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A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE KNIGHT'S TALE OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER

A thesis submitted to the Graduate School of
Drew University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Letters

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CHAPTER I

THE KNIGHT'S TALE OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER

The Knight's Tale has long been one of my favorite stories not only in the Chaucerian canon but within the whole realm of literature itself. Perhaps this attraction results from the plot, the characterization, the language, the setting, or the theme. Yet, too, it may arise from a combination of all these. Thus, when the requirement for a final essay in this program presented itself, a study of The Knight's Tale seemed a logical choice. Hopefully this critical survey and analysis will focus on one of these elements and aid my own understanding of this tale's lasting appeal.

Many years ago, many more, in fact, than I would care to number, I recall an introductory essay in the old College Survey of English Literature that defined literature as "the enduring expression of significant human experience in words well chosen and arranged." Few of us can quarrel with that.

But what has this to do with Geoffrey Chaucer and The Knight's Tale? To me, Chaucer serves as the keystone of our own literary heritage for three very important reasons. A paramount reason must be the use of his native

dialect for poetic expression. As George Lyman Kittredge has stated:

> Finally,--and this was of prime importance,--Chaucer was born in London. His native dialect was that which was to become, in the natural course of events, the English of literature. And it was a critical moment, when nothing was needed to determine the tendency but a poet of commanding genius. Chaucer did not make the English language. His service was to write the Midland dialect with an ease, a polish and a regularity which commanded immediate and unanimous admiration, and to use it as the vehicle for first-rate poetry. Nothing more was needed. Those who came after him had now an accepted standard.[1]

The second reason is his invention of the decasyllabic couplet in English, a perfect metre for narrative work. J. W. Mackail has remarked of this:

> Chaucer had already proved his own narrative gift and his mastery over the manipulation of verse for the purpose of narration. He had invented in the decasyllabic couplet a metre of complete fitness for this purpose. It gave to verse composition a flexibility and range comparable to that gained for architecture by the introduction of the pointed arch.[2]

The third reason comes from T. S. Eliot. In response to his own question, "What Is a Classic?" he enumerates several specifications, among which we find comprehensiveness which he explains thus:

> The classic must, within its formal limitations, express the maximum possible of the whole range of feeling which represents the character of the

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[1] George Lyman Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), p. 7.

[2] John William Mackail, The Springs of Helicon: A Study in the Progress of English Poetry from Chaucer to Milton (New York: Longmans, Green, 1909), p. 43.

> people who speak that language. It will represent this at its best, and it will also have the widest appeal; among the people to which it belongs, it will find its response among all classes and conditions of men.[1]

To put it more simply: humanitas, the human condition. Chaucer speaks of man as none have done before and few have done since.

What can we say of the life of this man Chaucer? Born circa 1340 to a wealthy wine-merchant family, Chaucer lived in a time that was as plagued with difficulties as our own. During his lifetime the Black Plague ravaged Europe; economic disasters were frequent; social unrest appeared; the Hundred Years' War with France raged; and religious dissension resulted in the Great Schism within the Church and the division of the Papacy.

Much of Chaucer's adult life was spent in various capacities in the king's service. Some of these missions required frequent trips to France and Italy. His royal service encompasses the reigns of three English monarchs: Edward III, Richard II, and Henry IV. Many feel that his special insight into human nature resulted directly from his association with people from all walks of life. Of his family and economic background, Kittredge remarked:

> It is vastly fortunate that Chaucer was born high enough in the social scale not to need holy orders as a means of escape from cramping circumstances.

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[1]Thomas Stearns Eliot, On Poetry and Poets (New York: Octagon, 1975), p. 69.

> Otherwise, a great poet would have been spoiled to make an indifferent parson. He would still have been a poet, and patrons would not have failed him, but he could not have comprehended the world, or "had his life in his time." It is equally fortunate that Chaucer was not born an aristocrat; for then he would not have understood the lower orders, but would have lived and died the poet of chivalric love. We might have had the Troilus, but we should lack the Canterbury Tales.[1]

One extremely important work of Chaucer is the Canterbury Tales. In attempting to reflect the life and times of his day, he used as a framework the journey of a group of pilgrims from every level of society to the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. These men and women represented the whole spectrum of English life: some noble, some coarse, some witty, some pious. Though the portraits are highly individual, they are also typical. And the stories the pilgrims tell are as varied as the pilgrims themselves. Kittredge further explains that the sight of pilgrims would be very familiar to Chaucer, and, in all probability, he went on a Canterbury pilgrimage himself.[2] The pilgrim we shall focus on here is the Knight and the tale he tells.

Terry Jones mentions three specific divisions or groups within medieval society: the priests, the knights, and the labourers. A sermon delivered by Master Thomas

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[1] Kittredge, p. 5.

[2] Ibid., p. 149.

Wimbledon to the congregation of St. Paul's Cross explains the function of each:

> To the priesthood it falls to cut away the dead branches of sin with the sword of their tongues. To the knighthood, it falls to prevent wrongs and thefts being done, and to maintain God's law and those that are teachers of it, and also to save the land from the enemies from other lands. And to the labourers it falls to work with their bodies and by their sore sweat to get out of the earth the bodily sustenance for themselves and the others.[1]

Thus for medieval society each of the three estates had clearly delineated roles.

With this as background, we may look now at Chaucer's description of the Knight from the General Prologue:

> A KNYGHT ther was, and that a worthy man,
> That fro the tyme that he first bigan
> To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
> Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.
> Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre,
> And thereto hadde he riden, no man ferre,
> As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse,
> And evere honoured for his worthynesse.
> At Alisaundre he was whan it was wonne.
> Ful ofte tyme he hadde the bord bigonne
> Aboven alle nacions in Pruce.
> In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,
> No Cristen man so ofte of his degree.
> In Gernade at the seege eek hadde he be
> Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarye.
> At Lyeys was he and at Satalye,
> Whan they were wonne, and in the Grete See
> At many a noble armee hadde he be.
> At mortal batailles hadde he been fiftene,
> And foughten for oure feith at Tramyssene
> In lystes thries, and ay slayn his foo.

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[1] Terry Jones, Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 10.

> This ilke worthy knyght hadde been also
> Somtyme with the lord of Palatye
> Agayn another hethen in Turkye,
> And everemoore he hadde a sovereyn prys.
> And though that he were worthy, he was wys,
> And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.
> He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
> In al his lyf unto no maner wight.
> He was a verray, parfit, gentil knyght.
> But for to tellen yow of his array,
> His hors weren goode, but he was nat gay.
> Of fustian he wered a gypoun
> Al bismotered with his habergeoun,
> For he was late ycome from his viage,
> And wente for to doon his pilgrymage.
> General Prologue, 43-78

This Knight's love of "chivalrie, Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie" resulted in his recognition for "worthynesse" in both Christian and heathen lands. The enumerated successful campaigns in Alisaundre, Pruce, Lettow and Ruce, together with the engagements at Gernade, Algezir, Belmarye, etc., all testify to his fortitude and valour on the field of battle. These and other favorable considerations entitle this pilgrim to the respect accorded by most critics. On this point John M. Manly has observed:

> Knighthood was no longer a mere feudal obligation, it had become an ever-alluring ideal; men fought not because they must, but because they might; and the conditions of the time gave to the ideal all the inspiration of religious fervor and all the enticements of contact with the unknown, the mysterious, the unsearchable.[1]

Manly also believes that Chaucer's knight was probably between sixty and sixty-five years of age and enjoyed a

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[1] John M. Manly, "A Knight Ther Was," in Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 47.

singular reputation.[1] Concerning Chaucer's description of this pilgrim, Manly remarks that "Chaucer was painting no picture of fancy, but giving us a figure at once realistic and typical of the noble and adventurous idealists of the day."[2]

In another essay, Joerg A. Fichte has remarked that the knight thus described seems slightly anachronistic by the standards of the late fourteenth century. He alludes to the following conditions on the waning of the chivalric code as they were expressed by Eustache Deschamps, a contemporary of Chaucer: the knighting of many youths by age 10 or 12; their idling away of the hours by eating, drinking, sleeping and resting well and praising the sins of the flesh; their frequent participation in robbery and pillage; and their open disrespect of the Church and religion.[3]

Terry Jones' thoroughly documented, scholarly work takes a diametrically opposite view to that of most critics toward the knight in the General Prologue. He regards the knight as a ruthless mercenary soldier who, despite his successful campaigns on foreign soil, had never once fought to protect his own land.[4] He continues further:

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[1] Ibid., p. 56.

[2] Ibid., pp. 58-59.

[3] Joerg O. Fichte, "Man's Free Will and the Poet's Choice: The Creation of Artistic Order in Chaucer's Knight's Tale," Anglia 93 (1975): 335-60.

[4] Jones, p. 98.

> A glance at the tables on pp. 102-6 shows that far from being typical, Chaucer's Knight is quite exceptional for his total lack of patriotism in having ridden 'no man ferre.' At a period of crisis for the English nation, he has failed to serve his own country with spectacular single-mindedness and has ranged all over the known world in search of fat pickings. In short, the Knight's career has not been that of a responsible member of the knightly class, nor even of a dedicated militant Christian but of a self-serving itinerant mercenary, and this would have been quite obvious to Chaucer's contemporaries.[1]

Such an interpretation certainly does run counter to the bulk of traditional reaction to the character of the knight.

Perhaps E. T. Donaldson still provides the most adequate rejoinder to this point of view. Acknowledging that the knight was still the dominant figure of the age of chivalry, Donaldson admits to the gradual disintegration of knightly ideals and alludes to Chaucer's deliberate mention of campaigns that could be regarded as holy wars:

> . . . campaigns against the Moors in the Spanish kingdom of Granada, in Morocco, and in Algiers; against the Moslems at Alexandria in Egypt, in Turkey, and in Armenia; against the northern barbarians in Prussia, Lithuania, and Russia. The names of these campaigns must have had for the contemporary reader the same proud ring that such names as Normandy, El Alamein, and Iwo Jima have today--great battles which momentarily united much of the civilized world. . . . Having just returned from his latest campaign, he proceeds at once in his travel-stained clothing to offer thanks to the saint who has protected him.[2]

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[1] Ibid., p. 100.

[2] E. T. Donaldson, Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1975), pp. 1041-43.

This view of the knight as a skillful warrior who must travel forthwith to offer thanks to God for the preservation of his own life during all these campaigns is certainly a far cry from the "self-serving itinerant mercenary" of Terry Jones.

Let us consider for a moment Chaucer's relationship to the literary heritage of the Western World. His poetical works are generally divided into three periods: 1) the French; 2) the Italian; and 3) the English. During the French Period Chaucer usually followed French methods and conventions, emulating in particular Guillaume de Lorris and Guillaume de Machaut. The Knight's Tale (or the Palamon and Arcite) belongs to the Italian Period. Kittredge, acknowledging Chaucer's indebtedness to Dante and Petrarch and Boccaccio, says:

> They enlarged his horizon. They awoke him to consciousness of power that was his own. Boccaccio, in particular, did him the priceless service of stirring him to emulation. Here, in the Teseide and the Filostrato, were new and fine and congenial things.[1]

Kittredge feels that there should also be added a fourth period to the usual three indicated above. This he names a Period of Transition. For him this falls between the French and the Italian Periods. Speaking of this, he continues:

> Chaucer's period of Transition . . . falls between his first Italian journey (in 1373) and the writing of the Palamon and Arcite or the Troilus . . .

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[1] Kittredge, pp. 26-27.

> In this period he was reading and assimilating Italian poetry, was achieving emancipation from French fashions under its guidance, was "finding himself," was getting ready for the full exercise of his native genius. His leisure was scanty, and he read far more than he wrote, enlarging his knowledge on every side. In particular, he gave much time to the Latin classics, which must share with Dante and Petrarch and Boccaccio the honor of setting him free from the bonds of French convention.[1]

Thus he had a wide diversity of literary sources available to him.

Though Chaucer used as his primary source for The Knight's Tale Boccaccio's Teseide, Bryant and Dempster inform us that he also may have relied on his knowledge of the following in the development of this poem: the Thebaid of Statius, the Roman de Thèbes, the poetry of Ovid, the De consolatione philosophiae of Boethius, the Speculum maius of Vincent de Beauvais, the Roman de la rose of Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun and some English romances.[2] Here is a pertinent summary of the detailed tables provided by various scholars concerning the parallels between The Knight's Tale and the Teseida:

> H. L. Ward presented marginal references . . . indicating 272 lines translated from the Teseida, 379 showing a general likeness, and 131 showing a slight likeness to passages in the Italian poem. . . . Skeat prepared a brief table of general

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[1] Ibid., p. 73.

[2] William Frank Bryan and Germaine Collette Dempster, Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941), p.88.

> correspondences, and Mather printed parallel summaries of the two poems. Tatlock prepared a table of parallels, adding a few lines to those indicated by Ward. Cummings listed the further borrowing of episodes and has shown that Chaucer used the materials of the Teseida in from seven hundred to eight hundred more lines than previously noted.[1]

This is then followed by a reproduction of Robinson's modification of Skeat's original table.

Nicholas R. Havely's more recent work in this area makes the comparison between the two works easier to single out and understand. In reviewing this volume, the following interesting elements stand out. Though omitted or modified by Chaucer in The Knight's Tale, these items merit special mention here: 1) Boccaccio's gloss indicates that the souls of the unburied dead faced a one-hundred year wait on the shores of the Acheron before they would find rest; 2) Palamon and Arcite as prisoners lead the triumphal entry of Theseus into Thebes; 3) Arcite was the first of the lovers to be smitten by Emily; 4) a good physical description of the two knights and Emily is provided; 5) the raising of Arcite's spirit to heaven seems a striking passage; and 6) the wedding of Palamon and Emily in addition to the wedding night receives adequate coverage.[2]

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[1] Ibid., pp. 90-91.

[2] Nicholas R. Havely, Chaucer's Boccaccio: Sources of Troilus and the Knight's and Franklin's Tales (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1980), pp. 106-115, 144, 151.

The descriptions of both Palamon and Arcite from Boccaccio follow:

> Palemone was tall, with well-knit limbs, somewhat dark-haired, cheerful in appearance, pleasant-looking and well-spoken; but since he fell in love he had become modest and gentle in manner. He was of excellent intelligence and discreet in conduct; rosy-complexioned, extremely graceful, dignified in stance and abounding in courage.
>
> Arcita was very tall, slim (but not excessively so) and cheerful in expression. He was as white and red as an April rose, with blond, curly hair, a modest manner and an air of nobility. He had fine eyes and a steady gaze, but showed great vigour in his speech, and anyone could see how agile and nimble he was.[1]

Such physical details as these enable the reader to envision for himself a more complete picture of the two knights.

Here is one segment from Book XI of the Teseida which gives Arcite's reaction after his soul has been raised to heaven:

> Then he turned downwards to look again at what he had left behind him. And he saw the little globe of earth with the sea and air encircling it and the fire above, and he judges it all to be worthless by comparison with Heaven. . . .
>
> And he smiled to himself, thinking of all the Greeks and their lamentations, and greatly deplored the futile behaviour of earthly men whose minds are so darkened and befogged as to make them frenziedly pursue the false attractions of the world and turn away from Heaven. Then he departed to the place that Mercury allotted him.[2]

These citations really suffice to illustrate some of the differences between the two versions of the basic story.

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[1] Ibid., pp. 114-15.

[2] Ibid., p. 144.

CHAPTER II

SURVEY OF CRITICISM

Critical reviews of Chaucer and his works are indeed plentiful from the time of John Dryden onward. In approaching the commentaries in this section, I will merely cite in chronological sequence what I regard as the most significant of these from the twentieth century.

John W. Mackail views The Knight's Tale as the "single poem which represents Chaucer most fully."[1] He bases this opinion on the exceptional pictorial and decorative power of the poetry itself:

> It is all beautiful, all dexterous and masterly, all Chaucer at a high level that only comes short of his highest. It has more range than any other single poem of his; it supplies more memorable phrases and lovely lines.[2]

He further cites a striking parallel between the following four lines and the opening remarks of Zeus at the beginning of the Odyssey:

> Alas, why pleyen folk so in commune
> Of purveyance of God, or of fortune,
> That giveth them full oft in many a guise,
> Well better than they can themself devise?
>
> The Knight's Tale, 1251-54

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[1] Mackail, p. 55.

[2] Ibid.

> Alas, how idly do these mortals blame
> The gods, as though by our devising came
> The evil that in spite of ordinance
> By their own folly for themselves they frame!

Mackail notices a great parallel between Arcite's words: "So stood the heaven when that we were born: / We must endure: this is the short and plain" to the metric cadence found in the Aeneid: "Stat sua cuique dies" or "superanda omnis fortuna ferendo est."[1]

A few years later George Lyman Kittredge, commenting on the classical virtue of "conciseness," stated:

> The condensation of Boccaccio's Teseida into The Knight's Tale is a truly marvelous performance. The artistic economy of Chaucer, even in descriptive passages, where decoration would be excusable, goes quite beyond all Dryden's power of self-control.[2]

Later, in further remarks about the lover's malady of hereos described in the tale, Kittredge cites the duality of this illness: the "symptoms" of the afflicted, namely, grief, pallor, sleeplessness, etc., become for the follower of chivalry duties or ideals of human emotion which the true lover must live up to. He continues:

> Chaucer's mental attitude toward the whole phenomenon is at once sympathetic and ironical. He understood, for he was human, and human nature was, to him, the most interesting and moving subject in the world,--the only tangible thing, indeed, in a universe of mystery and thwarted endeavor. . . . Human nature is the one thing

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[1] Ibid.

[2] Kittredge, p. 19.

> that we can comprehend; and to comprehend, with Chaucer, was to sympathize, for he felt himself a part of all he saw.[1]

Thus we glean from Kittredge's comments Chaucer's qualities of conciseness and humanitas or sympathy with human nature.

W. P. Ker, in the Clark Lecture of 1912, marvels at Chaucer's ability to extract from the Teseida all the materials that suited his purpose and to disregard those which did not. He states:

> In so far as Chaucer's Knight's Tale is a poem that will bear the most exacting tests with regard to its composition, ordonnance, whatever be the right name for that in which the classical poets are believed to excel, it is a classical poem. It comes up to the requirements: there is nothing weak or inharmonious or out of place.[2]

Charles Muscatine feels that symmetry is the most distinguishing feature of this tale. He cites the triangle of lovers over which Theseus sits in power. There is also symmetry of description in the companies of the two knights, the prayers raised by the principals to their own deities, and the funeral procession for Arcite near the poem's end. Noting that Chaucer by deliberate selection and addition did compose a work more symmetrical than its source, he avers that this poem bears a closer affinity to the medieval idea of conventionalism than realism. He also suggests that

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[1] Ibid., pp. 124-25.

[2] W. P. Ker, "Chaucer and the Rennaissance," in Geoffrey Chaucer: A Critical Anthology, ed. J. A. Burrow (New York: Penguin, 1969), p. 108.

> . . . The Knight's Tale is essentially neither a story nor a static picture, but a poetic pageant, and that all its materials are organized and contributory to a complex design expressing the nature of the noble life.[1]

He acknowledges later that in this tale Chaucer is at his very best as a poet. Rejecting the idea of love as the poem's central theme, Muscatine comments:

> Love, which has too often been regarded as the poem's central theme, is used only as a vehicle of expression, a mode of experience of the noble life, which is itself the subject of the poem and the object of its philosophic questions.[2]

He then reminds us that true nobility is faith in the ultimate order of all things.

R. Neuse directs our attention to the consistent counterpointing of human and divine elements throughout the poem. He also provides a schematic diagram to represent the divine-human parallelism with the deities of Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Venus and Diana on the left, facing their counterparts Egeus, Theseus, Arcite, Palamon and Emily on the right. Neuse feels that our couclusion should be that the will of man is his fate. He thus asserts:

> The Tale, then, deals precisely with those elements that most nearly concern the Knight. Yet it appears that the latter casts an ironic eye at the relationship between the generations. Man in the tale does not learn much by age and

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[1]Charles Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer's Knight's Tale," in Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 69.

[2]Ibid., p. 78.

> experience. What wisdom can the older transmit to the younger generation? The Knight's Tale is a testimony to the insufficiency of human wisdom at the same time that it transcends it.[1]

Robert S. Haller a few years later notes that Chaucer did avail himself of materials from the epic tradition by selection of several elements of the tale itself. Interestingly, he states, ". . . it is in his treatment of love that Chaucer is most epic, for what Chaucer has done is to make love take the place of the usual political center of the epic."[2] He notes that the treatment of love here is in the truly epic style and that the rivals-in-love and their actions have an effect not only on the individuals themselves but on society in general. Love, for Haller, is here treated in epic style. He adds:

> . . . Palamon and Arcite are made to show, in their speeches, some awareness that their love is connected with both the fate of their city and the operation of the universe; and readers of the tale, knowing the Thebaid, are to see their love as the means whereby an epic of destiny is worked out.[3]

He indicates the parallellism between love and governance. In this connection he cites a quote from Ovid's Ars Amatoria [III, 563-64] where women are advised on the method of maintaining the love of young men: Effuge Rivalem: vinces,/

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[1] R. Neuse, "The Knight: The First Mover in Chaucer's Human Comedy," in Burrow, p. 260.

[2] Robert S. Haller, "The Knight's Tale and the Epic Tradition," Chaucer Review I (1966): 68.

[3] Ibid.

dum sola tenebis; / Non bene cum sociis regna Venusque manent." He further observes the distinctions between despotism and true rule, the ordering of the universe and the interrelationship between private and public traits of the good ruler. Chaucer's deliberate use of a pre-Christian setting for the tale evokes this comment:

> The fact that The Knight's Tale, while commenting on contemporary politics, is set in the pre-Christian past and uses the classic genre of the epic, implies that Chaucer believed that the perfection of the state existed before the Christian dispensation, and that the qualities of the ruler were not changed by that dispensation. . . . It is Theseus, not Arthur, whom he takes as the model ruler, and it is the epic, not the romance or lai, which he uses to define the qualities of a ruler. As a political poet . . . Chaucer's roots are in classical antiquity, which provided him with both his ideas of the state and the genre in which to express these ideas.[1]

Kathleen A. Blake, writing on the noble life, notes the difficulty we all have of distinguishing between the two knights Palamon and Arcite. She cites some very interesting common traits associated with both the Knight and Theseus: 1) the most noble of the pilgrims and the person of highest degree in the city; 2) their use as arbiters: the Knight between the Pardoner and the Host, and Theseus for the two combatants; and 3) the positive view which both share of the world.[2]

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[1] Ibid., p. 84.

[2] Kathleen A. Blake, "Order and the Noble Life in Chaucer's Knight's Tale," Modern Language Quarterly 34 (1973): 3-19.

Frederick Turner's essay provides one of the most sensible and easily understood analyses of the tale. In stressing the medieval penchant for order and regarding binary opposition as built into the medieval system of logic and discourse, he cites the description of the lists as the most geometrical and diagrammatic part of the whole poem. He notes the triangle in the human plane (Palamon, Arcite and Emily) and the divine sphere (Venus, Diana and Mars). The trio of Palamon, Arcite and Theseus possesses a juridical model, i.e., of contestants to judge. This particular tale begins and ends with a marriage and a funeral. The familial relationships are also stressed as a further example of the idea of order:

> Emelye and Ypolita are sisters; Emelye is Theseus' sister-in-law; the mothers of Palamon and Arcite are sisters; the knights themselves are blood-brothers; Theseus and Perotheus are blood-brothers; Venus and Mars are siblings; Palamon becomes the brother-in-law of Ypolita and Theseus.[1]

He further notes:

> Of the four main characters, Emelye is a woman in league with a goddess, Theseus a man in league with a god; Arcite, also a man in league with a god, and Palamon, a man in league with a goddess. Palamon is the only character whose divine sponsor is of the opposite sex and this, crudely, is the basic reason why he achieves his intentions.[2]

R. M. Lumiansky feels that the philosophical romance of The Knight's Tale results from the inclusion of segments

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[1] Frederick Turner, "A Structuralist Analysis of the Knight's Tale," Chaucer Review 8 (1974): 279-96.

[2] Ibid.

from the De Consolatione Philosophiae of Boethius. As evidence of this he cites the comparison between Theseus' speech at the end of the tale to the conclusion reached by Boethius after his discussions with Lady Philosophy. Lumiansky insists, "Most of the 100 lines deal with one point, 'the relation of Providence to man's happiness,' and this point is, of course, at the very center of the Consolation."[1] Lumiansky does provide a fine, easily-followed guide for the sequence of fourteen events of the narrative which could be readily followed by those intending to use this tale as a teaching unit with high school students. He states that Arcite and Palamon represent two states of seekers and remarks that the philosophical question is deliberately unanswered by Chaucer in this poem. He also contends that the influence of Boethius is so evident here as to control the action in the narrative itself.

Peter H. Elbow shows how the poet manages to transcend oppositions in this story. He comments on Chaucer's refusal to answer the question of which knight is more estimable than the other by the citation of three paradoxes: 1) Palamon finally gets Emily although Arcite had won her; 2) the funeral near the end certainly dwarfs the wedding of the final lines; and 3) Arcite's conduct in winning Emily is more appropriate

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[1] R. M. Lumiansky, Of Sondry Folk: The Dramatic Principle in the Canterbury Tales (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1955), p. 34.

to Palamon yet the twist of fate by which Palamon finally secures her is more easily associated with Arcite.[1]

Joerg A. Fichte advises us of the three basic assumptions necessary to a proper understanding of the tale: 1) that the aristocratic teller used by Chaucer reflects his own views; 2) that this tale shows "disorder proceeding from the characters' lack of wisdom and understanding; and 3) that the final speech of Theseus suggests that, "man, having absolute responsibility for his actions, can create order if he uses right judgement."[2] He further states that Egeus' advice reflects a wisdom culled from Hebraic, Christian and classical sources. Fichte regards the poet here as a poeta-vates, a poet-theologian. Further observations disclose the juxtaposition of joy and misery, the irony of Arcite's death at the moment of his greatest triumph, and the quick mood and scene shifts throughout.

Ian Robinson also discusses favorably the powerful range of poetry that we find in this tale. He feels that the description of Emelye is deliberately vague because falling in love is a limited ideal and he views Emily as somewhere between unreal idealization and lively realization. He sees the central problem of the tale as "how to know one's place in the world and how to see any justice

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[1]Peter H. Elbow, "How Chaucer Transcends Oppositions in the Knight's Tale," Chaucer Review 7 (1972): 97-112.

[2]Fichte, pp. 334-60.

in it."[1] He has called this "The Tragic Tale" based on his view that tragedy usually concerns the interaction of a man with the gods whom man often defies or fails to understand. His conclusion bears repetition here:

> . . . here I will just suggest that The Knight's Tale shows there can be medieval poetry of full tragic seriousness which is yet not committed to any philosophical programme or to any continuous literary decorum--which can be exploratory and tentative rather than, with Dante, assured and determined to be assured, and which can recognize the injustice as well as the sense of life.[2]

Bernard Huppé reminds us quite explicitly that the poet's function was "to express in terms of the figurative and the fabled the doctrinal truth which the homilist and the confessor presented directly."[3] Thus, poetry for the medievalist was rightly considered to be an adjunct of philosophy. He emphasizes this by an allusion to Boccaccio:

> Elsewhere Boccaccio emphasizes the meaningfulness of poetry. He develops at length the point that poetry has as its purpose not entertainment but learning. The only justification for fictional discourse rests in its underlying meaning. This is another way of saying as Hugh of St. Victor had said, that poetry looks toward philosophy.[4]

He makes an even further comment that is frequently overlooked when discussing the Canterbury Tales: "All Christians become

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[1] Ian Robinson, Chaucer and the English Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 125.

[2] Ibid., p. 146.

[3] Bernard F. Huppé and D. W. Robertson, Jr., Fruyt and Chaf: Studies in Chaucer's Allegories (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 10.

[4] Ibid., pp. 19-20.

knights spiritually at Confirmation. Symbolically all who live are in the battle either as Knights of God or as knights of the world."[1] These points are made with reference to the poetry of Chaucer in general.

In a work published the following year, Huppé regards the hero of The Knight's Tale as neither Palamon nor Arcite but Theseus himself. This is true despite the fact that Palamon and Arcite occupy for most readers the central position in the story. Further, he notes that Chaucer's inclusion of several lines from Boethius, all noble and philosophically questioning, provides a further clue to Chaucer's goal here: "Chaucer's intention must surely have been to make a philosophical poem out of Boccaccio's epic."[2] He cautions us that the approach found most helpful to him has been to view this tale as a comedic venture:

> to see it as a venture in comedy, specifically high comedy. . . that is, comedy, the essential purpose of which is serious and philosophical. High comedy is a means of understanding and it uses laughter as a tool by which to reveal folly and thus to show how it may be avoided.[3]

He also views the story as a means employed by the Knight to instruct his own son and lead him to the idea of Christian chivalry. Hopefully, the result of all this will be to

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[1] Ibid., p. 56.

[2] Bernard F. Huppé, A Reading of the Canterbury Tales (New York: State University of New York, 1964), p. 50.

[3] Ibid., p. 54.

provide some serious reflections on the virtues and characteristics most desired in a true noble leader of men. The moral lesson is Chaucer's standard medieval view: "that Faith leads to Charity and that in Charity man triumphs over Fortune; conversely, that any other love is self-directed, leads away from God and thus to fatal enslavement."[1]

Terry Jones, the "devil's advocate" in this enterprise, provides the most divergent view of all those encountered. For Jones, the idea of pity plays little part in the Knight's chivalric codes; he stresses this point by an enumeration of the violent details that prevail in the fight between Palamon and Arcite in the grove and subsequently in the lists and also the utter destruction of Thebes by Theseus. He also notes that Chaucer has omitted from his version any of the kindnesses indicated by Boccaccio in the Teseida, namely, their courteous treatment as prisoners, the skill of their combat in the glade and the limited modification of the tournament rules by Theseus. For Jones, looking to Boccaccio, sees that the greatest love in the poem is the mutual one which Palamon and Arcite have. Jupiter he views as a tyrant prince, and The Knight's Tale he speaks of thus:

> In The Knight's Tale, he presents a chivalric romance, seen through the eyes of a mercenary captain, which consequently turns into a hymn to tyranny--just as the mercenaries themselves had become the mainstay of the modern tyrant.[2]

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[1] Ibid., p. 57.

[2] Jones, p. 222.

By far the most valued source for background as well as critical commentary is found in the work of John P. McCall. He, too, stresses the indebtedness which Chaucer had to Ovid, Virgil and Statius. He regards Chaucer as one poet who saw himself as an integral segment of the great narrative tradition in poetry stretching back to antiquity itself:

> He honored those old "appreved stories," "the tales of loves that were true and false, newly begun or lately won; tales of casual love or "love of stel"; tales of discord, of jealousy, of feigned repair and trickery. He knew and loved them. And second, he reworked them with a purpose which was broadly moral and from a stance of sympathetic irony toward the ways people behave on the crazily ordered pilgrimage of life.[1]

Chaucer has painted a double picture of earthly love and his comment/, "Now in the crope, non doun in the breres,/ Now up, now doun, as boket in a welle," truly reflects the conditions in which lovers find themselves. In this tale, McCall advises, Chaucer has reworked the broad myth of Boccaccio in order to provide a picture of a chivalric ideal. He gives added useful commentary on the basic structure of the tale itself:

> All these [opening] events are compressed into the first 140 lines of the narrative and they constitute, as it were, a prologue to the tale. . . . these events will be balanced by the actions which conclude the tale.[2]

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[1]John P. McCall, Chaucer Among the Gods: The Poetics of Classical Myth (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979), p. 17.

[2]Ibid., p. 64.

The introductory passage he views as an excellent preparation for the mythological theater prepared by Theseus. McCall views Theseus as the ideal leader who can balance the forces of justice, wisdom and mercy. The concupiscible appetite in the view of medieval morality is the force responsible for the narrative of events in the story. This he explains as "the human instinct 'to have' or to possess what is attractive."[1]

Theseus grows within the story toward the moral ideal of all good rulers. Though he does not attain the ideal, his efforts evince constant attempts to do so. Near the end, Theseus' final speech exerts more of an appeal to life rather than death:

> Theseus' philosophical discourse--drawn from Boethius--both countervails and encompasses the wisdom of Egeus' speech. It addresses itself to life rather than to death; in mythical terms its words are jovial rather and saturnine, prudent but joyous.[2]

The Knight-narrator of the story, who followed chivalry, finds in Theseus a noble ruler who learns as he progresses and, even as the characters of ancient classics would, also heeds the words of his sire, Egeus. Near the end of his discussion, McCall remarks:

> Taken in isolation, the story of Palamon and Arcite leads to tragedy. . . . But this view is lightened

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[1] Ibid., p. 70.

[2] Ibid., p. 81.

> by the world around it--encompassed and made whole by Theseus' benevolence and nature's love.[1]

His reemphasis on the characteristics of gods and goddesses of antiquity, his intelligent and highly readable description of the elements in many of Chaucer's other works, presents the most comprehensive background one would wish from a critic.

The last work perused was published only last year by Helen Cooper. She regards The Knight's Tale as a model one for all pilgrims to follow. The fine combination of romance and epic along with the epic range set by the first six lines compel this view. Our attention is again directed to the symmetrical arrangement of the story with the tripod of temples at the center. The parallellism of the two knights is stressed as is the philosophical observation that there is in reality no way of knowing how to achieve one's desires. She handles Chaucer's use of occupatio with great favor:

> Chaucer's use of occupatio, the device of describing something under the pretense of refusing to do so, is notorious, and has even been seen as satirical. This is not usually the case; he often uses the device to summarise a section of the Teseida that he does not wish to give in full, and the figure can be strikingly effective for conveying a sense of richness of background, as if the poet finds even describing the tip of the iceberg overwhelming.[2]

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[1] Ibid., p. 123.

[2] Helen Cooper, The Structure of the Canterbury Tales (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1984), p. 105.

The use of vernacular language balances the high style of the work by giving to it a deeper decorum "appropriate to the greater reach of The Knight's Tale." Finally, she concludes: "If The Knight's Tale sets a standard for the rest, it does not pretend to give a definitive view of the world and those who live in it."[1]

Thus this brief survey of critical commentary can furnish almost every reader with sufficient motivation for a positive reaction to this first of The Canterbury Tales. Our sampling has been drawn primarily from twentieth century reactions most of which were written over the past thirty years. Whether our approval arises from the decorousness of the poetry mentioned by Mackail, or the symmetry alluded to by Muscatine and others, or the consistent counterpointing of human and divine which Neuse avers, or the noble life theme favored by Blake, or the philosophical poem stressed by Huppé, does not really matter. The overwhelming approval for The Knight's Tale has certainly not abated over the years. Such acclaim from so diverse a range of critics can only ensue from a literary work of singular intrinsic merit.

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[1]Ibid., p. 107.

CHAPTER III

THE CHARACTER OF THESEUS

Finally we come to The Knight's Tale itself. To me, The Knight's Tale appears as a philosophical mini-epic based on love with Theseus as the central figure. It possesses enduring philsophical significance because of the nature of the questions it raises.

One handbook on literature defines the epic as follows:

> A long narrative poem in elevated style presenting characters of high position in a series of adventures which form an organic whole through their relation to a central figure of heroic proportions and through their development of episodes important to the history of a nation or race.[1]

This same source notes some of the following as common characteristics of this type work: (1) the hero should rightfully be an individual of national import; (2) the vast setting or scope of the poem should cover great nations, the world or the universe; (3) the action comprises deeds of great valor; (4) supernatural forces such as gods or angels frequently intervene from time to time; and (5) a style of

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[1] William Flint Thrall, Addison Hibbard, and C. Hugh Holman, A Handbook to Literature (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), pp. 174-75.

sustained elevation and grand simplicity is used.[1]

Most of the classical epics are comprised of twelve segments or books. Chaucer's use here of a four-part division considerably reduces the length of his work to some 2246 or 2250 lines, and this causes me to regard the poem as a mini-epic. While the scope of this work specifically focuses on the ancient cities of Athens and Thebes, some inherent philosophical observations relate to the world in general and mankind in particular. There is abundant action, interaction and interference by such gods and goddesses as Mars, Diana, Venus, Jupiter and Saturn. Finally, the central figure of the tale, the "Prime-Mover" as one critic calls him, is Duke Theseus himself; and he will form the subject of the major part of this segment. What I would like to do is to trace his actions throughout the tale as they reveal his character in relation to plot development.

The opening five lines of the poem pose a clue to the elevated style that appears throughout:

> Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,
> Ther was a duc that highte Theseus.
> Of Atthenes he was lord and governour,
> And in his tyme swich a conquerour,
> That gretter was there noon under the sonne.[2]

With this introduction of the hero, the Knight proceeds to

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[1] Ibid.

[2] John H. Fisher, ed., The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), pp. 25-56. References hereafter cited within the text by line number.

tell of Theseus' most recent conquest of the Amazons who had been led by their queen Hypolita. Returning in triumph to Athens, Theseus is confronted by a group of wailing women. His first reaction is one of supreme annoyance:

> "What folk been ye, that at myn homcomynge
> Perturben so my feste with criynge?"
> Quod Theseus. "Have ye so greet envye
> Of myn honour, that thus compleyne and crye?
> The Knight's Tale, 905-8

He further seeks to know how these women have been wronged, "And telleth me if it may been amended, / And why that ye been clothed thus in blak" (910-11). Learning that the despicable King Creon has denied proper burial to their menfolk, the noble duke, now moved to pity,

> . . . swoor his ooth, as he was trewe knyght,
> He wolde doon so ferforthly his myght
> Upon the tiraunt Creon hem to wreke.
> The Knight's Tale, 959-61

The nobleman acts with dispatch to avenge the sacrilege and cruelty of Creon. Foregoing his triumphal return to Athens, he sends his family entourage to the city and goes forth to lead his troops to triumph over Creon. Moved with compassion, his instantaneous response has resulted in the defeat of Creon and the soothing of the Theban widows. This noble deed of Theseus also unleashes the first of a chain of events relating to the love plot.

Soon thereafter, pillagers on the battlefield discover two royal cousins Arcite and Palamon among the heap of dead bodies. Theseus, learning their identity as

Theben royalty, spares their lives but condemns them to eternal prison:

> Out of the taas the pilours han hem torn,
> And han hem caried softe unto the tente
> Of Theseus, and he ful soone hem sente
> To Atthenes, to dwellen in prisoun
> Perpetuelly--he nolde no raunsoun.
> The Knight's Tale, 1020-24

As a conqueror Theseus could have ordered their immediate execution. Here, however, he displays the quality of mercy in extending the gift of life to two erstwhile foes.

As the plot advances, Palamon and Arcite see Theseus' sister-in-law Emelya walking in the palace garden, and both fall immediately in love with her. Thus begins the resultant strife between the two.

Theseus' next decision emerges when his bosom friend Perotheus, who is also a close friend of Arcite, arrives for a state visit. The steadfast bond of love for the two nobles is thus described:

> 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 that oon was deed, soothly to telle,
> His felawe wente and soughte hym doun in helle--.
> The Knight's Tale, 1196-200

Responding favorably to his blood-brother Perotheus' request for the release of Arcite, Theseus makes only one condition:

> That if so were that Arcite were yfounde
> Evere in his lif, by day or nyght or stounde,
> In any contree of this Theseus,
> And he were caught, it was acorded thus,
> That with a swerd he sholde lese his heed.
> Ther nas noon oother remedie ne reed,

But taketh his leve, and homward he him spedde.
Lat hym be war. His nekke lith to wedde.
The Knight's Tale, 1211-18.

The sole condition of the release is important. Since Theseus had already spared Arcite's life once, he required this surety as a mark of good faith from a former royal prisoner. Yet this release of Arcite has another effect on the love triangle.

Part two of the poem provides the first significant intervention by a god--Mercury. After a year in Thebes, Arcite, still smitten with "hereos" or love of Emelye, while sleeping envisions the god Mercury who

seyde hym thus, "To Atthenes shaltou wende,
Ther is thee shapen of thy wo an ende."
The Knight's Tale, 1391-92

Heeding Mercury's advice, Arcite in disguise returns to Athens and soon secures employment as Emily's chamberlain. Because of his competence, gentility and renown as Philostrate, Theseus out of charity makes him a squire of his own chamber:

And thre yeer in this wise his lif he ladde,
And bar hym so, in pees and eek in werre,
Ther was no man that Theseus hath derre.
The Knight's Tale, 1446-48

Thus Philostrate progresses in Theseus' service over a three year period.

Palamon, meanwhile, after his seven year's isolation, decides,

in the nyght thanne wolde he take his way
To Thebes-ward, his freendes for to preye

On Theseus to helpe hym to werreye.
And shortly, outher he wolde lese his lif,
Or wynnen Emelye unto his wyf.
This is th'effect and his entente pleyn.
The Knight's Tale, 1482-87

By chance, the two suitors meet in a glade and engage in combat on the following day.

Theseus, an avid hunter, approaches this grove during the ferocious struggle of the two knights. Reacting at once:

This duc his courser with his spores smoot,
And at a stert he was bitwix hem two,
And pulled out a swerd and cride, "Hoo!
Namoore, up peyne of lesynge of youre heed!
By myghty Mars, he shal anon be deed
That smyteth any strook that I may seen.
The Knight's Tale, 1704-9

As a true representative of knightly nobility, Theseus, disregarding any imminent danger, calls an immediate halt to this violent fray. His instantaneous intervention at great personal risk is as apparent as his extreme annoyance at their illegal incursion onto his land.

When Palamon confesses both his own and Arcite's identity, Theseus becomes enraged:

Youre owene mouth, by youre confessioun,
Hath dampned yow, and I wol it recorde.
It nedeth noght to pyne yow with the corde.
Ye shall be deed, by myghty Mars the rede!"
The Knight's Tale, 1744-47

His fury is unabated. Glad to forego interrogation by torture, he declares their immediate death. Yet here again Theseus accedes to the pleas and weeping of all the ladies

in the entourage. The range of his emotional outburst is thus described:

> For pitee renneth soone in gentil herte.
> And though he first for ire quook and sterte,
> He hath considered shortly, in a clause,
> The trespas of hem bothe, and eek the cause,
> And although that his ire hir gilt accused,
> Yet in his resoun he hem bothe excused,
> As thus: he thoghte wel that every man
> Wol helpe hymself in love, if that he kan,
> And eek delivere hymself out of prisoun.
>
> The Knight's Tale, 1761-69

Theseus' original sentence of death is understandable. His land has been abused and his trust violated by two youths who thus far owed their very existence to his mercy and compassion. The duke's gentleness is equally obvious. Though enraged at first, on consideration he is moved to pity. His ire had promulgated the death sentence, but as a nobleman his reason prevailed.

This passage also shows the trait of humanitas in the Duke. A seasoned warrior and ruler, he well understands the plight of youth, especially youth in love. He muses to himself that everyone will attempt to free himself from prison and everyone will also try to aid himself in any matter of the heart. Next he speaks of the qualities of a lord or king:

> "Fy
> Upon a lord that wol have no mercy,
> But been a leon, bothe in word and dede,
> To hem that been in repentaunce and drede,
> As well as to a proud, despitous man
> That wol mayntene that he first bigan.
> That lord hath litel of discrecioun,

Than in swich cas kan no divisioun,
But weyeth pride and humblesse after oon."
The Knight's Tale, 1773-81

In his view a ruler or king who, through blatant obstinacy, refuses to change his mind or opinion or fails to show mercy to those who have exhibited true penitence for an offense is nothing more than a mere despot. One who fails to distinguish between pride and humility is truly blind and can in no way merit respect or allegiance from any subject. The true king or nobleman, then, must be understanding, merciful and forgiving. Such a view can only come to one who has learned through the dire school of experience in leading or lordship. It is not really an ingrained or inherited trait. It requires clear thought and sound reason to ply the craft of leadership.

Of equal import, however, is his discussion of the lovers' dilemma of Palamon and Arcite. This strikes at the core of the theme of the whole poem. Let us look to the initial segment of this discourse:

"The god of love, a, benedicite!
How myghty and how greet a lord is he!
Ayeyns his myght ther gayneth none obstacles.
He may be cleped a god for his myracles,
For he kan maken, at his owene gyse,
Of everich herte as that hym list divyse.
The Knight's Tale, 1785-90

In Theseus' view, love is rightfully considered as a god since there are really no obstacles in his path. The lover, viewing the object of his desires or affection, refuses to see impediments along the way. The god of love can make one

who is so afflicted do as his inclinations urge without regard to the consequences. To illustrate this further Theseus alludes to the case at hand. Palamon and Arcite, both mortal enemies of Theseus and former blood-brothers, defy all obstacles merely to attain the fulfillment of their desires--Emelye. Theseus reaffirms that he has had power of life and death over them, yet, because of love, they show "an heigh folye," by returning to Athens and risking death at his hands.

The next segment of his remarks on this merits repetition:

> "Who may been a fool but if he love?
> Bihoold, for Goddes sake that sit above,
> Se how they blede! Be they noght wel arrayed?
> Thus hath hir lord, the god of love, ypayed
> Hir wages and hir fees for hir servyse!
> And yet they wenen for to been ful wyse
> That serven love, for aught that may bifalle.
> The Knight's Tale, 1799-1805

Let us look at the two knights before us. How foolish they now seem. Let us look at their wounds; the blood exudes. Look also at their knightly equipment. Consider the extent of their injuries despite this equipment. Yet this is how love repays them for his service. Such is the mystery in the enterprise of love that the lover is completely heedless of any evil consequence.

To Theseus, however, the supreme irony arises in this:

> But this is yet the beste game of alle,
> That she for whom they han this jolitee

Kan hem therfore as muche thank as me.
She woot namoore of al this hoote fare,
By God, than woot a cokkow or an hare!
The Knight's Tale, 1806-10

The object of both youths' desires, Emelye, the maiden for whom they have risked everything including life itself, is as unknowing and innocent as a rabbit or a cuckoo. Both Palamon and Arcite are attempting to kill one another for the love of a maiden who knows them not. It is no wonder that Theseus regards this as "the beste game of alle."

Yet, he continues, we must look at all sides of the question. Confessing through the area of his own experience to his remote service of love and honestly admitting to the pain he bore, he forgives this transgression of his direct commands on condition that:

ye shul bothe anon unto me swere
That nevere mo ye shal my contree dere,
Ne make werre upon me nyght ne day,
But been my freendes in al that ye may.
I yow foryeve this trespas every deel.
The Knight's Tale, 1821-25

This certainly shows the extent of his empathy for youth and for love.

Theseus closes this part of The Knight's Tale with a decision for a knightly tournament to be held one year hence where each suitor will bring one hundred knights with him to aid his pursuit of Emelye's hand:

This is to seyn, that wheither he or thow
May with his hundred, as I spak of now,
Sleen his contrarie, or out of lystes dryve,
Thanne shal I yeve Emelya to wyve

To whom that Fortune yeveth so fair a grace.
The Knight's Tale, 1857-61

The final contest shall be a tourney, and the victorious side can claim the hand of Emelye for his knight.

Part Three of The Knight's Tale focuses on a vivid description of the construction of the lists during the intervening time. Theseus' largesse or munificence in providing such facilities receives mention:

the dispence
Of Theseus, that gooth so bisily
To maken up the lystes roially,
That swich a noble theatre as it was,
I dar wel seyn in this world ther nas.
The Knight's Tale, 1882-86

His demand for excellence in construction and artistry knew no bounds. We find more pictorial details on the construction of the three temples to Venus, Diana and Mars, the interior murals depicting activities both human and divine associated with each deity, the retinues of the two knights and the kings allied with each, and Theseus' bountiful reception and provisions for the warriors and their guests. This segment of the poem concentrates heavily on the three heavenly beings Venus, Diana and Mars and the prayers raised to them by Palamon, Emelye and Arcite. The final fragment of this part furnishes a good description of strife among the gods:

And right anon swich strif ther is bigonne,
For thilke grauntyng, in the hevene above,
Bitwixe Venus, the goddesse of love,
And Mars, the stierne god armypotente,
That Juppiter was bisy it to stente,

Til that the pale Saturnus the colde,
That knew so manye of aventures olde,
Foond in his olde experience an art
That he ful soone hath plesed every part.
The Knight's Tale, 2438-46

"Saturnus the colde" will provide the ultimate solution to the lovers' quest. Let us remember that Saturn has a wide range of experience in many areas. The Knight-narrator pays tribute to the learning and experience of all such elders in the next few lines:

As sooth is seyd, elde hath greet avantage;
In elde is bothe wysdom and usage:
Men may the olde atrenne, and noght atrede.
Saturne anon, to stynten strif and drede,
Al be it that it is agayn his kynde,
Of al this strif he gan remedie fynde.
The Knight's Tale, 2447-52

This idea of respect for elders finds its counterpart in some of the epics of Greece and Rome and will come into focus again during the last part of this poem in connection with Theseus' aged father Egeus.

Part Four begins with a description of the celebrations in Athens on the day of the tournament. Duke Theseus first appears here in a window setting arrayed like a god on a throne to receive the obeisance of the people. A herald announces Theseus' modification of the rules for the tournament. His reason is given as follows:

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

Theseus, to avoid needless killing and prevent excessive injuries, prohibits the use of particular weapons and changes some of the rules of knightly combat. His purpose is the avoidance of unnecessary harm and a fair set of standards for both sides. Then, with the two principals on either side, Theseus leads the ride to the lists.

A ferocious combat ensues, and, in attempting to rescue Palamon, King Lycurgus falls while King Emetreus, wounded by Palamon, is also borne off the field. Following the specific regulations previously promulgated, Theseus cries:

> "Hoo! namoore, for it is doon!
> I wol be trewe juge, and no partie.
> Arcite of Thebes shal have Emelie,
> That by his fortune hath hire faire ywonne."
> The Knight's Tale, 2656-59

Now the deities enter the picture again. Pluto, on the request of Saturn, sends a furie out of the ground which unhorses Arcite and mortally wounds him. Theseus' tournament ends with the winner Arcite near death.

The feasting lasts for three days with Theseus well pleased with the valor displayed by all the knights. His role as peacemaker now emerges from the Knight's words:

> For which anon Duc Theseus leet crye,
> To stynten alle rancour and envye,
> The gree as wel of o syde as of oother,
> And eyther syde ylik as ootheres brother;
> And yaf hem yiftes after hir degree,
> And fully heeld a feeste dayes three,
> And convoyed the kynges worthily
> Out of his toun a journee largely.
> The Knight's Tale, 2731-38

Thus Theseus has upheld the chivalric tradition by restoring peace between the opposing forces.

After Arcite's death a mood of universal sorrow prevails. Hardest struck of all is Theseus who, in a tradition reminiscent of the Homeric epics, can receive solace only from the words of his own sire Egeus:

> No man myghte gladen Theseus,
> Savynge his olde fader Egeus,
> That knew this worldes transmutacioun,
> As he hadde seyn it chaunge bothe up and doun,
> Joye after wo, and wo after gladnesse,
> And shewed hem ensamples and liknesse.
> The Knight's Tale, 2837-42

This quote also strikes at one of the crucial philosophical questions within the tale: the endless puzzlement of life. The sequence of short-lived joy followed by sadness does seem to pervade existence. Egeus concludes with the remark:

> This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo,
> And we been pilgrymes, passynge to and fro.
> Deeth is an ende of every worldly soore.
> The Knight's Tale, 2847-49

It also relates directly to the questions raised by Boethius in his De Consolatione Philosophiae.

Theseus himself superintends the plans for Arcite's funeral which is held in the same grove in which the two young knights had fought. Such is Theseus' pity and generosity here that he spares no cost for the funeral and the games.

Several years thereafter Theseus, still eager to improve relations with other nations and to secure complete

obedience of the Thebans, convenes a parliament after which he summons Palamon and Emelye. His last speech in the poem reveals Theseus as a philosopher. Aware of humanity's constant search for the true meaning of life and aware also of the need for love as a unifying force in nature, he tells the assemblage that:

> That same Prince and that same Moevere," quod he,
> "Hath stabilissed in this wrecched world adoun
> Certeyn dayes and duracioun
> To al that is engendred in this place,
> Over the whiche day they may nat pace,
> Al mowe they yet tho dayes wel abregge.
> The Knight's Tale, 2994-99

Using illustrations from nature, he reminds us all that each being must die. Such is the plan of God--Jupiter. He continues:

> "Thanne is it wysdom, as it thynketh me,
> To maken vertu of necessitee,
> And take it weel that we may nat eschue,
> And namely that to us alle is due.
> The Knight's Tale, 3041-44

> Why grucchen we, why have we hevynesse,
> That good Arcite, of chivalrie flour,
> Departed is with duetee and honour
> Out of this foule prisoun of this lyf?
> Why grucchen heere his cosyn and his wyf
> Of his welfare, that loved hem so weel?
> The Knight's Tale, 3058-63

His conclusion reads:

> But after wo I rede us to be merye,
> And thanken Juppiter of al his grace.
> And er that we departen from this place
> I rede we make of sorwes two
> O parfit joye, lastynge everemo.
> The Knight's Tale, 3068-72

So Theseus uses a philosophical approach to the problems encountered during life. Let us use our time on earth to

best advantage. Do not bemoan the loss of a gallant knight who dies before his deeds have been forgotten. Be thankful, he advises, that we could enjoy his presence for as long as we did. In our present situation, let us try to take from two sorrows something of advantage for all. In resolving the love problem of the story, he gives Palamon as husband to Emelye:

> Syn he hath served yow so many a yeer,
> And had for yow so greet adversitee,
> It moste been considered, leeveth me,
> For gentil mercy oghte to passen right.
> The Knight's Tale, 3086-89

To Palamon he remarks:

> "I trowe ther nedeth litel sermonyng
> To make yow assente to this thyng.
> Com neer, and taak youre lady by the hond."
> The Knight's Tale, 3091-93

With these final words Theseus leaves the scene, and The Knight's Tale ends on the felicitous thought of a successful marriage for the two lovers after all their previous travail.

Thus from his initial entry in the prologue to the tale, Theseus is seen in many lights: as a conquering warrior, a compassionate lord, a merciful captor, a steadfast friend, a charitable employer, a nobleman who allows reason to govern his irascible impulses, a guardian of chivalry, a humanist, and a just and learned philosopher. Many of his earlier actions, done with the best of intentions, possess a definite double effect. An immediate good result usually flows from a noble act or decision, but it

can also cause an adverse situation to arise. The duality of consequences resulting from acts of nobility and courage lies heavily on the dilemma of existence. Only in Theseus' final solution is this duality overcome. The marriage of Palamon and Emelye certainly rekindles the fires of their love and also ameliorates the lingering enmity of Athens and Thebes.

This character study of Theseus serves as only one method of approach to be used in a study of The Knight's Tale. Several other questions that underlie the action remain unanswered, especially the puzzlement of love and the ultimate meaning of life. How is one to sort these out? Perhaps Chaucer did not provide an answer since he felt that the two problems could not be readily answered except by faith in a life hereafter.

Other elements may be examined in this same way and variant approaches used hopefully with the same ultimate goal, that of deeper understanding and appreciation for such an excellent work. Perhaps I should return to my original question: On what basis can I explain the consistent personal appeal that The Knight's Tale has for me? It is neither the characters, the action, the plot nor the theme alone that justifies this. It is rather a combination of all these elements.

Perhaps the answer can be expressed better in another way. Several years ago, while delivering the

Presidential Address to the Classics Association in Great Britain, John William Mackail remarked:

> . . . we must think of the Classics as those writings in which human language has been used to the best purpose and with the utmost perfection; and of classical studies as the studies which interpret and are in turn interpreted by these writings. Or to put the same thing differently, we may find the warrant for calling anything a classic to which we find ourselves perpetually returning, and which we perpetually find, on returning to it, even greater than we thought.[4]

Chaucer's Knight's Tale lives not only in the fourteenth century but today. For each time that I have the opportunity to read this work I discover an added insight, a new twist, a witticism, an irony, a sombre thought that gives added meaning and purpose to life itself. To me, this tale portrays man not only as he was and is, but as he can be. And that I submit is the true meaning of a classic or any other work of consummate art.

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[1]John William Mackail, Classical Studies, Essay Index Reprint Series (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1925; reprint ed., 1968), p. 192.

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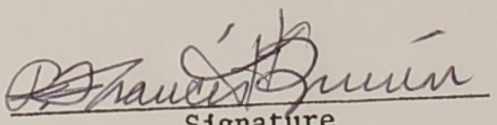

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A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE KNIGHT'S TALE OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER

A thesis submitted to the Graduate School of
Drew University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Letters

Patrick Francis Quinn
Drew University
Madison, New Jersey
1985

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CHAPTER I

THE KNIGHT'S TALE OF GEOFFREY CHAUCER

The Knight's Tale has long been one of my favorite stories not only in the Chaucerian canon but within the whole realm of literature itself. Perhaps this attraction results from the plot, the characterization, the language, the setting, or the theme. Yet, too, it may arise from a combination of all these. Thus, when the requirement for a final essay in this program presented itself, a study of The Knight's Tale seemed a logical choice. Hopefully this critical survey and analysis will focus on one of these elements and aid my own understanding of this tale's lasting appeal.

Many years ago, many more, in fact, than I would care to number, I recall an introductory essay in the old College Survey of English Literature that defined literature as "the enduring expression of significant human experience in words well chosen and arranged." Few of us can quarrel with that.

But what has this to do with Geoffrey Chaucer and The Knight's Tale? To me, Chaucer serves as the keystone of our own literary heritage for three very important reasons. A paramount reason must be the use of his native

dialect for poetic expression. As George Lyman Kittredge has stated:

> Finally,--and this was of prime importance,--Chaucer was born in London. His native dialect was that which was to become, in the natural course of events, the English of literature. And it was a critical moment, when nothing was needed to determine the tendency but a poet of commanding genius. Chaucer did not make the English language. His service was to write the Midland dialect with an ease, a polish and a regularity which commanded immediate and unanimous admiration, and to use it as the vehicle for first-rate poetry. Nothing more was needed. Those who came after him had now an accepted standard.[1]

The second reason is his invention of the decasyllabic couplet in English, a perfect metre for narrative work. J. W. Mackail has remarked of this:

> Chaucer had already proved his own narrative gift and his mastery over the manipulation of verse for the purpose of narration. He had invented in the decasyllabic couplet a metre of complete fitness for this purpose. It gave to verse composition a flexibility and range comparable to that gained for architecture by the introduction of the pointed arch.[2]

The third reason comes from T. S. Eliot. In response to his own question, "What Is a Classic?" he enumerates several specifications, among which we find comprehensiveness which he explains thus:

> The classic must, within its formal limitations, express the maximum possible of the whole range of feeling which represents the character of the

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[1] George Lyman Kittredge, Chaucer and His Poetry (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), p. 7.

[2] John William Mackail, The Springs of Helicon: A Study in the Progress of English Poetry from Chaucer to Milton (New York: Longmans, Green, 1909), p. 43.

> people who speak that language. It will represent this at its best, and it will also have the widest appeal; among the people to which it belongs, it will find its response among all classes and conditions of men.[1]

To put it more simply: humanitas, the human condition. Chaucer speaks of man as none have done before and few have done since.

What can we say of the life of this man Chaucer? Born circa 1340 to a wealthy wine-merchant family, Chaucer lived in a time that was as plagued with difficulties as our own. During his lifetime the Black Plague ravaged Europe; economic disasters were frequent; social unrest appeared; the Hundred Years' War with France raged; and religious dissension resulted in the Great Schism within the Church and the division of the Papacy.

Much of Chaucer's adult life was spent in various capacities in the king's service. Some of these missions required frequent trips to France and Italy. His royal service encompasses the reigns of three English monarchs: Edward III, Richard II, and Henry IV. Many feel that his special insight into human nature resulted directly from his association with people from all walks of life. Of his family and economic background, Kittredge remarked:

> It is vastly fortunate that Chaucer was born high enough in the social scale not to need holy orders as a means of escape from cramping circumstances.

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[1]Thomas Stearns Eliot, On Poetry and Poets (New York: Octagon, 1975), p. 69.

> Otherwise, a great poet would have been spoiled to make an indifferent parson. He would still have been a poet, and patrons would not have failed him, but he could not have comprehended the world, or "had his life in his time." It is equally fortunate that Chaucer was not born an aristocrat; for then he would not have understood the lower orders, but would have lived and died the poet of chivalric love. We might have had the Troilus, but we should lack the Canterbury Tales.[1]

One extremely important work of Chaucer is the Canterbury Tales. In attempting to reflect the life and times of his day, he used as a framework the journey of a group of pilgrims from every level of society to the shrine of Saint Thomas à Becket at Canterbury Cathedral. These men and women represented the whole spectrum of English life: some noble, some coarse, some witty, some pious. Though the portraits are highly individual, they are also typical. And the stories the pilgrims tell are as varied as the pilgrims themselves. Kittredge further explains that the sight of pilgrims would be very familiar to Chaucer, and, in all probability, he went on a Canterbury pilgrimage himself.[2] The pilgrim we shall focus on here is the Knight and the tale he tells.

Terry Jones mentions three specific divisions or groups within medieval society: the priests, the knights, and the labourers. A sermon delivered by Master Thomas

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[1] Kittredge, p. 5.

[2] Ibid., p. 149.

Wimbledon to the congregation of St. Paul's Cross explains the function of each:

> To the priesthood it falls to cut away the dead branches of sin with the sword of their tongues. To the knighthood, it falls to prevent wrongs and thefts being done, and to maintain God's law and those that are teachers of it, and also to save the land from the enemies from other lands. And to the labourers it falls to work with their bodies and by their sore sweat to get out of the earth the bodily sustenance for themselves and the others.[1]

Thus for medieval society each of the three estates had clearly delineated roles.

With this as background, we may look now at Chaucer's description of the Knight from the General Prologue:

> A KNYGHT ther was, and that a worthy man,
> That fro the tyme that he first bigan
> To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
> Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.
> Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre,
> And thereto hadde he riden, no man ferre,
> As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse,
> And evere honoured for his worthynesse.
> At Alisaundre he was whan it was wonne.
> Ful ofte tyme he hadde the bord bigonne
> Aboven alle nacions in Pruce.
> In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,
> No Cristen man so ofte of his degree.
> In Gernade at the seege eek hadde he be
> Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarye.
> At Lyeys was he and at Satalye,
> Whan they were wonne, and in the Grete See
> At many a noble armee hadde he be.
> At mortal batailles hadde he been fiftene,
> And foughten for oure feith at Tramyssene
> In lystes thries, and ay slayn his foo.

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[1] Terry Jones, Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), p. 10.

> This ilke worthy knyght hadde been also
> Somtyme with the lord of Palatye
> Agayn another hethen in Turkye,
> And everemoore he hadde a sovereyn prys.
> And though that he were worthy, he was wys,
> And of his port as meeke as is a mayde.
> He nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde
> In al his lyf unto no maner wight.
> He was a verray, parfit, gentil knyght.
> But for to tellen yow of his array,
> His hors weren goode, but he was nat gay.
> Of fustian he wered a gypoun
> Al bismotered with his habergeoun,
> For he was late ycome from his viage,
> And wente for to doon his pilgrymage.
> General Prologue, 43-78

This Knight's love of "chivalrie, Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie" resulted in his recognition for "worthynesse" in both Christian and heathen lands. The enumerated successful campaigns in Alisaundre, Pruce, Lettow and Ruce, together with the engagements at Gernade, Algezir, Belmarye, etc., all testify to his fortitude and valour on the field of battle. These and other favorable considerations entitle this pilgrim to the respect accorded by most critics. On this point John M. Manly has observed:

> Knighthood was no longer a mere feudal obligation, it had become an ever-alluring ideal; men fought not because they must, but because they might; and the conditions of the time gave to the ideal all the inspiration of religious fervor and all the enticements of contact with the unknown, the mysterious, the unsearchable.[1]

Manly also believes that Chaucer's knight was probably between sixty and sixty-five years of age and enjoyed a

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[1] John M. Manly, "A Knight Ther Was," in Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 47.

singular reputation.[1] Concerning Chaucer's description of this pilgrim, Manly remarks that "Chaucer was painting no picture of fancy, but giving us a figure at once realistic and typical of the noble and adventurous idealists of the day."[2]

In another essay, Joerg A. Fichte has remarked that the knight thus described seems slightly anachronistic by the standards of the late fourteenth century. He alludes to the following conditions on the waning of the chivalric code as they were expressed by Eustache Deschamps, a contemporary of Chaucer: the knighting of many youths by age 10 or 12; their idling away of the hours by eating, drinking, sleeping and resting well and praising the sins of the flesh; their frequent participation in robbery and pillage; and their open disrespect of the Church and religion.[3]

Terry Jones' thoroughly documented, scholarly work takes a diametrically opposite view to that of most critics toward the knight in the General Prologue. He regards the knight as a ruthless mercenary soldier who, despite his successful campaigns on foreign soil, had never once fought to protect his own land.[4] He continues further:

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[1] Ibid., p. 56.

[2] Ibid., pp. 58-59.

[3] Joerg O. Fichte, "Man's Free Will and the Poet's Choice: The Creation of Artistic Order in Chaucer's Knight's Tale," Anglia 93 (1975): 335-60.

[4] Jones, p. 98.