

## Chaucer's Double Telling of the *Knight's Tale*

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Among literary deathbed scenes, the pathos of Arcite's passing in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* ranks with that of Falstaff, Little Nell, and Marguerite. But while Falstaff babbles of green fields (*Henry V*, II. 3), Arcite delivers a formal lamentation in which he mourns the unhappy lot of man and commends Emily, his bride-to-be, to his cousin, friend, and rival, Palamon. The latter is associated with all the chivalric virtues: 'That is to seyen, trouthe, honour, knyghtede, / Wysdom, humblesse, estaat, and heigh kynrede, / Fredom, and al that longeth to that art' (ll. 2789–91),<sup>1</sup> although from what we've seen of Palamon's conduct to this point, these lines sound more like Falstaff's delirium than an accurate assessment of knighthood in general, and Palamon's in particular. Arcite's eloquent valediction is not the only occasion in the *Knight's Tale* where discrepancies arise between ritual (whether verbal, like Arcite's lament, or staged, like the tournament of Book IV) and 'reality'. Set within the framework of chivalric romance, that narrative form in which the noble hero is characteristically successful in his quest, loved by his lady, and in command of his destiny, the *Knight's Tale* upends such comfortable audience expectations in a world controlled by spiteful deities, baleful fortune, and arbitrarily minded despots, where the best man does not get the girl, the bride dedicates herself to the goddess of virginity on her nuptial eve, and the wedding feast becomes the funeral meats.

Although it is a story of love and war, told by a knight, fitting the *Knight's Tale* into the mould of medieval romance is a square peg into round hole exercise. Its source, Boccaccio's *Teseida*, calls itself an epic but owes much to popular Italian romance. If Chaucer really intended, as is sometimes suggested, to turn the twelve-book epic into a chivalric romance,<sup>2</sup> he made a botched job of it; but if his purpose was to make the frequently banal conventions and optimistic outlook of that genre play an ironic counterpoint to the tale's bleak picture of the human condition, the result is a *tour de force*.

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<sup>1</sup>All references are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson (Oxford and New York, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>On the *Knight's Tale* as an 'epic of love' as opposed to romance, see Robert S. Haller, 'The *Knight's Tale* and the Epic Tradition', *Chaucer Review*, 1 (1966–67), 67–84. For a discussion of the tale as Callimachean epic, see John Kevin Newman, *The Classical Epic Tradition* (Madison and London, 1986), pp. 341–71.

In a masterly essay on *Troilus and Criseyde*, written for Ralph Farrell's *Festschrift*, H. L. Rogers discussed that poem's 'epic frame' and the extra dimension it adds to the love story.<sup>3</sup> Conversely, the epic matter of the *Knigh'ts Tale* is given the framework of chivalric romance — a somewhat flimsy framework, as it happens, but nonetheless one which plays a significant role in determining the tenor of the work. The first and the last sixteen lines of the *Knigh'ts Tale* provide the formulaic boundaries of medieval chivalric romance. Lines 859–74, which begin the tale, are a paradigm of the form: a highborn knight, Duke Theseus of Athens, is victorious in conquest, gains a royal bride in the process, and is last seen homeward bound in triumph. But this turns out to be a false start. We are not, says the narrator interrupting himself, to hear about the successful conquering of the Amazons and the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta, which are summarized in the opening lines. This is to be another tale — of Theseus, conquest, and marriage, but of a very different order — and a second start is called for ('And ther I lefte, I wol ayeyn bigynne', l. 892). Within striking distance of Athens, Theseus is deflected from the pomp and circumstance of triumphal homecoming dictated by the conventions of romance. Abruptly, the secure world of medieval romance turns into the stuff of medieval tragedy. The joyful progress of the hero is interrupted by the weeping, dispossessed widows of Thebes; and, before he completes his journey to Athens, Theseus avenges the women of Thebes by reducing the city to rubble, killing its tyrant, Creon, rifling the bodies of the Theban soldiery, and sentencing the surviving two sons of its royal line, Palamon and Arcite, to life imprisonment. What begins as the climax of a medieval romance for Theseus begins as a *de casibus* tragedy for the Theban princes, already debased by their allegiance to a tyrant and now condemned to perpetual captivity in an Athenian gaol. By the time the pair have been incarcerated, without hope of ransom, 'in angwissh and in wo' (l. 1030), we are only some 160 lines, but a world away, from the scene of stylized contentment, on the brink of consummation ('This duc, of whom I make mencion, / Whan he was come *almost* [my italics] unto the toun, / In al his wele and in his mooste pride', ll. 893–95), with which the tale began.

But just when it seems that the conventions of romance have been conclusively abandoned, the coming of spring brings with it Emily, sister-in-law of Theseus and stereotype of the courtly heroine, who celebrates the season with due ceremony (ll. 1046–55) in a lush garden incongruously adjacent to, and in full view of, the prison where the Thebans languish. Henceforth, the major turns of action in the 'Knigh'ts Tale' will adopt the calendar (the month of May) and the chronology

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<sup>3</sup>H. L. Rogers, 'The Beginning (and Ending) of Chaucer's "Troilus and Criseyde"', in *Festschrift for Ralph Farrell*, edited by Anthony Stephens, H. L. Rogers, and Brian Coghlan (Bern, Frankfurt am Main, and Las Vegas, 1977), pp. 185–200.

(periods of one year, seven years) of medieval romance; and for the rest of the tale, the motifs of chivalric romance will jostle with those of medieval tragedy, along with some fundamental issues of medieval philosophy, to confuse the reader's response. From the moment when the narrator, reversing all those expectations of romance raised in the first sixteen lines, tells us what his story *won't* be about, all the 'generic' signposts of the *Knight's Tale* seem to be pointing in the wrong direction. The weeping women of Thebes have already abruptly changed the expected course of Theseus' victory march; later Theseus, this time engaged in another romance convention, the springtime hunt, interrupts a bloody and illegal duel between Palamon and Arcite, and the pursuit of the great hart is abandoned for a judgment scene determining matters of human life and death. Similarly, the dignified, carefully regulated ritual of the tournament will conclude with a grotesque accident whose consequences are forced upon us in gruesome physiological detail. Superficially magnificent, the description of the forces drawn up for the lists seethes disturbingly with images of bestial violence, especially in the entourage of Lygurge, champion of Palamon — bulls, bears, ravens, griffins, mastiffs (ll. 2139–52) — inappropriate, one might think, in a tournament of blunted swords intended, says the narrator, 'For love and for encrees of chivalrye' (l. 2184). The concept of the spectacle is right for the occasion, the execution of some of the details seems awry. The splendour of Arcite's obsequies underlines the injustice of it all: the conventions of romance prescribe a wedding to follow his victory; a funeral is the wrong ceremony for the occasion.

By the end of Book I alone, the tale has moved from romance to tragedy, back to romance, to philosophical debate, and, finally, on the subject of the pros and cons of Arcite's release and exile from Athens on the one hand and Palamon's continued imprisonment on the other, to a *demande d'amour* which serves to trivialize the philosophical debate concerning providence and the nature of happiness which precedes it.

The literary disorientation in matters of plot induced in the reader by this mixing of narrative modes brings with it an even more disconcerting sense of the absence of a governing ethic in the *Knight's Tale*. A range of sometimes contradictory value systems is invoked throughout the tale: the code of chivalry, the law of love, the rule of law, the consolation of philosophy. Arcite, for instance, in the fateful grove near Athens, begins his gloomy May song (ll. 1542–71) in the epic mode as a royal Theban, victim of the spite of Mars and Juno ('Allas, thou felle Mars! allas, Juno! / Thus hath youre ire oure lynage al fordo', ll. 1559–60), and ends it in a very different literary and ethical vein as a casualty of courtly love ('Ye sleen me with youre eyen, Emelye! / Ye been the cause wherfore that I dye', ll. 1567–68). Neither Palamon nor Arcite quite fits the mould of the hero of

chivalric romance. In the grove soliloquy, Arcite, worshipper of Mars, sounds as if his true *métier* is epic hero when he represents himself firstly as one of two surviving members of the Theban royal line and only secondly as a 'courtly' lover. Yet, on his release, he fails to raise a force against Athens, which Palamon expects him to do (ll. 1285–90), and instead adopts tactics better suited to a hero of romance by using his wits to pose as a labourer, infiltrate the household of Theseus, and gaze upon Emily. And this must surely be the only 'courtly' lover not only to put the physical ravages of his lovesickness to practical use as the basis of a successful disguise (ll. 1399–407) but also to display a somewhat bourgeois head for business which enables him, eventually promoted to the position of squire at Theseus' court, to manage two incomes — his Theban resources and Athenian salary — without attracting suspicion. Unluckily the object of a funeral rather than the subject of a wedding, he ultimately receives an epic hero's burial and a comparison with Hector (ll. 2831–32). Palamon, however, having escaped from prison, is initially intent upon the organization of his fellow Thebans in an assault against Theseus (ll. 1480–86) but instead follows a course unacceptable by either the standards of epic or romance, or indeed by any standards, in falling victim, at the sight and sound of Arcite in the grove, to the jealousy which has gripped him since his cousin's release.

But if Arcite sometimes seems out of place as the hero of a romance, then Palamon, despite his pledged service to Venus, is even more so. As Arcite's dying words indicate, the knightly code is an altruistic one, but none of Palamon's actions seems deserving of the health, wealth, and happiness he gains at the end of the poem. Love, even when unrequited, should ennoble a knight, inspiring him to deeds of valour in noble causes, but all that the emotion arouses in Palamon is criminal impetus. Quick to accuse his sworn brother of betrayal for loving the same woman (ll. 1129–51), he is just as quick to declare himself Arcite's 'mortal foe' ('For I am Palamon, thy mortal foe', l. 1590) when, murder in his heart, he overhears the grove soliloquy. Palamon eagerly denounces his cousin in the same terms ('This is thy mortal foe, this is Arcite', l. 1724) to Theseus, who finds them there, ankle-deep in each other's blood. The animal imagery so prevalent in the poem emphasizes the viciousness of the encounter ('Thou myghtest wene that this Palamon / In his fightyng were a wood leon, / And as a cruell tigre was Arcite; / As wilde bores goone they to smyte', ll. 1655–58) and discounts the courteous observances, minimal though they are, which precede it ('Ther nas no good day, ne no saluyng, / But streight, withouten word or rehersyng, / Everich of hem heelp for to armen oother / As frendly as he were his owene brother', ll. 1649–52). As one scholar has commented: 'The Knight has gone out of his way to make Palamon at least ungallant here . . . Palamon's unchivalric behavior somewhat besmirches the

fairy-tale ending'.<sup>4</sup> Arcite, by contrast, is reluctant to declare enmity for his fellow sufferer in love and war. He calls his cousin a 'worthy knyght' (l. 1608), declining to fight with a lovesick, unarmed man and offering the fugitive not only food, bedding, armour superior to his own, but also Emily, should Palamon win the duel which they arrange to fight the next day. It is unfashionable to suggest that there is any discernible difference between the two, but surely Arcite is at this crucial point the better man.<sup>5</sup> Curiously, in one sense he is more of a man in that he has a bodily dimension which Palamon lacks. The symptoms of his love-sickness, of which he makes such practical use, give us a pale, emaciated, hollow-eyed portrait 'grisly to beholde' (l. 1363) which contrasts vividly with his tall and brawny physique, reminiscent of Havelok the Dane's and well suited to the guise of labourer ('Wel koude he hewen wode, and water bere, / For he was yong and myghty for the nones, / And therto he was long and big of bones', ll. 1422–24). The representation of Arcite as a flesh and bones character drives home the pathos and agony of his ghastly death by putrefaction. It does, in retrospect, seem entirely appropriate that Arcite should base his claim to Emily on the grounds that he loves her not, like Palamon, with religious devotion, but with human warmth ('Thyn is affeccioun of hoolynesse, / And myn is love, as to a creature', ll. 1158–59).

Since this is, ostensibly, a romance, it could, of course, be argued that Palamon is the more deserving of Emily, since he is the servant of Venus: while Arcite prays to Mars for victory in the tournament, Palamon asks for Emily. Yet neither Mars nor Venus represents an ideal code of conduct. Conforming in outward design to the architectural symmetry which marks the structure of the narrative, chaotic scenes adorn the interiors of the temples of the two gods and seriously question those primary values of chivalric romance, love and war. The world of Mars contains not a single glorious martial image. This is a realm of desolation and criminal aggression, from pickpocketing to arson, accident, murder, suicide, and bloody wounds on the battlefield, a catalogue of horrors which extends to all mankind and in which Conquest, embodied in the tale by the triumphs of Theseus, sits beneath a sword hanging by a single thread. Venus is an equally fickle and tyrannical deity ('For as hir list the world than may she gye', l. 1950), presiding over a scene of sighs and misery. In serving either deity, Palamon and Arcite are merely exchanging one form of tyranny, Creon's, for another. Yet, returning abruptly from these pagan mysteries to the mode of chivalric romance, the narratorial voice subscribes with what appears to be naive enthusiasm to the martial ethic which the tale has just implicitly, but persuasively, condemned; in romance

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<sup>4</sup>Judith Ferster, *Chaucer on Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 41.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. A. V. C. Schmidt who argues for the moral superiority of Arcite in this scene in *The Tragedy of Arcite: A Reconsideration of the Knight's Tale*, *Essays in Criticism*, 19 (1969), 112–13.

terms, the violence and cruelty of Mars and the snares of Venus become the exhilaration and inspiration of the game of love and chivalry:

For every wight that loved chivalrye,  
And wolde, his thankes, han a passant name,  
Hath preyed that he myghte been of that game;  
And wel was hym that therto chosen was.  
For if ther fille tomorwe swich a cas,  
Ye knowen wel that every lusty knyght  
That loveth paramours and hath his myght,  
Were it in Engelond or elleswhere,  
They wolde, hir thankes, wilnen to be there,—  
To fighte for a lady, *benedicitee!*  
It were a lusty sighte for to see. (ll. 2106–16)

The conventions of romance govern the pre-tournament festivities, when Theseus honours the participants with a feast, gifts, music, and dancing (ll. 2197–203), a somewhat incongruous prelude to the fateful visits of Palamon, Emily, and Arcite to the forbidding temples of Venus, Diana, and Mars on the morrow. And, as they did in the case of Theseus' triumphal progress at the beginning of the tale, the conventions of medieval tragedy, in the form of an all too literal *casus* for Arcite, intrude upon the formulas of romance which celebrate his victory in the lists ('The trompours, with the loude mynstralcie, / The heraudes, that ful loude yelle and crie, / Been in hire wele for joye of daun Arcite', ll. 2671–73).

The additional perspective which the conventions of Middle English romance, narrative and stylistic, lend to significant turns of the narrative extends to its two conclusions: a 'philosophical' one, in the form of Theseus' 'Prime Mover' speech (ll. 2987–3074), and a 'literary' one in the marriage of Palamon and Emily (ll. 3093–108). These last sixteen lines of the tale need only a substitution of names to be interchangeable with the conclusion to any number of medieval romances. Yet this is no love-match, not on Emily's part at any rate, but an expedient union arranged by Theseus to reinforce his sovereignty over Thebes. The poem's ending offers us only a politically motivated misalliance between the clichés of chivalric romance and those of pseudo-Boethian philosophy,<sup>6</sup> with each underlining the banality of the other. The apparent 'resolution' of the tale of Palamon and Arcite is as open-ended at the conclusion of Book IV as it is at the end of Book I.

Morality in the *Knight's Tale* is a matter of *ad hoc* expediency. For example, disregarding all the ideals of chivalry, Arcite claims that the law of love overrules all

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<sup>6</sup>On the philosophical limitations and irresolution of Theseus' speech see, for example, Joerg E. Fichte, 'Man's Free Will and the Poet's Choice: the Creation of Artistic Order in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*', *Anglia*, 93 (1975), 343–45; Elizabeth Salter, *Fourteenth-Century English Poetry. Contexts and Readings* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 175–79.

others and makes it every man for himself (ll. 1153–86) as he disputes with Palamon their respective claims on Emily. Later he discourses at length upon the folly of man's propensity to pursue happiness under the wrong guises ('We seken faste after felicitee, / But we goon wrong ful often, trewely', ll. 1266–67) in a speech whose Boethian seriousness is eventually undercut by its incongruous application to the code of 'courtly' love: in other words, 'I mistakenly thought I would be happy out of prison, forgetting that my freedom would deprive me of the sight of the beloved. I might as well be dead.' Despite all its philosophical grandstanding, pomp, and ceremony, the *Knight's Tale* is, contrary to all the norms of chivalric romance, ultimately bereft of a positive ethic. With man at the mercy of fate, fortune, and the gods, expediency remains the only solution to the problems of the universe in Theseus' 'Prime Mover' speech: 'Thanne is it wysdom, as it thyngketh me, / To maken vertu of necessitee' (ll. 3041–42).

In the *Knight's Tale* Chaucer uses the counterpoint of romance to provide his story with a two-sided narrative. The tale can be read solely as 'romance': Theseus' marriage; the Thebans' 'courtly' love for Emily; Palamon's escape from gaol; Arcite's successful disguise; their interrupted duel; Theseus' display of mercy; the tournament; the union of Palamon and Emily; and all the attendant ritual. Here is a success story of chivalry, love, and justice, with a happy conclusion, beginning and ending with a wedding, and told in romance formulas which eventually teeter on the edge of suspiciously unChaucerian banality: 'For now is Palamon in alle wele, / Lyvyng in blisse, in richesse, and in heele' (ll. 3101–02). Concurrent with this, however, is a darker story, beginning and ending with a burial, of ruthless warfare, tyranny, enmity, and betrayal, where the wit and ingenuity of the romance hero are no match for the forces of fate and fortune.<sup>7</sup> Which, if either, is the 'true' account? Manipulating a variety of narrative modes (romance, epic, tragedy, philosophical discourse), Chaucer confronts us with a 'drama of styles'<sup>8</sup> whose differing perspectives give the tale an affinity with that kind of narrative, like *Roshomon* or the *Alexandria Quartet*, in which a multiplicity of viewpoints, devoid of obvious authorial bias, makes it impossible to establish the 'truth' of the action.

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<sup>7</sup>Marsha Siegal considers that the incongruity between chivalric values and the events of the tale makes the *Knight's Tale* 'an anti-romance to the extent that it shows that chivalric values — romantic love, sworn brotherhood, fealty to one's lord, and such institutions as the judicial tournament — can occasion unmanageable disorder, injustice, tragedy. This is not to say the tale shows these to be false values, but rather that it tests them, as most romances do not, against reality': 'What the Debate Is and Why it Founders in Fragment A of *The Canterbury Tales*', *Studies in Philology*, 82 (1985), 11.

<sup>8</sup>I have borrowed the term, but not its application here, from C. David Benson's *Chaucer's Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in the Canterbury Tales* (Chapel Hill and London, 1986).

The futile debates which Kathleen Blake sees in the tale<sup>9</sup> can never be satisfactorily resolved, because its dominant literary conventions, those of chivalric romance and *de casibus* tragedy, are antithetical. The marriage of Palamon and Emily is an abrupt conclusion to, not a resolution of, the drama of the *Knight's Tale*. So unsatisfying, ethically and aesthetically, is this formulaic conclusion,

For now is Palamon in alle wele,  
Lyvyng in blisse, in richesse, and in heele,  
And Emelye hym loveth so tendrely,  
And he hire serveth al so gentilly,  
That nevere was ther no word hem bitwene  
Of jalousie or any oother teene.  
Thus endeth Palamon and Emelye;  
And God save al this faire compaignye! Amen. (ll. 3101–08)

that instead of inducing the comfortable sense of closure which such endings usually do, the audience is inclined to wonder if it has missed something. These last lines might satisfy listeners, like the Canterbury pilgrims, who judge it a 'noble storie' (l. 3111), but they make the reader inclined to turn back to the tale rather than proceed to the next one.

Paradoxically the Miller's parody, explicitly intended to 'quite the Knyghtes tale' (l. 3127), does start to lead us out of the ethical confusion of the *Knight's Tale*. The chivalric matter of epic and romance disappears, to be replaced by domestic violence, as we move down the social and literary scale of the A-fragment of the *Canterbury Tales* to the tales of the Miller, Reeve, and Cook. But baleful cosmic forces vanish too: while the superficial 'order' (of chivalric pageantry, symmetry of structure, and Theseus' ruling hand) of the *Knight's Tale* masks a world of chaos and chance, the brawling of the Miller's and the Reeve's tales provides a more natural, if rougher, justice. There are, after all, no fatalities in this pair of tales, even if there are bumps on the head, broken arms, offended sensibilities, and burned bottoms. This form of mayhem is the stuff of slapstick comedy, and the values by which the players operate are, consistently, the cheerful, amoral, and unashamedly expedient standards of *fabliau*.

In the *Miller's Tale*, the judgments upon the follies of Nicholas and Absolon, brutally fit the crime. There are some loose threads in the tale — why should the adulterous Alison get off apparently scot-free, and does her silly old husband John really deserve a broken arm for his gullibility? — but none in the following *Reeve's Tale*, where justice is entirely poetic: Symkyn is an out and out thief; his two young victims, John and Alan, repay him in kind and, in the process, achieve the sexual

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<sup>9</sup>Kathleen A. Blake, 'Order and the Noble Life in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*?', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 34 (1973), 3–19.



gratification denied to Palamon and Arcite in the *Knigh's Tale* and to Absolon in the Miller's. Philosophizing Theseus has no greater understanding of the way of the world than superstitious John, and still less than cynical Symkyn. Yet, while the immediate correlation between success and reward, crime and punishment, becomes clearer cut as the A-fragment progresses, the characters involved become less and less admirable: Palamon and Arcite may be flawed heroes, but neither the engaging Nicholas nor the hapless Absolon is in any way praiseworthy, and finer feelings of any kind are completely alien to Alan and John. Neither the conventions of chivalric romance nor the egocentric ethic of *fabliau* offer any conclusive resolution to the questions of justice, morality, and determinism raised in these tales. Even our own perceptions of right and wrong become confused if they are read immediately one after the other. We can only heave a sigh of relief that the sleazy, fragmentary *Cook's Tale*, which plumbs the murkiest depths of urban low life and promises the most dubious standards of morality in the *Canterbury Tales* thus far, never got any further than it did.