two worlds."]

In the *Teseida*, Arcites makes a death-bed sacrifice to Mercury, he says, "'per sî fatto merto / in luogo amen li piaccia de portare / lo spirito mio'" (X, 90) ["so that in recompense he might be pleased to carry my spirit to a happy clime"], and, in his gloss

²See Richard L. Hoffman, *Ovid and the Canterbury Tales* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1967), 61–63. Hoffman is not convinced that Claudian is also operative here.

³Compare *Metamorphoses*, 3rd ed., Loeb Classical Library (1977), 1.671–72 ("parva mora est alas pedibus virgamque potenti / somniferam sumpsisse manu tegumenque capillis") with *De Raptu Proserpinae*, Loeb Classical Library (1922), 1.77–78 ("Cyllenius adstitit ales / somniferam quatiens virgam tectusque galero").

to this stanza, Boccaccio says that “era opinione degli antichi che Mercurio avesse a trarre l’anime de’ corpi e quelle portare dove gli piacesse” [it was the opinion of the ancients that Mercury separated the souls from the bodies, and brought them wherever he pleased]. In *The Knight’s Tale*, Arcite’s dream is as good as a death-bed visitation: Arcite may be alive and well when it occurs, but it heralds just as inevitable an end for him as do the final observances of his Italian forerunner. Mercury sends Arcite across the threshold irrevocably to the underworld. He sends him to Athens as Orpheus goes to Hades, braving much peril to win his love after winning the confidence of her ward; indeed, Arcite charms Athens as Orpheus does Hades, “Bothe of his dedes *and his goode tonge*” (1438; my emphasis). And Mercury sends Arcite on the path to a hellish death at the poem’s end.

Arcite, however, does not descend merely in the mold of Orpheus. It is his release that begins his enterprise and his release is affected by Perotheus, in whose likeness he descends as well. The introduction of Perotheus ostensibly presents a model of friendship against which the drastic falling out of Palamon and Arcite is to be judged. The cousins come to feud over a seemingly impossible goal, whereas the friendship of the dukes knows not even the bounds of hell:

A worthy duc that highte Perotheus,
That felawe was unto duc Theseus
Syn thilke day that they were children lite,
Was come to Atthenes his felawe to visite,
And for to pleye as he was wont to do;
For in this world he loved no man so,
And he loved hym als tendrely agayn.
So wel they lovede, as olde bookes sayn,

That whan the oon was deed, soothly to telle,
 His felawe wente and soughte hym down in helle—
 But of that storie list me nat to write. (1191–1201)

There can hardly be a more idealized portrait of friendship than this, and it is a portrait well-known in the Middle Ages and based upon classical authorities whom Chaucer knew as well.⁴ In the *Metamorphoses*, for example, Ovid refers to the two as sharing a happy and binding friendship—“felix concordia” (VII.303)—and on two occasions he has Theseus attest to their friendship in much the same terms in which the Theseus of *The Knight’s Tale* erroneously views Palamon and Arcite. Addressing Pirithous, he says, ““o me mihi carior . . . / pars animae consiste meae”” (VIII.405–06) [“O dearer to me than my own self, my soul’s other half”], and in a later statement: ““quae te vecordia,’ Theseus / ‘Euryte, pulsat,’ ait, ‘qui me vivente laccessas / Pirithoum virolesque duos ingarus in uno?’” (XII.227–29) [“What madness, Eurytes, drives you to this, that while I still live you dare provoke Pirithoüs and, not knowing what you do, attack two men in one?”]. But the greatest testament to their friendship lies in their descent to Hades. Richard Hoffman suggests that the narrator’s and Chaucer’s reticence to fully explain the story behind their descent—“But of that storie list me nat to write”—reflects a lack of knowledge resulting from Ovid’s own cryptic allusions in his *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto*: “Thesea Pirithous non tam sensisset amicum, / Si non infernas vivus adisset aquas” [Pirithoüs would not have felt so acutely the friendship of Theseus had he not journeyed,

⁴Hoffman, 52, says: “The friendship of Theseus and Pirithoüs, regarded in the Middle Ages almost as a kind of classical parallel to the Scriptural love of David and Jonathan, is mentioned many times by Ovid.” Hoffman also notes the following examples from the *Metamorphoses* (52–54).

in life, to the infernal waters]; “Quod pius ad manes Theseus comes irat amico, / Tartareum dicunt indoluisse deum” [They say that the god of Tartarus grieved because loyal Theseus accompanied his friend to the lower world]; and “Pirithoum Theseus Stygias comitavit ad undas” [Theseus accompanied Pirithoüs to the Stygian waves].⁵ According to Hoffman, these references, together with Jean de Meun’s version of the story in the *Romance of the Rose*,⁶ led Chaucer to understand Theseus as rescuing his friend merely from an untimely death.⁷ We might see in this supposed understanding of the story an interesting link with Orpheus’ descent for Eurydice and, in that link, a striking commentary on the comparative values of *amor* and *amicitia*: for, whereas Orpheus fails in his descent for the former, Theseus succeeds in his descent for the latter. But it is Perotheus, rather, who is paralleled here with Orpheus, for, like Orpheus, he descended unsuccessfully for love as well. Chaucer could not have failed to notice that the allusions to the descent of the dukes in Ovid refer to Virgil’s brief account in Book VI of the *Aeneid*. There, Charon relates the dukes’ infernal exploit, whereby “hi dominam Ditis thalamo deducere adorti” “[they] essayed to carry off our queen from the chamber of Dis”].⁸ Virgil indicates an equal share in the venture and its spoils, but the subsequent elaborations by Ovid, already mentioned, and especially those by Statius

⁵Ovid, *Tristia* I.v. 19–20, I.ix.31–32, and *Ex Ponto* II.iii.43, Loeb Classical Library (1924). The translations given here, however, are from Hoffman, 54.

⁶See *Le Roman de la Rose*, 8148–54.

⁷Hoffman, 54–55.

⁸Virgil, *Aeneid*, 2nd ed., Loeb Classical Library (1935), VI.397.

make Proserpina exclusively the goal of Pirithous. Statius refers to “fidem, quanta partitum extrema protervo / Thesea Pirithoo” [[the] loyalty as Theseus showed when he shared extremest peril with wanton Pirithous] and to “Pirithoi temerarius ardor / . . . et audaci Theseus iuratus amico” [the rash ardor of Pirithous . . . and Theseus, sworn comrade of his daring friend].⁹ This Pirithous descended headlong with an urgency of purpose, accompanied by a loyal friend whose presence was no doubt welcome but whose absence, we sense, would not have deterred him from his goal. This Pirithous descended for love, and were it that he had no role in *The Knight’s Tale*, he would still be as compelling an analogue to Arcite as is Orpheus.

Encouraged as we are in *The Knight’s Tale* to juxtapose one pair of friends with the other, it is easy to dismiss Perotheus’ friendship with Arcite and easier to miss the deep affinity between them. “Duc Perotheus loved wel Arcite,” we are told, “And hadde hym knowe at Thebes yeer by yeer” (1202–03). Yet their association is more essential and more profound than any friendship made merely out of a lifetime’s habit: the dukes’ friendship may point to the cousins’ failure less than the cousins’ friendship points to the real possibility of failure in the dukes. What is destructive in Arcite and Perotheus, meanwhile, is itself a part of their bond, for it is self-destruction that they share. Arcite and Perotheus are alike in their extreme responses to love, in the depths to which they are willing to go to win it, and in the priority their loves have over even the surest threat of death. Not only is Perotheus’ rash descent for Proserpina similar to that of Orpheus

⁹Statius, *Thebeid*, Loeb Classical Library (1928), I. 475–76 and VII.53–54.

for Eurydice, and thus to that of Arcite as well, but knowing the traditional proscription against the admittance of the living to the land of the dead, in both cases we might ask, as Arcite asked it of himself, who can give a lover any law? Seeing to Arcite's release, Perotheus enables not only his Orphic descent but, having once descended for love, Perotheus releases Arcite to complete what he himself could not. It is a strange and complex act of friendship to free one's friend to pursue his innermost desire, when that desire leads him on a path to hell; Theseus, in contrast, may loyally have returned Perotheus from his infernal fate, but that act was also a tearing of his friend from his love and thus an equivocal act of support. When Arcite says "The fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly," he is, of course, speaking figuratively of his love and at once forebodingly of the end to which his love will bring him; we might understand the death from which Theseus rescued Perotheus in similar terms. Perotheus' friendly gesture is thus as foreboding for Arcite as is Mercury's command and Arcite's own conceit, not least because Perotheus' death further parallels the descent of Orpheus—at least in Chaucer's rendering of Boethius' account of it. When Orpheus turns to Eurydice in the *Consolation*, "Eurydicen suam / Vedit, perdidit, occidit" [he saw, lost, and killed his Eurydice]:¹⁰ breaking the condition of her release he loses her the moment he looks upon her and she is returned to the death to which she was originally condemned. In Chaucer's *Boece*, however, an interesting error of translation has occurred. "Orpheus," says Chaucer, "lokede abakward on Erudyce his wif, and lost hire, and was deed" (*Boece*, IV,

¹⁰Boethius, *Philosophiae Consolationis*, 2nd ed., Loeb Classical Library (1973), III, met. XII.51.

met. 12, 58–59). Compounding the death of Eurydice, which we already knew Orpheus' glance would bring, Orpheus here effects his own death as a result of his failure and poetically joins his love now that she can never join him. We can assume that Perotheus' death resulted from his own failure as well, if his failure did not result from it; and with Arcite associated with both descents, we can only expect that, in the mode of either, death for love is Arcite's inevitable end.

Though Arcite's pursuit of Emelye is figured in terms of the descents of Orpheus and Perotheus for Eurydice and Proserpina, respectively, Emelye's correspondence to these women is not immediately apparent because she does not herself appear to be the captive of any such infernal states. She is a captive of fate, however, and the infernal turn it means for her is only a matter of time, and it is a fate that promises her a factual *raptus* and figurative death. When she prays at the temple of Diana, which is one of Chaucer's many additions to Boccaccio's *Teseida*, "to ben a mayden al my lyf" (2305), the goddess to whom she prays is not, unfortunately, merely the goddess of chastity. Diana is a complex figure of many aspects, whose mythographic tradition Chaucer appears to have known rather well.¹¹ The iconography on the temple presents a triune goddess, one that embodies at once Diana the chaste huntress, Proserpina the ravished daughter of Ceres, and Lucina the goddess of childbirth:

This goddesse on an hert ful hye seet,
With smale houndes al aboute hir feet,
And underne the hir feet she hadde a moone—

¹¹See Jacqueline de Weever, "Chaucer's Moon: *Cynthia*, *Diana*, *Latona*, *Lucina*, *Proserpina*," *Names* 34 (1986): 154–74.

Wexynge it was and sholde wanye soone.
 In gaude grene hir statue clothed was,
 With bowe in honde and arwes in a cas.
 Hir eyen caste she ful lowe adoun
 Ther Pluto hath his derke regioun.
 A womman travailynge was hire biforn;
 But for hir child so longe was unborn,
 Ful pitously Lucyna gan she calle
 And seyde, "Help, for thou mayst best of alle!" (2075–86)

It is a paradoxical portrait, full of contradictory extremes of which Emelye is not unaware when she makes her prayer:

"O chaste goddesse of the wodes grene,
 To whom bothe hevene and erthe and see is sene,
 Queen of the regne of Pluto derk and lowe." (2297–99)

It is no doubt the first of these aspects whose aid she seeks, while stating that the other aspects Diana represents are exactly those things which she wishes to avoid:

"I am, thow woost, yet of thy compaignye,
 A mayde, and love huntynge and venerye,
 And for to walken in the wodes wilde,
 And noght to ben a wyf and be with childe." (2307–10)

She asks Diana as Diana asked Jupiter that she might always retain her chastity. Diana's request was granted, though only to a part of the goddess who would take on other, very different forms; earthly woman, however, cannot exist simultaneously and consubstantially in three such states, because they can only experience them, if they must experience them at all, in succession. Chaucer presents the goddess in these forms not in an indiscriminate show of mythographic encyclopedism but in a specific order that describes at once a brutish process in the life of maidens and a rather risky goddess in whom to entrust one's maidenhood. Indeed, the temple iconography is an answer to

Emelye's request even before she makes it. The chaste Emelye must give way to the ravished Emelye who must, in turn, suffer the pains of childbirth. Even the answer she receives in the temple confirms that her chastity will soon be a thing of the past:

But sodeynly she saugh a sighte queynte,
 For right anon oon of the fyres queynte
 And quyked agayn, and after that anon
 That oother fyr was queynt and al agon;
 And as it queynte it made a whilstelynge,
 As doon thise wete brondes in her brennynge,
 And at the brondes ende out ran anon,
 As it were bloody dropes many oon. (2333–40)

We can see in this omen the changing fortunes of the feuding cousins in the tournament to come, whereby Palamon, in seeming defeat, is rekindled victorious after Arcite's glorious victory is suddenly extinguished in a horrible letting of blood. One of the young knight's will indeed win the lady, and we might see in the foretelling of that victory a rather horrible signification for Emelye as well, as the embers' dripping sap forecasts her virginal blood. That fate has decided such an end for her is clear from the fact that the tale's resolution is represented in this omen well before the gods convene to decide what to do with the cousins' prayers, and well before Saturn steps forward with his morbidly accommodating solution. His decision would appear to have been made for him, or to have been made in accordance with a providential design that he, like we, cannot escape from fulfilling. And before the temple is even thought of, and before Emelye becomes the unknowing object of rivalry between the cousins, she is described in terms that associate her with Lucina and that bespeak a fate that she must fulfill as well. When she is sent to Athens before Theseus' preparations against Creon, she is described as

Hypolita's "yonge suster sheene" (972), she is "fresshe Emelye the shene" (1068) when Palamon spies her in the garden, "Emelye the brighte" (1737) when Palamon refers to her later in the tale, and, when making her prayer to Diana, she is described as having "brighte heer" (2289). As Jacqueline de Weever has shown, the epithet "sheene" is repeatedly used by Chaucer to represent the moon goddess Lucina, named variously *Cinthia*, *Diana*, *Latona*, *Lucina*, and *Proserpine*, throughout his work.¹² In *Troilus and Criseyde*, for example, she is "Lucina the sheene" and "Cinthia the sheene" (IV, 1591 and 1608) and, in *The Franklin's Tale*, Aurelius prays for "Lucina the sheene" (1045) to slow the moon's course so that the tide might be frozen and the threatening rocks concealed beneath the swell. And "'Prey hire,'" he asks Lucina's brother Phoebus,

"to synken ever rok adoun
 Into hir owene dirke regioun
 Under the ground, ther Pluto dwelleth inne." (1073–75)

Here, Aurelius identifies Lucina "the sheene" with Proserpina, the dark queen of the underworld, and thus unwittingly alludes to the sexually coercive tactics implicit in his prayer. In *The Knight's Tale*, that Emelye should be associated with pregnancy is innocent enough, but to associate her thereby with Lucina is also to associate her with Proserpina, which is to forecast pregnancy through *raptus*. Whether in the underworld or condemned to be there soon, Emelye is in the clutches of a fate from which she can no more escape than Eurydice and Proserpina could from theirs.

¹²See de Weever, 155 and 165. Marta Powell Harley, "Chaucer's Use of the Proserpina Myth in 'The Knight's Tale' and 'The Merchant's Tale,'" in *Images of Persephone*, edited by Elizabeth T. Hayes (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 22, builds on De Weever's discussion of Emelye's resemblance to Lucina by noting the instances of "brighte," noted above.

The threat of *raptus* and its aftereffects for Emelye's future is much stronger than these subtle suggestions, however. From the moment of her appearance in the garden in the first part of *The Knight's Tale*, Emelye is most clearly figured as Proserpina. There is no doubting Chaucer's knowledge of Ovid's account of Proserpina's ravishment in the *Metamorphoses*, but Chaucer's principal source for the Proserpina myth is little recognized. Robert Pratt long ago proved that Chaucer was acquainted at least with a modicum of Claudian's works and particularly with his *De Raptu Proserpinae*,¹³ in terms of which work Chaucer defines Claudian as a poet. In *The House of Fame*, Chaucer honors Claudian as one among the celebrated writers of antiquity:

. . . on a piler stood
 Of soulfre, lyk as he were wood,
 Daun Claudian, the sothe to telle,
 That bar up al the fame of helle,
 Of Pluto, and of Proserpyne,
 That quene ys of the derke pyne. (1507–12)

Crazed in the writing of his poem by the inspiring "furor" of Phoebus, which he says in his *De Raptu*, "*humanos nostro de pectore sensus / expulit*" (1.5–6) [has . . . driven all mortal thoughts from my breast], Claudian is placed by Chaucer emblematically on a pillar of sulfur as the quintessential poet of hell. And, in *The Merchant's Tale*, Chaucer synopsis Claudian's version of Proserpina's ravishment:

Pluto, that is kyng of Fayerye,
 And many a lady in his compaignye,
 Folwyng his wyf, the queene Proserpyna,
 Which that he ravysshed out of [Ethna]

¹³See Robert A. Pratt, "Chaucer's Claudian," *Speculum* 22 (1947): 419–29.

Whil that she gadered floures in the mede—
 In Claudyan ye may the stories rede,
 How in his grisely carte he hire fette. (2227–33)

These examples are obvious enough, but more subtle is Chaucer's use of the *De Raptu* in The Knight's Tale. Marta Harley has recently explored the role of the Proserpina myth in the depiction of Emelye in the garden scene of The Knight's Tale. As she observes: "Chaucer does not draw on Proserpina's dark, dire existence as Pluto's queen. Rather, he turns to classical accounts of Proserpina's innocent play prior to her ravishment."¹⁴ But Emelye's flower gathering in the garden of The Knight's Tale bears a deeper resemblance to Proserpina's springtime play than the brief summary of Claudian in the Merchant's Tale. Ovid presents her in the *Metamorphoses* within an idyllic grove where "perpetuum ver est" [spring is everlasting] and where "ludit et aut violas aut candida lilia carpit" (V.391–92) [[she] play[s], and gather[s] violets or white lilies], and, in Claudian's *De Raptu*, Proserpina's play is elaborated in her verdant, Sicilian retreat, where her mother Ceres believes her hidden safely from suitors: "nunc vimine texto / ridentes calathos spoliis agrestibus implet; / nunc sociat flores seseque ignara coronat, / augurium fatale tori" (II.138–41) [now she fills with the spoil of the fields her laughing baskets, osier-woven; now she twines a wreath of flowers and crowns herself therewith, little seeing in this a foreshadowing of the marriage fate holds in store for her].

These versions of Proserpina are both figured in Emelye's play in the verdant castle garden, where

¹⁴Harley, 22–23.

She gadereth floures, party white and rede,
To make a subtil gerland for hire hede. (1053–54)

And, also like Claudian's Proserpina, Emelye entertains in her actions the hope of connubial fortune. Claudian's Proserpina holds a decidedly ambivalent attitude toward the many suitors from whom Ceres hides her:

iam matura toro plenis adoleverat annis
virginitas, tenerum iam pronuba flamma pudorem
sollicitat mixtaque tremit formidine votum. (I.130–32)

[As the years were fulfilled she had grown a maiden ripe for marriage,
and thoughts of the torch of wedlock stir her girlish modesty, but while
she longs for a husband she yet fears to plight troth.]

Emelye's own maiden ambivalence is the same. As Joseph Harrison argues, "there is something delicately prelapsarian about Emelye's maidenhood; she most fears the primal curse of childbearing."¹⁵ But, when Emelye makes her impassioned plea to Diana to ever remain a maiden, we must not forget that in the garden she participates in the Springtime ritual of generation:

. . . it fil ones, in a morwe of May,
That Emelye, that fairer was to sene
Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,
And fressher than the May with floures newe—
For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe,
I noot which was the fyner of hem two—
Er it were day, as was hir wone to do,
She was arisen and al redy dight,
For May wole have no slogardie anyght.
The sesoun priketh every gentil herte,
And maketh it out of his slep to sterte,
And seith "Arys, and do thyn observaunce."

¹⁵Joseph Harrison, "'Tears for Passing Things': The Temple of Diana in the Knight's Tale," *Philological Quarterly* 63 (1984): 112.

This maked Emelye have remembrauce
 To doon honour to May, and for to ryse.
 Yclothed was she fresshe, for to devyse:
 Hir yelow heer was broyded in a tresse
 Bihynde hir bak, a yerde long, I gesse.
 And in the gardyn, at the soone upriste,
 She walketh up and down. . . . (1034–52)

Chaucer's scene emphasizes the freshness of the season with the freshness of the day, newly dawning as an awakening from sleep and life reborn from winter slumber; and both complement Emelye's fresh and fertile youth. In her innocent striving with the season, she is just as eager as is Arcite in his own observances later in the tale to "som grene gete" (1512). She rises to pay her respects to the season,

For May wole have no slogardie anyght.
 The sesoun priketh every gentil herte, (1042–43)

just as the "smale foweles" in *The General Prologue*, restless, perhaps, from thoughts of love and tireless in love's posturing and pursuit, "maken melodye,"

That slepen al the night with open ye
 (So Priketh hem Nature in hir corages). (9–11)

The pricking of Emelye's heart is no less libidinous: she is not celebrating her maidenhood; rather, she is celebrating her maiden fertility, and her work compels her, like the birds of *The General Prologue*, to song: "And as an aungel hevenysshly she soong" (1055). Thus her prayer before the tournament, while full of a genuine fear of marriage and all that it entails, also betrays a resignation to marriage that is neither insensitive nor indifferent to matters of love:

"if my destynnee be shapen so
 That I shal nedes have oon of hem two,

As sende me hym that moost desireth me,” (2323–25)

she says, speaking now as the maiden whose dedication in the garden was an offering up of her maidenhood to the call of the season. She is hardly steadfast in her chastity, and we might thus hear equivocation born from fear in her insistence that she remain chaste: “Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf” (2306). Perhaps the over-insistence in this emphatic use of negatives is to convince herself of her resolution as much as Palamon’s over-insistence in his prayer to Venus is aimed at convincing himself of his love.¹⁶ But, however at once hopeful or cautious she may be toward marriage, like Proserpina, she can hardly see the nuptial foreshadowing of her actions in the garden, and she has more to fear from her impending marriage than she knows.

Like Ceres’ secluded Sicilian hiding place for her daughter, the walled garden in which Emelye plays is no more secure from the gaze of suitors, and Emelye as Proserpina is not without her Pluto. In the *Metamorphoses*, Pluto’s emerges from his “tenebrosa sedes,” (V.359) [gloomy realm] to inspect the damage done by a quake in Sicily, because “rex pavet ipse silentum / ne pateat latoque solum retegatur hiatu / inmissusque dies trepidantes terreat umbras” (V.356–58) [even the king of the silent land is afraid lest the crust of the earth split open in wide seams and lest the light of day be let in and affright the trembling shades]. And, exposed by his inspection, he is targeted by Cupid, at Venus’ request, to extend love’s empire to the underworld.¹⁷ Cupid

¹⁶See pages 76–77 above.

¹⁷In *Metamorphoses*, V.370–71, Venus asks her son: “cur non matrisque tuumque / imperium proferum?” [Why do you not extend your mother’s empire and your own?]

chooses his sharpest arrow “inque cor hamata percussit harundine Ditem” (V.384) [[and] smote Dis through the heart], whereupon “paene simul visa est dilectaque raptaque Diti” (V.395) [almost in one act did Pluto see his love and carry her away]. Harley sees Emelye’s impending *raptus* only in the tournament, where “Theseus . . . obviates Emelye’s commitment to chastity, offering her virginity to the victorious voyeur . . . [and] diverts lust into a civilly sanctioned tournament and reconstructs rape as marriage.”¹⁸ We must not ignore the dreadful concomitants of arranged marriage, to which Harley’s discussion of May in *The Merchant’s Tale* attests.¹⁹ But Emelye is only half-heartedly committed to chastity, and, in any case, she faces a worse *raptus* than arranged marriage in the voyeurism and violent intentions of Palamon, who fulfills the Proserpinan allusions as Pluto. The contrasting movement of *The Knight’s Tale* from fresh spring morning to the austere gloom of the cousins’ prison tower recalls the emergence of Pluto into the bright world of day from the dark realm he would not have it penetrate:

Bright was the sonne and cleer the morwenynge,
 And Palamoun, this woful prisoner,
 As was his wone, by leve of his gayler,
 Was risen and romed in a chambre an heigh,
 In which he al the noble citee seigh,
 And eek the gardyn, ful of braunches green,
 Ther as this fresshe Emelye the shene

¹⁸Harley, 26–27.

¹⁹Harley, 27. For further discussion of Claudian’s role in *The Merchant’s Tale*, see also Mortimer J. Donovan, “Chaucer’s January and May: Counterparts in Claudian,” in *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives: Essays Presented to Paul E. Beichner*, edited by Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 49–60.

Was in hire walk, and romed up and down. (1062–67)

Like Pluto, Palamon “*was risen*,” surveys the bright, wide world without his prison, and spies Emelye as suddenly as Pluto spies Proserpina in Ovid’s account. And echoing cupid’s arrow, Palamon seems to be taken by her just as suddenly again: “he bleynte and cride, “A!” / As though he stongen were unto the herte” (1078–79). The scene not only forecasts ravishment for Emelye but it also immediately identifies her future assailant and insidiously suggests an early formed and long brooded-over premeditation, as Palamon will not be free to pursue Emelye for another seven years; and all the more strange and horrible is our realization that his determination for Emelye, shaped in response to Arcite’s sincere concern and anything-but-vain imagination, is not even based in love. He acts *as though* he were stung in the heart, a tentative possibility of love that his subsequent actions betray as not to be possible at all.²⁰

Ovid’s Pluto is a passive victim of Cupid and love, and, as a consequence, there is no doubting his feelings for Proserpina, however sudden and ultimately indiscriminate his ravishment of her may be. Claudian’s Pluto, whom Palamon most resembles, is even less discriminate than he. Emelye is Palamon’s only immediate defense for his wounded pride: she may indeed be beautiful, but her unique beauty has not struck a special cord in him; it is her freedom, general to all free men and women in the free world without the tower and in no way particular to her, that moves him so and stokes his yearning. When he first sees her, she is to him a symbol of the freedom his ill fortune has denied

²⁰See pages 50–51 above.

him, and, when Arcite is released and “the fyr of jalousie up sterte / Withinne his [Palamon’s] brest” (1299–1300), she comes to stand for both the freedom unjustly given the criminal oath-breaker Arcite and the spoils of freedom that Arcite can now enjoy in his place. When he eventually makes his escape he heads to Thebes with a single act in mind by which he may avenge himself both of Theseus’ tyranny and Arcite’s insult: he intends to lay siege to Athens to take Emelye as his own and, no doubt, to avenge himself upon the city’s ruler in the process. In the *Metamorphoses*, the nymph Cyane, witness to Proserpina’s abduction, chastises Pluto for his deed: “roganda, / non rapienda fuit!” (V.415–16) [[she] should have been wooed, not ravished!], she says. Arcite, who desires only somehow to earn Emelye’s grace has heeded this advice; Palamon has chosen *raptus*, but in choosing war as well he most clearly resembles the Pluto of the *De Raptu*. There, the god is incited neither by Cupid’s arrows nor by a love of his own but rather out of a sense of the injustice of his lot as king of the underworld and the bridelessness that his lot apparently means for him. As eminent as his sovereignty is, he cannot help but feel cheated by his lesser status as compared to those of his brothers Jove and Neptune, and he can only see to take what he believes to be his rightful consideration by force. Thus Pluto’s dissatisfaction is reflected in Palamon as “woful prisoner” and so too does Palamon resemble Pluto’s in the god’s demand for a bride, which is at the same time a threat of war:

Dux Erebi quondam tumidas exarsit in iras
 proelia moturus superis, quod solus egeret
 conubiis sterilesque diu consumeret annos
 impatiens nescire torum nullasque mariti

inlecebras nec dulce patris cognoscere nomen. (I.32–36)

[Once on a time the lord or Erebus blazed forth in swelling anger, threatening war upon the gods, because he alone was unwed and had long wasted the years in childless state, brooking no longer to lack the joys of wedlock and a husband's happiness nor ever to know the name of father.]

And, says Pluto in his message to Jove:

“non adeo toleranda quies. primordia testor
noctis et horrendae stagna intemerata paludis:
si dicto parere negas, patefacta ciebo
Tartara, Saturni veteres laxabo catenas,
obducam tenebris solem, compage soluta
lucidus umbroso miscebitur axis Averno.” (I.111–16)

[“I will not brook so dull a life. I swear by elemental night and the unexplored shallows of the Stygian lake, if thou refuse to hearken to my word I will throw open Hell and call forth her monsters, will break Saturn's old chains, and shroud the sun in darkness. The framework of the world shall be loosened and the shining heavens mingle with Avernus' shades.”]

Muscatine chose rightly in characterizing the force in the world against which Theseus wars as chaos. Chaos is what Palamon would unleash on Athens in an effort to right his fortunes, just as Pluto would carry it to the heavens for identical reasons; and chaos is the term Claudian uses in his invocation at the beginning of the *De Raptu*. There, he describes the violence Proserpina faces at the hands of Pluto while at once identifying Pluto in terms of his destructive effects; but he just as aptly describes the violence Emelye faces at the hands of Palamon and just as aptly characterizes Palamon's effects as well. Tell, says Claudian “quo ducta ferox Proserpina raptu / possedit dotale Chaos” (I.27–28) [how Proserpina was stolen away in her maiden pride to win Chaos as a dower].

With all the attention Chaucer pays to the Proserpina myth in *The Knight's Tale*, an apparent absence that might seem strange to some is that of an avenging/protecting Ceres-like advocate for Emelye. Though Proserpina is irrevocably a victim of ravishment, at least her condemnation to live ever after as Pluto's queen in hell is mitigated some through Ceres' intervention, whereby she secures for Proserpina the freedom to spend half the year on the surface, enjoying something of her former life, while only the other half must be spent serving out her wifely and queenly duties in hell. In this resolution the wrong done Proserpina is addressed, if only half-heartedly, and the aetiology of the yearly cycle of seasons to which we are accustomed is explained. The unending Spring of the world in which the maiden Proserpina lived and which she symbolized gave way through her ravishment to a new age marked by the alternation of stagnation and fertility, death and rebirth. Thus Proserpina ends by continuing to represent the season, only now it is the season with which we are familiar, a Spring defined in part by the Autumnal and Winter months it replaces. Both Proserpinas are reflected in Emelye, who paradoxically embodies the untouched or "prelapsarian" quality to which Harrison refers, while at the same time entertaining her natural, generative urges. Harley argues that Emelye as Proserpina is without a mitigating protector, unlike in the *Merchant's Tale*, where Proserpina herself plays the part of Ceres to May as Proserpina.²¹ And, without such a figure, *The Knight's Tale* must implicitly lack the seasonal theme of the mythic story to which it alludes.

²¹Harley, 28–29. See also Charlotte F. Otten, "Proserpine: *Liberatrix Suae Gentis*," *The Chaucer Review* 5 (1971): 277–87.

But Emelye is not without a mitigating protector, and the seasonal outcomes of the Proserpina story are realized in Chaucer's poem by its end. Once the threats of *raptus* have been engaged in *The Knight's Tale* and reinforced through allusions to Proserpina's ravishment by Pluto, our fear for Emelye's future stems from our knowledge that, if the allusions are carried through to their logical end, Emelye's *raptus* must in the end be realized just as Arcite's descent must fail. But, though the Proserpina allusions are carried through, they are not carried out in their entirety on Emelye. Arcite half succeeds in his rescue of Emelye from her infernal fate, just as Ceres half succeeds at winning Proserpina's release, and his success is identical with his own failure and tragedy, whereby, in the attempt, he dies in a fulfillment of the Orphic and Perothian elements of *The Knight's Tale* as well.

Arcite's success is achieved by his taking of Emelye's anticipated ravishment upon himself. Among the more striking changes of *The Knight's Tale* over Boccaccio's *Teseida* is Chaucer's repetition of the garden scene in which Palamon first views Emelye, this time with Arcite in her place. A hopeful connection and affinity is established in the parallel: Arcite is compelled, as Emelye was herself, to perform the same May rites, and, by expressing his hope that through those rites he might eventually win her grace, we might expect the reciprocation of his affections and the parallel's completion, whereby the searching affection in Emelye's observances might be given an object and a name in Arcite. When Emelye later expresses her desire that, if her marriage cannot be avoided, she at least be given the cousin who loves her the most,

Arcite is indeed that cousin, and the fulfillment of both their observances would appear to be in the making.

But, also like Emelye, Arcite is cast in the mold of Proserpina. His rites are performed, like hers, on a fresh and fertile May morning and in a lush grove—a setting that, while mirroring Emelye’s garden, even more clearly recalls Proserpina’s Play:

The bisy larke, messenger of day,
 Salueth in hir song the morwe gray,
 And firy Phebus riseth up so bright
 That all the orient laugheth of the light,
 And with his stremes dryeth in the greves
 The silver dropes hangyng on the leues. (1491–96)

In the grove, Arcite makes “hym a gerland of the greves” (1507) in an echo of Emelye’s Proserpinan garland of flowers, and he completes the scene, as did Emelye, with song: “And loude he song ayeyn the sonne shene” (1509). And like Emelye’s Proserpinan garden, Arcite’s grove is no more private or secure from unwanted onlookers, nor is Arcite in any less danger as a result. Palamon is the unseen observer of these May rites as well, and the recounting of his arrival there bears the same contrast of gloom and darkness with fresh and verdant brightness that we have already seen. Palamon breaks his prison insidiously, with “With narcotikes and opie of Thebes fyn” (1472) and with war on his mind; and, in darkness, says Chaucer, “soone after the mydnyght” (1467), Palamon makes his way to the grove where he intends to hide until night falls again. There he spies Arcite enjoying the same freedom that Emelye enjoyed and, as if piquing his interest, Arcite’s roaming reintroduces the escaped Palamon as a Plutonian interloper right on cue:

And in a path he [Arcite] rometh up and down,
 Ther as by aventure this Palamoun
 Was in a bussh, that no man myghte hym se. (1515–17)

Arcite's danger already seems greater and more immediate than Emelye's, for this is a Palamon newly emerged from his hellish prison and bent actively now on his plans for war and for his just deserts. And when Arcite reveals his identity, Palamon's wounding by Emelye's freedom ("As though he stongen were unto the herte"), which is a wounding of his honor by that which Theseus has deprived him, is compounded by what, to his mind, is Arcite's gross treachery:

This Palamoun, that thoughte that thurgh his herte
He felte a coold swerd sodeynliche glyde,
 For ire he quook; no lenger wolde he byde.
 And whan that he had herd Arcites tale,
 As he were wood, *with face deed and pale,*
 He stirte him *up out* of the buskes thikke. (1574–79; my emphasis)

Palamon's appearance is corpse-like and hellish, and his movement—"up out of the buskes thikke"—is as Pluto's sudden emergence from the earth to snatch away the unsuspecting Proserpina.

But Arcite's Proserpinan end—his *raptus*, which would not, of course, mean in his case sexual rape, though it would still maintain its sense of abduction or, in its Proserpinan context, death²²—is only postponed until the tournament a year later. When the cousins return with their forces assembled, they are, significantly, returning to the same place where they previously dueled and where Arcite's *raptus* was interrupted.

²²The dual sense of *raptus* as both rape and abduction is obvious enough, but see also Henry Ansgar Kelly, "Meanings and Uses of *Raptus* in Chaucer's Time," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 20 (1998): 101–65.

Theseus builds the amphitheater upon the site of the grove in an attempt to circumscribe the offense of the cousins' unsanctioned and unruly combat over the rights to illicit love with a grand, civic monument signifying order in form and occasioning now a more civilized arena for the determination of marriage. But, by preserving the locus where Arcite was figured as Proserpina on the verge of *raptus*, Theseus also occasions the fulfillment of Arcite's role; this time Arcite will be granted no further delay. Riding the field in victory, Arcite looks

upward upon this Emelye;
And she agayn hym caste a freendlich ye, (2679–80)

and her downward gaze falls ominously upon him in an echo of the portrait of Proserpina in the temple of Diana, where, as the goddess of the underworld,

Hir eyen caste she ful lowe adoun
Ther Pluto hath his derke regioun. (2081–82)

Emelye looks upon him as the queen of hell upon one of her subjects, as though he were already dead.²³ Indeed, her presentation as Proserpina is identical with his death, for his death means that he has failed, as Perotheus failed to rescue Proserpina, to rescue Emelye from becoming Proserpina in the first place. There is perhaps a vanity ultimately to be seen in Arcite's attempt to avert what appears to have been such an ineluctable, juggernaut process, not to mention obvious and unavoidable harm in standing in its way. But Arcite's attempt is not without virtue. He does not look down upon Emelye as Orpheus looked down upon Eurydice; Chaucer has retained the ethical importance of

²³William F. Woods, "Up and Down, To and Fro: Spatial Relationships in The Knight's Tale," 41.

directionality in the lover's gaze: Arcite looks up at Emelye as a testament to his genuine and selfless love, whereas Palamon's first gaze from the tower was pointedly downward and falsely amorous. Arcite does not look downward into human vanity and ignorance because of love; he looks and proceeds in his pursuit of love in the same direction as the ascending Orpheus before his love drew his backward glance. Philosophy's criticism is explicitly countered here, even though the Orpheus parable of Boethius is once again present, this time with tragic consequences. Orpheus looked "on Erudyce his wif, and lost hire, and was deed," translates Chaucer. It is the same with Arcite: not only is Arcite's Orphic joy turned swiftly and sharply to woe as he loses his love but in that loss he loses his own life. At that moment Arcite is delivered his Orphic death blow, but, in a poignant convergence of allusive elements, that blow is also Proserpinan:

Out of the ground a furie infernal sterte,
 From Pluto sent at requeste of Saturne,
 For which his [Arcite's] hors for fere gan to turne,
 And leep aside, and foundred as he leep;
 And er that Arcite may taken keep,
 He pighte hym on the pomel of his heed,
 That in the place he lay as he were deed,
 His brest tobrosten with his sadel-bowe.
 As blak he lay as any cole or crowe. (2684–92)

The fury emerges from the ground of this one-time grove as Palamon, in the same place, "stirte hym up out of the buskes thikke" only a year before. And though the cause-and-effect of the fury's appearance is rightly ascribed to the real, behind-the-scenes arrangements of Saturn, of whose drastic solution the fury is the end product, we must not forget that the chain of cause-and-effect is traceable ultimately from Saturn through

Venus to Palamon. Palamon is the tale's overwhelmingly Plutonian figure, and the fury is no less sent by him. His desire to win Emelye at any cost resulted in his highly duplicitous prayer to Venus in which he called for other means by which a victorious end might be achieved. And, with that call, Palamon as Pluto sets the various divine influences in motion by which Arcite meets his end. And if we are to understand Palamon to have sent the fury at Saturn's request, we have only to look to his Saturnalian surrogate in Lygurge, and to the Saturnalian quality of and motivation to Palamon's many destructive actions throughout the tale.²⁴ Curry showed the appropriateness of calling Palamon a child of Saturn, but as Pluto the relationship is even clearer. Says Pluto proudly to Proserpina in the *De Raptu*: "ille ego Saturni proles" (II.280) ["I am that scion of Saturn].

We have witnessed the ravishment of the fresh and vigorous youth in Arcite. "His brest tobresten with his sadel-bowe" is a violent breaking of the heart that only a moment before was brimming with joy in the gaze of Emeye, who "was al his chiere, as in his herte" (2683). He is left "as he were deed" and, in a reference to the ominous ember that foretold his infernal fate, "As blak he lay as any cole." But though Emelye inevitably ends unfreed like Eurydice and doomed, like Proserpina, to be the bride of chaos, she is spared the violent *raptus* forecasted for her because Arcite is suffering it now in her stead. All the seasonal consequences of Proserpina's *raptus* follow Arcite to his grave. In a strange inconsistency, the grove in which Arcite/Proserpina was spied by

²⁴See page 81 above.

the lurking Palamon/Pluto appears again because the preservation of that original locus is just as essential as before. This time Theseus has it cleared for Arcite's funeral pyre, and in so doing, Theseus lays waste to what was once verdant with Spring: he rapes the land just as Arcite was himself ravished. Theseus' pyre building echoes Ceres in the *Metamorphoses*, where, in retaliation against the wrong done her daughter, she lays waste to all the earth, but especially to Sicily and, as a consequence, Proserpina's grove;²⁵ it also echoes Ceres in the *De Raptu*, where she lays waste the sacred grove of Jove (III.332–91) in a defiant response to the wasting of her daughter as it appeared to her in a dream:

namque modo adversis invadi viscera telis,
 nunc sibi mutatis horret nigrescere vestes,
 nunc steriles mediis frondere penatibus ornos.
 stabat praeterea luco dilectior omni
 laurus, virgineos quondam quae fronde pudica
 umbrabat thalamos: hanc imo stipite caesam
 vidit et incompertos foedari pulvere ramos
 quaesivitque nefas. Dryades dixere gementes
 Tartarea Furias debellavisse bipenni. (III.71–9)

[Now she dreams that an enemy's spear is piercing her body, now (oh horror!) that her raiment is changed and is become black, now that the infecund ash is budding in the midst of her house. Moreover, there stood a laurel, loved above all the grove, that used with maiden leaf to o'ershadow the virgin bower of Proserpine. This she saw hewn down to the roots, its straggling branches fouled with dust, and when she asked the cause of this disaster weeping dryads told her that the Furies had destroyed it with an axe of Hell].

²⁵See *Metamorphoses* V.475–77: “terras tamen inscrepat omnes / ingratasque vocat nec frugum munere dignas, / Trinacrium ante alias, in qua vestigia damni / repperit” [still she reproached all lands, calling them ungrateful and unworthy of the gift of corn; but Sicily above all other lands, where she had found traces of her loss].

Chaucer catalogues the trees (2921–23) as does Claudian (II.107–10),²⁶ the spirits of the trees, “Disherited of hire habitacioun” (2926) and scattered by the deforestation, echo the Nymphs who “Diffugiunt” (II.204) [fly in all directions] at Pluto’s sudden emergence from the earth, and the alliteration with which Chaucer describes their scattering recalls his previous use of alliteration in describing the tournament on this very locus (2605–16):

Ne hou the beestes and the briddes alle
 Fledden for fere, whan the wode was falle;
 Ne how the ground agast was of the light,
 That was nat wont to seen the sonne bright. (2929–32)

Even nature is here embattled, and the fear the ground has of the light of day alludes to Pluto’s horses. Writes Claudian: “rutilos obscurat anhelitus axes / discolor et longa solitos caligine pasci / terruit orbis equos” (II.192–194) [their smoky breath obscures the bright heavens and the sun’s orb affrighted them, so long fed on darkness].

But from this waste comes rebirth. In the *De Raptu*, as a result of the change from eternal to periodic Spring, the earth no longer offers up to man an endless bounty. Though Claudian left his poem unfinished, he proposes in the beginning to relate “unde datae populis fruges et glande relictæ / cesserit inventis Dodonia quercus aristas” (I.30–31) [whence corn was given to man whereby he laid aside his acorn food, and the new-found ear made useless Dodona’s oaks]. When Theseus announces the pyre project, he “leet comande anon to hakke and hewe / The okes olde” (2865–66), oak is the first

²⁶See Chaucer’s catalogue of trees in *The Parliament of Fowls*, 176–182 for a precise allusion to Claudian’s catalogue.

tree of Chaucer's catalogue (2921), and the end that even the long-living oak must inevitably face is the first exemplum of Theseus' First Mover speech on providence and the natural, orderly design behind seeming disorder and death in the world:

“Loo the ook, that hath so long a norisshynge
From tyme that it first bigynneth to sprynge,
And hath so long a lif, as we may see,
Yet at the laste wasted is the tree.” (3017–20)

And, as William Woods has shown, Arcite's “funeral pyre is itself a figure of change.”

As a catalog—or chain—of burning trees, it represents nature's cycle of “transmutaciouns.” It is also, of course, a summative figure of life, and of the life of Arcite. Notice that this pyre is very nearly an allegorical entity: it has a head (“his grene top” [line 2915]) and arms (“And twenty fadme of brede the armes straughte” [line 2916]), as though the pyre were one great tree containing within it a multitude of trees, hence symbolizing “treeness,” greenness, the essence of life. . . . When this green pyre burns, we have, in effect, seen Arcite's life passing in review, topped with green youth but ending in ashes.²⁷

And the change that comes from Arcite's death is most notable in Palamon and the consequences of that change for Emelye. In the *De Raptu*, Pluto does not fall in love until he sees his victim's suffering: “Talibus ille ferox dictis fletuque decoro / vincitur et primi suspiria sensit amoris” (II.273–74) [Her words and those becoming tears mastered e'en that rude heart as Pluto first learned to feel love's longings]. In *The Knight's Tale*, we see Arcite's suffering and death overwhelm even Palamon with grief. As Woods rightly observes: “‘Jalousie’ was precisely what Arcite conquered on his death bed . . . by giving up his life and yielding his place to Palamon.”²⁸ But the change in

²⁷Woods, 43–44.

²⁸Woods, 45.

Palamon is more essential than what would inevitably have resulted from the elimination of his rival. When the tale comes to an end and his marriage with Emelye is announced, he seems now a fitting husband, and seems also to have left behind his vow to “holden werre alwey with chastitee” (2236). His enmities having been vented on the *raptus* of Arcite, the motivations behind his disingenuous intentions for Emelye have been satisfied. His wrath has been disarmed and he has been cast anew as a true lover. Speaking to Emelye, Theseus refers to Palamon as:

“That gentil Palamon, youre owene knyght
That serveth yow with wille, herte, and myght,
And ever hath doon syn ye first him knewe,
That ye shul of youre grace upon hym rewe,
And taken hym for housbonde and for lord.” (3077–81)

Yet this service and love of Palamon, which is after the fashion of Arcite, must be understood as relatively recent, since Emelye did not know Palamon during his seven years in the tower dungeon, and does not appear to have been in a position to make her acquaintance until Arcite was on his deathbed. It was inevitable that Emelye should be Palamon’s bride, and inevitable that Arcite would not gain her for himself; but in Arcite’s attempt and sacrificial death in her place, he has produced for her a groom who would seem to be as good as he, and has refashioned Palamon in his own image by making a proper lover out of him. The cousins have finally approached a state of identicalness, but only at the price of Arcite’s tragic but ultimately comic death.

Though a comic end emerges from Arcite’s tragic one, it should not distract us from either the depth of his tragedy or the contributing injustice of Palamon’s final good

fortune. In the *Teseida*, Arcites is given the same, final transcendent perspective that Chaucer gives Troilus at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde*. Chaucer, however, has removed every hint of transcendence from *The Knight's Tale*. Dying in the modes at once of Orpheus, Perotheus, and Proserpina, hell is Arcite's only possible destination—a fact with which the equivocating Knight does not wish to come to terms:

His spirit chaunged hous and wente ther,
 As I cam nevere, I kan nat tellen wher.
 Therfore I stynte; I nam no divinistre;
 Of soules fynde I nat in this registre,
 Ne me ne list thilke opinions to telle
 Of hem, though that they writen wher they dwelle.
 (2809–14)

And even Theseus' famous First Mover speech, while addressing the ordered necessity of mutability in the world, can offer only an earthly apotheosis to Arcite's memory:

And certainly a man hath moost honour
 To dyen in his excellence and flour,
 Whan he is siker of his goode name. (3047–49)

To the sensitive soul yearning for a sense of meaning of both the world and his own place in it, Theseus offers only the consolation of chivalry, which is to blunt one's hopes for transcendence in the earth with transitory honor and fame. While these concerns were Palamon's and not Arcite's, it is for high achievement in their pursuit for which Arcite is erroneously lauded in the end, while the undeserving Palamon rejoices in Arcite's transcendent goal. *The Knight's Tale*, for all its concerns with order, ends in a troubling state of disorder, and the ending marriage arrangements are small consolation for the immense tragedy whose shadow they cannot erase.

CHAPTER IV

AFTERWARD AND CONCLUSION

In reference to Albert Marckwardt's greatly undervalued study of characterization in *The Knight's Tale*, Muscatine says:

And one persuasive critic has demonstrated that it is perfectly possible—given the assumptions that characterization is a main issue—to show that Arcite is the more profound and contemplative, and Palamon the more active and impulsive [of the cousins].¹

But Marckwardt's observations in no way depend on whether characterization is the main issue or merely a minor one. If his observations, or any like them, are at all persuasive, they must be given due consideration; and, if they stand, they open the *Tale* wide to a greater depth and complexity of meaning. The recognition that the cousins are presented not as identical but rather in opposing terms need not detract from Muscatine's thesis that *The Knight's Tale* is a highly ordered and balanced composition. As Peter Elbow has shown, much of the poem's balance is achieved through the cousins' often opposing actions.² But opposite cousins mean differentiated cousins, and, as we have shown, in terms of both characterization and the allusions to the underworld that underscore their differences, the cousins play an integral role in a seldom seen drama

¹Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning," 912.

²Peter H. Elbow, "How Chaucer Transcends Opposition in the *Knight's Tale*," *The Chaucer Review* 7 (1972): 97–112.

within the poem's complex frame. Even if that drama is not the main issue, *The Knight's Tale* is no "poetic pageant," for it is not so bright and ceremonious, and its players wear no masks.

Still, the preceding will no doubt have struck most readers as in no way resembling *The Knight's Tale* with which they are familiar, while Charles Muscatine's influential work will hardly seem sufficient explanation for it. And rightly so: for neither does the preceding in any way resemble what the Knight believes he has told. Muscatine rightly presented a tale whose theme is the struggle between order and disorder, but he did not see the same struggle in the conflict between Palamon and Arcite because he was not willing to recognize that *The Knight's Tale* has an actively intrusive narrator, and that the Knight, as narrator, might not fully understand his material.

The limitations of time and space prevent a full discussion of the matter here—a fuller treatment awaits future work—but, by way of conclusion, a brief explanation of how *The Knight's Tale* actively encourages the misreading against which I have argued seems in order. *The Knight's Tale* is really two tales: one the Knight knowingly tells; the other he unknowingly obscures in the course of the telling; and both the telling and the obscuring are the product of misinterpretation. Thus a distinction should be made between the Knight's tale and Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*: while the former is the tale the Knight tells, the latter is the poem he inhabits as its titular character, the poem in which his telling of his tale and his gross misinterpretation of it are related. Thus *The Knight's Tale*, which contains the Knight and his tale, is a poem *about* misinterpretation, about

the making of a palimpsest. With these distinctions in mind, it should not surprise us that Chaucer's poem has proven so difficult to so many, and left its criticism so varied and not a little confused. In *The Knight's Tale* Chaucer made a convincing narrator—so convincing, unfortunately, that it is sometimes uncertain whether the multitude of often dramatically divergent responses to it confirms its artistic success or failure. Even the present critical consensus is influenced by the Knight's own misreading and thus rarely attentive to his often overwhelming biases. But while we have been a failed readership, we have been no less ideal for that. For it seems the height of poetic irony that we should have been as taken in our reading of *The Knight's Tale* as the Knight was in the reading of his, and one must wonder if Chaucer would not have been pleased: our addition to the equation merely completes a pattern that stands the Knight at a crossroads of misinterpretation, between us, his real-world audience, and the first seeds of misreading in Theseus.

But how can we be sure that the Knight does not know that his tale contains the drama between Palamon and Arcite and its attendant allusive dimensions? or that he does not wish to communicate them in the telling? And how do we distinguish the original tale from the misinterpretive performance that makes up Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*? We have already uncovered something of this "original tale" in the preceding chapters, central to which enterprise was the resurrection of the long-dead debate of characterization in the poem. But central to our understanding of *The Knight's Tale* as a whole is an understanding of the process by which the original tale is concealed. This

process begins with the failure of Theseus and the Knight to recognize the cousins' patent differences, and it is on their misinterpretation that the comic relationship of The Knight's Tale to *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole is based. It is no wonder that the issue of characterization should have been put to rest, for The Knight's Tale is as much about concealing characterization as it is concerned with presenting distinctly differentiated characters in the cousins. The Knight's Tale is complex in ways rarely supposed, not least because some of its best critics have sometimes been better participants than readers. Not only does characterization loom large within it but we have for too long been a readership complicitous with Theseus and the Knight in its suppression.

The presence of two divergent, roughly coextensive tales is apparent from the start of The Knight's Tale, though Chaucer, via the Knight, made one much more easy to hear than the other. Beginnings can be charged with significance. Succinct and masterful statements of thesis and subject, they establish important scene-setting parameters and prepare the expectations of their audience for the unfolding of the tale to come. How they are heard and how they are told, however, can prepare an audience for something very different from what was intended. In the case of the tale that the Knight delivers to his fellow pilgrims, what should make for dark reading he has glossed in bright, heroic strokes.

We marvel as the narrative achieves what the explanatory title of its Italian source achieves by way of preface. Boccaccio's *Teseida delle Nozze di Emilia* prepares us for a Theseid, an epic of Theseus, played out in a drama of marriage and, presumably,

love. The Knight does not forecast the focal events around Emelye that comprise the main action of his tale, but the martial and the marital emerge side by side to capture our attention. We are witness to Theseus in full epic splendor: his martial prowess in his defeat of the Amazons and his pragmatic statesmanship in his marriage with Hypolita their queen seem to confirm that “gretter was ther noon under the soone” (863). At the same time, the Amazonian campaign is the vehicle for the freight of deeper meaning we might be hard-pressed to find in the *Teseida*.³ “The regne of Femenye,” weightier than editors commonly gloss it, is more than merely “the land of women”: it is also the sovereignty and power of the female sex that Theseus brings under his noble yoke. And Theseus’ defeat of and eventual marriage with Hypolita are suggestive of a successful, albeit forceful, courtship. Indeed, the Amazonian campaign seems to be the allegorization of a perennial process:

He conquered al the regne of Femenye,
That whilom was ycleped Scithia,

³While it is clear in the *Teseida* that the feminist ambitions of the Amazons are grave offenses, it is not as integral to the theme of the poem as it is in *The Knight’s Tale*. And while Teseo’s epistolary exchange with Hypolita is perhaps suggestive of an amatory significance, it is so overwhelmed by the martial as to make such suggestiveness unlikely. Indeed, Boccaccio does not indicate in his glosses that Teseo’s conquest is anything other than military. Instead, he finds himself compelled to justify the campaign’s presence on the grounds that it is a necessary tool for the introduction of Emilia into the narrative. In his gloss to stanza six of the first book of the *Teseida*, Boccaccio says: Con ciò sia cosa che la principale intenzione dell’autore de questo libretto sia di trattare dell’amore e delle cose avvenute per quello, da due giovani tebani, cioè Arcita e Palemone, ad Emilia amazone, sì come nel suo proemio appare, potrebbe alcuno, e giustamente, adiamandare che avesse que a fare la guerra di Teseo con le donne amazone, della quale solamente parla il primo libro di questa opera. Dico, e brevemente, che l’autore a niuno altro fine queste cose scrisse, se no per mostrare onde Emilia fosse venuta ad Attena (255–56, note 6). [Since the principal intention of the author of this little book is to treat of the love of two young Thebans, that is Arcites and Palæmon, for Emilia the Amazon and of the things that happened because of it, as it appears in this his proem, someone might ask, and justly, what the war of Theseus with the Amazon women, about which the First Book of this work speaks exclusively, is doing here. I say, and briefly, that the author wrote these things for no other purpose but to show whence Emilia came to Athens” (48, note 6).]

And weddede the queen Ypolita,
And broughte hire hoom with hym in his contree.

(866–69)

From chaste if not virginal independence, Hypolita is torn reluctantly from Femenye (with little sense of wooing conveyed), quickly wedded, and set on the road to a new country: she goes the way of all wives to the home of her husband. Even the Knight's use of *occupatio* shows this process as already complete, as an inevitable success handily achieved rather than foregrounded as a protracted labor of sweat and peril:

And certes, if it nere to long to heere,
I wolde have toold yow fully the manere
How wonnen was the regne of Femenye
By Theseus and by his chivalrye;
And of the grete bataille for the nones
Bitwixen Atthesen and Amazones;
And how asseged was Ypolita,
The faire, hardy queene of Scithia;
And of the feste that was at hir weddyng.

(875–83)

Here again, marriage follows fast upon the siege. The immense stage of the martial and political at once gives way to the universal wrangling between men and women as well as to a more modest drama of the interpersonal and, in its way, the amatory. It is a testament to Chaucer's poetic skill that he could reduce and more richly imbue in so few lines what Boccaccio labors over for an entire book of his poem. The Theseus to whom we are introduced is as much a conqueror in the battle of the sexes as he is in war, and we should sense his total victory in the former to be integral to the *sentence* and *solace* of the tale the Knight believes will be, for his fellow pilgrims, a difficult lead to follow.

For already we are witness to Theseus engaged in "the struggle between noble

design and chaos” to which Muscatine refers. And for the Knight, to whom the business of chivalry is both a serious matter and a way of life, surely it is a noble struggle marking a “noble tale.” Because he was a strong reader of the Knight’s telling of his tale, when Muscatine redefined the critical debate over *The Knight’s Tale* in terms of this struggle, he did so in a decidedly optimistic light.⁴ There is little doubt that the Knight means us to see Theseus here as the embodiment of the quest for order and the noble life—as a noble, civilizing authority whose efforts to maintain stability in the world around him parallel the efforts of his celestial counterpart Jupiter and liken him to a “representative of fate on earth.”⁵ And yet while Muscatine’s conclusions are well observed, his reading is hampered, in part, for being too general: if Theseus’ defeat of the Amazons is a signature skirmish in the endless campaign against disorder, we must understand the tale’s theme in more specific terms. The Amazonian defeat is the defeat of feminine sovereignty, which is also, paradoxically, the defeat of feminine unruliness and sexual misrule, and these are offenses that are righted only by the restoration of social order through marriage, the surest symbol of masculine sovereignty and authority. Hypolita’s marriage affects the disarmament of the Amazonian threat because it transforms her from symbol and leader of feminine independence to subservient wife.⁶ And in framing courtship in such militaristic terms, Theseus is portrayed as an unequivocally

⁴Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 166.

⁵Muscatine, “Form, Texture, and Meaning,” 922.

⁶See Priscilla Martin, *Chaucer’s Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), 41.

domineering lover, the object of whose desire will, as a matter of course, always be on the defensive and always fall to his advances. The pursuit of the noble life is thus defined in terms of Theseus' firm and commanding response to women. Muscatine's reading would perhaps have been less positive had he understood *The Knight's Tale* this way, but he was influenced to a great extent by the Knight. For it is armed with this theme of masculine dominance that the Knight takes up the Host's challenge with such cheerful confidence and good spirits. If, as Arthur Hoffman describes, each pilgrim is answering the call of one of two voices—that of the bird or that of the saint—surely the libidinous song of Spring is far from the ears of the Knight.⁷ It may at first appear that he continues with his tale where the themes of love and renewal of *The General Prologue* leave off, but, austere, mud-bespattered, and still attired for war, the Knight is resisting the thaw while offering his tale as a caution against the season.

Beginnings, however, can be misleading, and the Knight and we have been misled: for the beginning of the tale the Knight here tells at once begins another tale seldom heard. To the extent that *The Knight's Tale* is the Knight's tale, much of the artistry that is Chaucer's is also his. Indeed, vestiges of the poem's former conception as a scribal enterprise, not unlike *Troilus and Criseyde*, point to a well-educated and bookish narrator to whom we may attribute its very rhyme and meter. Such an attribution becomes impossible with the relocation of the poem within *The Canterbury Tales* frame, but his new identity as the Knight has cost the narrator none of his former intelligence,

⁷See Arthur W. Hoffman, "Chaucer's Prologue to Pilgrimage: The Two Voices," *ELH* 21 (1954): 1–16.

nor has it cured him of his foibles. For not all the artistry is the Knight's—not least because the Knight himself and all his quirks of character are solely Chaucer's, as is all the Knight overlooks in his misreading. Even the most observant are rarely conscious of themselves, and rarely conscious of their peculiar blindness as a result. We can imagine that once having heard the tale told, much as the pilgrims hear him tell it, the Knight found it “worthy to drawn to memory”; so too his former scribal self must have thought it worthy to translate and record for all posterity. But though his role as re-teller of and commentator upon the tale he has clearly edited to meet the demands of time and occasion entails a firm command of its matter and *sentence*, nevertheless, the Knight performs an astonishing act of misinterpretation and thus betrays a singular lack of command. Despite his idealized appearance among the cast of pilgrims at the helm of society's defenders, he shares that characteristic which E. T. Donaldson famously described in the narrator of the General Prologue. The Knight is not blithely naive like Chaucer the Pilgrim, but he too is often “acutely unaware of what he sees, no matter how sharply he sees it.”⁸ He is sometimes quite perceptive, but more often obtuse, and proves himself to have been as bad a listener as he is a fallible narrator. The significance, for example, of Theseus' Amazonian conquest, as we have presented it above, is not lost upon him; but still he is misled, for he fails in the telling as he failed in the hearing to recognize its proper place in the tale as a whole, and he has missed a profoundly damning allusion to Claudian in Theseus' campaign. As with his Pilgrim alter ego, in the

⁸E. T. Donaldson, “Chaucer the Pilgrim,” in *Speaking of Chaucer* (Durham, North Carolina: The Labyrinth Press, 1983), 3. Reprinted from *PMLA* 69 (1954): 928–36.

Knight Chaucer has created a narrative tool through which to simultaneously present both what is seen and the failure to recognize it for what it is.⁹

From the opening lines of his tale the Knight is misled because his interpretation is constrained by biases that are too fully aligned with those enforced by Theseus. Thus the favorable light in which the Knight is predisposed to view Theseus has blinded him to the darker implications of Theseus' conduct and, by association, his own as well. In Theseus and his Amazonian campaign the Knight has mistaken background for foreground, counter-example for exemplum, ignorant and oppressive ideology for noble and enlightened conduct. Much as the narrator of *Troilus* finds in Pandarus, in Theseus the Knight has found a confederate with whose goals and ideals to identify and through whose eyes to read and judge the fictional world he inhabits. And just as the moral world of *Troilus* judges Pandarus, the moral world of The Knight's Tale judges Theseus to be one whose vision is terribly flawed. So too we should judge the Knight.

Theseus and the Knight are well-intentioned, but so great are their concerns for maintaining harmony and social order that they are too eager to seek out the causes of disorder and too quick to judge. In the end they deny themselves with this myopia the self-reflective evaluation necessary to find the real culprit. Instead, just as they find an enemy in the feminist ambitions of the Amazons, in Palamon and Arcite they find the

⁹I do not wish to belabor matters by addressing the controversial issue of narrative voice in The Knight's Tale. It should be clear where I stand: the only narrative voice to be heard is that of the Knight, who has a distinct "persona": "Chaucer the Pilgrim" meanwhile, stands aloof, as especially does Chaucer the author. For a look at the complexity and variety of critical opinions on the matter, see Ebbo Klitgård, *Chaucer's Narrative Voice in The Knight's Tale* (Copenhagen: Museum of Tusculanum Press, 1995).

threat of tyranny and strife. They are not far wrong. Such a threat is not without precedent: we as readers are witness to the tyranny of Creon, and he comes at the end of an infamous line of offenders; Indeed, his is the cousins' heritage and the very blood that courses in their veins. But, to Theseus and the Knight, the cousins' perpetuation of the Theban threat offers a special lesson because it is rooted specifically in love—in love's mastery of the masculine will, in its disruption of social bonds, and, ultimately, in the threat it poses to civilized society. To them, they are guilty of the same folly, demonstrate the same flawed character, and are both patent exemplars of the same turning away from the noble life. To them, they are identical. But they are gravely mistaken, and their misinterpretation speaks more to their own flaws in the end.

During the lists, Theseus and the Knight finally see the cousins as distinct, but their realization is long overdue and the basis for it is in error. We have seen the cousins as distinct from their first moments in the prison tower, but Theseus and the Knight have not. Not only does Theseus mistake them for being identical when they are first discovered amidst the slaughter of the field at Thebes but when he meets them again, fighting in the grove ankle-deep in blood, they seem only to confirm his first assessment, as they once again resemble the fratricidal warriors of the Cadmaean field and thus represent the dangers inherent to their lineage.¹⁰ And not only do they appear to him again as a single threat but, after some careful thought, Theseus says:

¹⁰Wetherbee (318) says: "The setting in which they fight up to their ankles in gore, is a version of the archetypal Theban landscape, the Cadmaean field saturated with the blood of the dragon who had destroyed Cadmus's original colonists, and that of the warriors who had sprung again from Cadmus's sowing of the dragon's teeth, only to all but destroy themselves in civil conflict."

“Lo heere this Arcite and this Palamoun,
 That quitly weren out of my prisoun,
 And myghte han lyved in Thebes roially,
 And witen I am hir mortal enemy,
 And that hir deth lith in my myght also,
 And yet hath love, maugree hir eyen two,
 Broght him hyder for to dye.

(1791–97)

Theseus could not know otherwise because he knows nothing of the cousins' differing intentions, but he nevertheless conflates the two as braving Theseus' wrath foolishly for love, when in fact, Palamon has not come “hyder,” he is going “thyder” to reclaim his Theban royalty and return with violence, not with love, on his mind. Theseus and the Knight do not see the cousins as distinct because, for them, that both the cousins appear to love is the source of confusion. If Theseus's defeat of the Amazons is seen as model conduct in male/female relations, love can only be another manifestation of the *regne of Femenye*, an abasement of masculine sovereignty to the feminine will. As a result of their conflation of the cousins, Theseus and the Knight fail to recognize Arcite for the hero he is and Palamon as the villain because they attribute love and disorder to them both.

Theseus and the Knight rightly find Arcite to have died an heroic death at the tale's end, but they do so for the wrong reasons. To the Knight, who is privy to the cousins' prayers before the tournament, Arcite's prayer to Mars is proof of a new-found, heroic restraint: his prayer is a prayer to win according to the terms that Theseus has dictated and to which, in any case, Arcite has already assented in the grove. Willing to conform to and play by the rules, he is a lover now who can be given a law and be

trusted to hold to it. To the Knight and Theseus both, Arcite dies “whan that he is best of name” and “in his excellence and flour” because, in the arena of the tournament amphitheater, intended by Theseus to contain and civilize the love-conflict of the cousins, he has put his striving for illicit love behind him and justly won instead in a contest whose legal and binding end is marriage. Win or lose, when Arcite enters the field under the gates of Mars, Theseus and the Knight see a man who has completed his translation into an epic hero and set foot at last upon the path of rectitude and the noble life; they see him emerge in the likeness of Theseus, who rode against Creon under the banner of Mars and against Hypolita with martial zeal. What they fail to recognize, however, is that Arcite’s restraint is not new-found, and he has put nothing behind him. As we have seen, when Arcite dies he dies for love, and his death is a sacrifice, albeit unwitting, performed as the natural fulfillment of his devotion to Emelye and wholly consistent with his character as a stricken lover throughout the tale.

And yet Arcite is more than just an interpretive casualty of the Knight’s tale, for he dies at the hands of the same martial ideology that views him so blindly. That his death speaks to more than the individual tragedy of the event is a point on which Theseus, the Knight, and we should all agree. It is an unsettling look into the nature of the world that disorder should emerge within the amphitheater itself, as if to flout Theseus and his efforts to shape a peaceful and harmonious end to the cousins’ strife, to deny Arcite, in the flush of victory, the glory and deserts that are his due. Here is proof of just how unremitting the struggle with chaos truly is, and how sometimes bitter. But

when Palamon enters the field under the gates of Venus, Theseus and the Knight see his intransigent opposition to order rooted in love. His failure underscores the extent of Arcite's transformation, while his prayer—at once because it is directed to Venus, petitions her for help outside the terms of the lists, and leads to Arcite's death—can only be regarded as final proof of love's tragic consequences.

Like Arcite, however, Palamon is judged rightly, though for the wrong reasons. Theseus and the Knight judge him because they think he loves. But, for Palamon, love is merely an idea employed as an excuse for the realization of darker motives. Thus they are not mistaken in understanding that love is the field on which the actions of both the cousins are played, nor that Palamon has taken a decidedly darker path. Their mistake is in failing to notice that the paths the cousins follow diverged long before the tournament, and that, contrary to what appears to be a Martian Arcite and Venerian Palamon facing off in the lists, it is the bellicose Palamon, not Arcite, who walks the path of Theseus. Arcite gives himself over to love, but in its control he is mellowed, not enraged. Palamon does not give in because for him, as for Theseus, love is a thing to subdue and control; he puts the idea of love to the service of ends driven by his savage Theban compulsions—ends that entail, whether in love or not, an inherent absence of self-control and an inherent disorder. Like Arcite, Palamon too is consistent throughout the tale. And though Theseus and the Knight attribute chaos to them both, consistently, Palamon is the only one of the cousins to blame.

But he is not the only one to blame. Palamon not only walks the path of Theseus

but he follows a trail that is well-worn and freshly trod. Palamon and Theseus are alike in their martial proclivities, alike in their martial solutions to amatory problems, and alike in the sinister shadow that hovers over their actions. When Theseus confesses that he was once a lover himself, his good humor depends on what he perceives to be the happy follies of youth. Instead he evokes his dark, inglorious past with Ariadne. And beneath the veneer of civilized Athenian polity is a Theseus little different from Creon, while in the Amazonian campaign is a presage of Palamon's intentions to lay siege to Athens to take Emelye for himself. And the shadow grows darker still, for Theseus may in fact be the answer to the question of how the newly mellowed Palamon, whose rage and plans for Emelye's *raptus* have been vented on Arcite, will fare in his future, just as, conversely, Palamon may bear a terribly accurate likeness to the younger Theseus. The Knight's Tale ends on the eve of a wedding and begins just shortly after the completion of another. Here The Knight's Tale seems to come full circle: not only is Palamon's arranged marriage with Emelye (which, if The Merchant's Tale is any indication of the horrors Emelye faces in marriage, may at best be only a blunted version of *raptus*) a completion of his role as Pluto, whose marriage with Proserpina in Claudian's *De Raptu* was arranged by Jove—one of Theseus's celestial counterparts—but Theseus is himself the recipient of the first and most damning reference to Claudian. His homecoming festivities are a change from the *Teseida*, in which Teseo marries Hypolita and stays with her in Scithia for a time until, after strong man-to-man cajoling from Peirithous, he sets out for further adventures. Chaucer's change evokes Claudian's *De Raptu*, where Pluto

returns to the underworld with his maiden spoils to be greeted by a joyous homecoming festivity. The Knight would tell us “of the tempest at hir hoom-comynge” (884) if time permitted, but he has already said enough. At his homecoming, Pluto is greeted by all the spirits of hell, whose gathering is described, in an omen of the seasonal change that Proserpina’s ravishment will mean for the upper world, as an autumnal storm:

conveniunt animae, quantas vilentior Auster
decutit arboribus frondes aut nubibus imbres
colligit aut frangit fluctus aut torquet harenas. (II.308–10)

[The shades assemble, thick as the leaves the stormy south wind shakes
down from the trees, dense as the rain-clouds it masses, countless as the
billows it curls or the sand it scatters.]

Theseus is very much a mellowed version of the Palamon who inhabits all but the end of The Knight’s Tale, but if Theseus sets the terms here for how we are to understand the apparent change that has come over Palamon, it is a change that is severely qualified. And if the Knight believes the actions of Theseus to be a noble alternative to the amatory self-abandon we may discern in Arcite, he has unwittingly condemned himself. For that alternative can be characterized in one potent and troubling word: *Raptus*.

Because the Knight does not understand his tale in such brutish terms, what results is an interpretive blunder that is both comedic and tragic. The dichotomy between the Martian and the Venerian embodied in the Knight and his son the Squire suggests that the Knight’s intentions are for his tale to be heard more by his son than by their fellow pilgrims. In telling his tale, he is attempting, as Theseus attempts with the cousins, to draw his son from the errors of amatory devotion to his own austere

dedication to the pursuit of the noble life. We can look on with some amusement as the Knight fails to see that the true lesson of the tale speaks against him rather than for him. Finding an example of Theseus in himself, he fails, like Theseus, to find himself mirrored in Palamon, with his own accusatory finger redounding blame upon his own ideological allegiances. The Knight, after all, is the recipient of the first Cadmaean allusion of *The Knight's Tale*, and it is an allusion, ironically, of his own making:

“I have, God woot, a large feeld to ere,
And wayke been the oxen in my plough.” (886–87)

We can also look on with amusement as his tale proves a rather tough tooth to sow. But our amusement must be tempered by the realization that not only does the Knight impute to himself the same attitudes if not conduct as Palamon and Theseus but, in overlooking the characterization of the cousins and thereby failing to appreciate the true nature of Arcite's heroism, he demonstrates an interpretive violence to Arcite that parallels the cousin's death as a consequence of Palamon's actions. The ideology behind Arcite's real death and his figurative death through disregard are the same. The Knight thinks he has told a tale of Theseus, the epic nobility of which is at once opposed to and confirmed by the threat of romance and emasculating love. But if we listen closely, we should hear instead a romance of Arcite laid waste tragically by the harsh reality of an inexorably overwhelming epic world—a world marked by the constancy of a blind and unfeeling violence justified, ironically, in the name of order.

That so much of *The Knight's Tale* criticism since Muscatine has come to confirm and praise the order that Theseus and the Knight hold in such high regard, when

the poem actually casts it very much in doubt, may be reflective of the critical concerns that they, like Muscatine, bring to the reading. Says Lee Patterson:

Thus the theme of the poem, defined by Muscatine as “the struggle between noble design and chaos,” expressed the very dynamic of both poetry and criticism itself. In effect, by applying to the poem the New Critical “reduction terms” of order and disorder, Muscatine showed that the *Knight's Tale* enacted, in both theme and form, the struggle in which he himself was engaged as a critic: the *Tale* became not merely a subject of New Critical practice but an exemplification of New Critical ideology.¹¹

The welter of scholarly opinion over the cousins to which Muscatine responded was, as he showed, wildly varied and confused. No doubt he felt the strength of his solution lay in its disinterestedness and reliance upon the text as a self-contained “literary artifact”¹² But we should perhaps be more forgiving than he, for while the critics before him may have erred, they did not wander far and, in any case, their way was obscured. Indeed, Muscatine's errors are as rooted in *The Knight's Tale* as theirs; his reading, too, is a consequence of characterization: they answered to the call of the cousins, he to that of Theseus and the Knight. They are different only in that, whereas the grand and noble design of the amphitheater held more interest for him, for them it was the characters within its walls. Indeed, like Theseus' amphitheater, Muscatine's New Critical reading is an effort to circumscribe apparently chaotic elements and to reshape them in a more orderly mode; and like the Knight's own misreading, it is an overzealous imposition of

¹¹Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 165. On the subject of New Critical “reduction terms,” Patterson cites R. S. Crane, *The Language of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), 123–24.

¹²Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 165.

order whose price is the suppression of characterization.

We must stop being the punch line of Chaucer's elaborate literary joke if we are ever to fully understand the setup. We must recognize that we have been guilty with the Knight in adding insult to Arcite's grave injury: indeed, we can only assuage his tragedy by recognizing that it is, in fact, a tragedy. For the turning away of our merciful gaze in a blind and absent disregard leaves Arcite as dead and alone in a world so abandoned by sympathy and justice as to be as bleak and godless as *Lear*, and just as disconsolate.

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