

## Acknowledgement

The pilgrimage, as Chaucer reminds us, is as important as the destination. My academic life at UNC culminates with this thesis: I would like to use this space to thank those who have helped me along the way.

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## I. Introduction

Medieval man, as C.S. Lewis reminds us, “was not a dreamer nor a wanderer,” but “an organizer, a codifier, a builder of systems” (10). He believed not in chaos or randomness, but in universal order. “God hath creat alle thynges,” Chaucer’s Parson says in his tale, “in right ordre, and no thyng withouten ordre, but alle thynges been ordeyned and nombred” (X.218). One need not look further than the Ptolemaic model of the universe to get a sense of medieval man’s conception of the universe. This geocentric model is a complex array of perfect spheres, each one charting the orbit of a planet around the Earth. *Primum Mobile*—“first moved”—is the outermost sphere in the model, setting everything in motion. Ptolemy no doubt associated *Primum Mobile* with pagan gods. Medieval man thought of God. When we read, therefore, of the Black Death, and of the limited accounts of it in Froissart and Chaucer, we need not be surprised that medieval man accepted the plague as divine punishment. God set the universe in motion; everything was as He ordered it.

Yet order did not persist in the medieval world, especially during Chaucer’s lifetime. As Marion Turner writes: “[t]he years in which Chaucer produced the bulk of his opus were years of extraordinary upheaval in the country as a whole, and in London in particular” (5). Chaucer, then, was situated on a societal divide: “on the divide between a world conceived in terms of a stable and God-given feudal hierarchy, and a society disrupted and energized” (Cooper, 6). *The Canterbury Tales*, I believe, documents this divide: it articulates the societal anxiety of an unordered world while simultaneously denying the possibility of social order and harmony. We see this, for example, in Harry Bailey’s protestation of the Miller’s telling a tale and upsetting the hierarchical order. We also see it in the tales of the Man of Law, Clerk, Physician, Parson, and Knight. This essay focuses on the Knight and his tale.

As established in Ramon Lull's *Book of the Order of Chivalry*, knighthood was meant to instill order where there was none: to "pacify the province," in the words of John of Salisbury, the secretary of Thomas Beckett (Miller, 177). In a romanticized reading, knights do just that. But in *The Knight's Tale* knights fail to uphold order and even incite chaos. This is not in and of itself shocking: Chaucer characterizes knights as aggressive throughout the *Tales*, particularly in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, in which a knight rapes a young woman. What is shocking is the extent to which *The Knight's Tale* devalues knighthood as an instrument of order: Theseus, ostensibly the apotheosis of chivalrous knighthood, fails to uphold order, incites chaos, and, most embarrassingly, tries to comfort his polity by philosophizing that there is divine order in perceived worldly chaos. The result of this is striking: the *Tale*—supposedly a justification of chivalrous knighthood told by a perfect knight—subverts the goal of knighthood. In this essay I argue against the gradient of benign and optimistic readings of the Knight and his tale and contend that Chaucer's knights reflect the inability of medieval knighthood to order society. Further, I suggest that the *Tale* reveals Chaucer's deep belief in social antagonism. As Turner has persuasively argued, Chaucer "holds out no hope for social amelioration": his works deny the possibility of the ordered medieval worldview and insist that chaos governs the universe (5). This essay, which draws upon Turner's outstanding work, argues that *The Knight's Tale* does so most fervently, for it records the failure of one of the foremost institutions of societal order: chivalrous knighthood.

## II. The Dream of Order

The origin of chivalrous knighthood is complex. Historians often contend that it began in 1066, when the Normans invaded England and brought with them the concept of fighting on horseback. But it also may be traced back to the Anglo-Saxons in the ninth and tenth centuries:

“the martial qualities which defined twelfth-century chivalry were precisely the qualities which had been celebrated centuries before in such poems as the *Battle of Maldon*” and *Beowulf* (Saul, 12). This wide variance in time is perhaps most succinctly articulated in the words themselves: *knight* derives from the Old English word *cniht* whereas *chivalry* is most closely associated with the French word *chevalerie*.

Fourteenth-century knights and writers were not fully aware of such history and often conceived their own origin. In his popular *The Book of the Order of Chivalry*, Ramon Lull writes of a uniquely mythical origin:

When charity, loyalty, truth, justice, and verity failed in the world, then cruelty, injury, disloyalty and falseness arose. Therefore there was error and trouble in the world in which God had created man with the intention that He be known, loved, feared, served, and honored by man. When the world had fallen into wickedness, it was through fear that justice first returned to the honor which had been customary. And therefore the people were divided into groups of one thousand. And from each thousand was chosen one man [a knight] who more than all the others was most loyal, most noble in courage, best instructed, and best manner (Miller, 181).

This establishes chivalrous knighthood as an institution born out of a fear of disorder. The implication is that knights were and always will be instruments of order. Lull himself was a great apologist for chivalrous knighthood, and so we may reasonably assume he believed this. But *The Book of the Order of Chivalry*, as historian Richard Kaeuper recognizes, is lined with bitter critiques knighthood (277). After Lull completes the origin myth, in fact, he adopts a didactic tone:

You, O Squire, who wish to enter into the order of chivalry, be careful what you do. For when you become a knight you will receive the honor and the service that must be accorded to the friends of chivalry. And insofar as you will have a more noble origin and more honor, so much more are you sworn and bound to be good and pleasing to God, and also to the people. And if you are wicked, you are an enemy of chivalry, and contrary to its commandments and honors (Miller, 182).

Lull's proceeding description of each chivalric virtue follows the pattern established here: he praises the intention of knighthood and then preaches "against the vice [knighthood] corrects" (Kaeuper, 278). When viewed in light of this, Lull's *Book of the Order of Chivalry* reads less like an account of chivalry and more like a reformatory manual. Kaeuper argues that this is indeed the case: "the thrust of [Lull's] book is to reform chivalry by enlightening individual knights, by changing the way they think" (278).

That Lull perceives a need for reform, and that he centers much of his language on the issue of order, is notable; it suggests that knighthood in Lull's lifetime was failing as an institution of order. This, it seems, was a fairly widespread concern in the Middle Ages. Some writers, like Geoffroi de Charny and John Gower, thought knights lacked the character to instill order. In a baldly polemical chapter of his *Book of Chivalry* Charny denounces the cowardice of the knightly class:

And these wretched people are so afraid of dying that they cannot overcome their fear. As soon as they leave their abode, if they see a stone jutting out of the wall a little further than the others, they will never dare to pass beneath it, for it would always seem to them that it would fall on their heads (Kaeuper and Kennedy, 127).

Others recognized the inherent incongruity of the violence of knighthood and the desire for a more ordered world. Eustache Deschamps, a French poet whose works influenced Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *The Merchant's Tale*, writes of the destructive force of knighthood. No matter the specific grievance, the overall problem is the same: knighthood was failing as an institution of order, ostensibly because of the behavior of knights. As Archdeacon Peter of Blois observes: "The knighthood of to-day! Why, it consists of disorderly living" (Luchoire, 273). But Charny and Deschamps, though caustic, believe like Lull in the ultimate mutability of the institution of knighthood. Though the social reality of knighthood informs their writing, it does not persuade them that the ideal of knighthood is unattainable. Rather, the social reality inspires them: each writer—Lull in particular—trusts that he can reform chivalry and create a more orderly society.

This, perhaps, stems from the medieval conception of a divinely ordered universe, to which Lull alludes in his manual on chivalry: "Like the seven planets, which are the celestial bodies that govern the terrestrial bodies and put them in order, we are dividing this Book of Chivalry into seven parts to demonstrate that knights have honour and seigneurie over the people so as to put them in order and defend them" (63). The implications of this passage are astounding. The seven celestial bodies are the medieval planets: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and Moon. Medieval astrologers thought these planets affected earthly existence. The influence of the planets was profound: the astrological condition of the skies determined everything from the weather to an individual's temperament. The Wife of Bath, for instance, says that she is "al Venerien," but that her "herte is Marcien": planets that inspire, respectively, salacity and belligerence (III.609-610). Lull, then, is contending that knights reign over and determine the condition of society. Further, his metaphor places knights above humans

and just below God in the cosmic hierarchy. In the traditional hierarchy seen in the Ptolemaic model, *Primum mobile* sets in motion the seven planets which in turn influence humans; in Lull's hierarchy God inspires knights who then order the chaos of humanity. In this sense, the actions of knights are directly connected to God.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to remember that Lull is not referring to the actions of all knights but to the hypothetical actions of ideal knights. The point of the metaphor, and of the manual, is to demonstrate the intention of knighthood and to inspire the cowardly, violent, and otherwise insufficient knights to reform. The objective of reform—though unstated—is to create a harmonious universe in which humans live virtuously: for if God directs knights to correct the errors and chaos of humanity, then “charity, loyalty, truth, justice, and verity” will again arise in the world (Miller, 181). This is Lull's dream of order. It is not altogether different from other medieval conceptions of an ordered universe. Lull merely envisions knights as the instigators of order. They are the keys to order and harmony in a postlapsarian society.

### III. The Inability of Knights to Order in *The Knight's Tale*

Though he was a pragmatist—and not a blind admirer of chivalry like Froissart—Lull failed to see that the “ideals [of chivalrous knighthood] may not have been fully compatible with the ideal of a more ordered and peaceful society” (Kaeuper, 4). Chaucer, in many of his writings, but especially in *The Knight's Tale*, recognizes that even an ideal knight can do nothing to ameliorate the conflicts of society. In *Chaucer, Langland, and the Creative Imagination* David Aers posits that *The Knight's Tale* is “a most illuminating scrutiny of the versions of order, styles of thought and life embodied in Theseus” (174-175). The order of Theseus, and of

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<sup>1</sup> This was not uncommon in the Middle Ages. Many writers perceive a connection between knights and God. For example, in his political treatise *Policraticus*, John of Salisbury writes of the oath of chivalry: “the soldiery of arms not less than the spiritual soldiery is bound by the requirements of its official duties to the sacred service and worship of God” (Miller, 176). We also find in ceremonial blessings of arms a distinctly spiritual conception of knighthood: see Miller, 171-173.

the *Tale*, according to Aers, is Martian. The chaos we perceive, then, is merely the order of Mars. Aers' work, though positioned as a break from the scholarship of Charles Muscatine, is nonetheless tethered to Muscatine's notion that the *Tale* depicts the order of Theseus. I wish to diverge from Muscatine's ideas and argue that the *Tale* shows Theseus trying and failing to impose order on chaotic material.

My analysis focuses on the narrative, and not the structure, of the *Tale*. The structure, as many scholars have shown, is as ordered as the Ptolemaic model of the universe.<sup>2</sup> Yet Chaucer, throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, questions the Knight's ability to order society. The Miller's "quite" of *The Knight's Tale* is the most recognized example of this: the Miller, by telling his tale, breaks the hierarchical order established by the Knight and Harry Bailey. Turner finds a more nuanced example:

The Knight senses the danger, the fear that the Pardoner has exposed the lack in the individual, the inevitability of social fragmentation and the emptiness of the idea of the ending. The Knight's conciliatory words seem bizarre: he sees that 'al the peple lough' (I.961) and exhorts them all to "laughe and pleye" (I.967). In other words, he realizes that they are laughing *at each other*—at the Host and the Pardoner—and wants them to direct their laughter outwards, to reconstitute the group body in order to prevent them from realizing their difference (165).

Turner sees the Knight recognizing "the inevitably conflicted nature of *compaignye*" and trying (futilely) to reconstruct the pilgrims into an amiable group (165-166). The implications of these examples are noteworthy. The Knight, it seems, fails to impart any meaningful order on the social structure that unites the Canterbury pilgrims. In other words, he orders successfully only

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<sup>2</sup> See Helen Cooper's *Oxford Guide to The Canterbury Tales* for a detailed table displaying the structural order of the *Tale*. For a general analysis see Frederick Turner's "A Structuralist Analysis of the 'Knight's Tale'" and Charles Muscatine's "Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer's Knight's Tale."



that which he has complete control of; social bodies complicate, and ultimately defeat, his attempts at order. I believe, therefore, that the Knight's capacity to order society is by no means clearly defined. At best, it may be said that Chaucer is ambivalent about the Knight as an instrument of order: he affords him the most ordered tale but refuses him a meaningful role in the order of the social structure of *The Canterbury Tales*.

*The Knight's Tale* clears away this ambivalence with regard to Chaucer's opinion on the ability of knights to order society. Chaucer never once allows knights the order they desire. In fact, Chaucer at the beginning of *The Tale*, in one of the first diversions from Boccaccio's *Teseida*,<sup>3</sup> establishes the impossibility of the chivalric ideal of order. He sets up a scene in which Theseus may bring social order:

This duc, of whom I make mencion,  
 .....  
 He was war, as he caste his eye aside,  
 Where that ther kneled in the heighe weye  
 A compaignye of ladyes, tweye and tweye,  
 Ech after oother clad in clothes blake;  
 But swich a cry and swich a wo they make (l.893-900).

The Theban ladies have lost their husbands in a siege. Creon, the tyrant who rules Thebes, will not return to the ladies the dead bodies of their husbands. He has dragged the bodies into a pile and is allowing dogs to eat them. This dishonorable practice is precisely the thing Lull and other reformers imagined knights would eliminate, and Theseus does, but not without causing more chaos:

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<sup>3</sup> The work from which Chaucer draws much of *The Knight's Tale*. See Cooper's *Oxford Guide to the Canterbury Tales* (65-68) for an overview of the influence of *The Teseida* on *The Knight's Tale*. For a more detailed analysis see Piero Boitani's *Chaucer and Boccaccio*.

Whan that this worthy duc, this Theseus,  
 Hath Creon slayn and wonne  
 Stille in that feeld he took al nyght his reste,  
 And dide with al the contree as hym leste.  
 To ransake in the taas of bodyes dede,  
 Hem for to strepe of harneys and of wede,  
 The pilours diden bisynesse and cure  
 After the bataille and discomfiture (I.1001-1008).

In his famous but much derided work *Chaucer's Knight*, Terry Jones uses this scene to illustrate Theseus's lack of the chivalric virtue pity. "Boccaccio," Jones writes, "specifically notes that...[Theseus] entered Thebes unchallenged and was so impressed by the beauty of the city that he wandered around, lost in admiration, and then gave orders that the temples were to be spared" (176). While I find tremendous fault with Jones's work—his historical analysis does not withstand even the slightest scrutiny—he is correct in perceiving something instructive in Chaucer's alteration of Boccaccio's narrative.

Charles Muscatine and Ian Robinson offer more cogent analyses of the scene. In *Chaucer and the French Tradition* Muscatine views Theseus's conquering Thebes as a successful act of order: he has banished chaos from the world (181-183). Robinson, however, in *Chaucer and the English Tradition*, questions this by emphasizing the military realism of the scene.<sup>4</sup> For him, the scene in Thebes is not proof of a noble knight's ability to order, but is evidence of chaos. I am inclined to agree with Robinson's interpretation, specifically because, as

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<sup>4</sup> Each critic uses this scene to argue for a respective tradition of ideals: Muscatine argues for the French tradition and Robinson for the English. As Daniel Kempton observes: this split makes it "clear that the French and English traditions comprise two very different kinds of language about knighthood and that they lead to quite divergent interpretations of Theseus and the noble life he stands for" (238).

Jones outlines, Chaucer deliberately alters Boccaccio's narrative. Chaucer does so to, seemingly, convey military realism and, more importantly, the chaos of the militaristic action. Aers reads the scene similarly: "The reality of militarism and the attitudes it sponsors among human beings is concisely evoked. People are reduced to dead bodies, piled up and ransacked for profit" (176). My interpretation of this scene draws on Turner's scholarship: Chaucer's diversion from the *Teseida* reflects the chaos of his England.<sup>5</sup>

Fourteenth-century writers were particularly concerned with knightly pillaging and destruction.<sup>6</sup> In *Tree of Battles*, a work similar to Lull and Charny's chivalric manuals, Honoré Bonet voices this concern: "in these days all wars are directed against the poor laboring people and against their goods and chattels. I do not call that war, but it seems to me to be pillage and robbery" (189). Modern historians, too, have noticed a medieval concern with knightly pillaging and destruction; Kaeuper writes that "[w]hat particularly worries [the medieval people] is not primarily common or garden crime, not country folk attacking their lordly exploiters, not simply urban unrest, not tax revolt, but the violence of knights" (28). The language of Chaucer's scene disallows idealistic or romantic interpretations. The emphasis is not on Theseus's preeminence, or the end of Creon's tyranny, but on the chaos of Theseus's conquest. He returns to the Theban women the bodies of their husbands, but he leaves the women without a home, arguably worse off than they were before seeking his help. Theseus, however, seems not to notice the chaos he leaves in his trail:

And whan this worthy duc hath thus ydon,

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<sup>5</sup> While Turner does not comment at any great length on *The Knight's Tale*, she does write a persuasive argument concerning *The Canterbury Tales*, specifically the *General Prologue* and *The Tale of Melibee*. In her chapter on the *General Prologue* Turner writes: "Of course, in this chapter there has not been space to examine every part of the *Tales*, and it might be suggested that other parts of the text have different emphases [regarding social antagonism and harmony]" (166). *The Knight's Tale*, I believe, aligns with the emphasis in the *General Prologue*: it demonstrates the impossibility of social order.

<sup>6</sup> See Deschamps's ballade, above.

He took his hoost, and hoom he rit anon  
 With laurer crowned as a conquerour;  
 And ther he lyveth in joye and in honour  
 Terme of his lyfe; what nedeth wordes mo? (I.1025-1029).

In ancient Greece and Rome laurel wreaths represented victory: in Greece they were given to the winners of the Olympics and in Rome to those who were successful martially. So Theseus clearly believes he has successfully completed a military campaign. Yet he is unaware that he has failed to live up to the ideals of chivalrous knighthood as established by Lull. This is the extraordinary Chaucerian irony to which G. K. Chesterton refers: it “is sometimes so large that it is too large to be seen” (10).<sup>7</sup> In Theseus’s humorous unawareness of his actions we see the reality of Chaucer’s universe. Chivalrous knighthood was not living up to the ideal; pillage and destruction were often the products of knightly intervention. Lull acknowledges this reality obliquely by penning a reformatory manual defining the ideal of chivalrous knighthood. Other writers, like Charny and Deschamps, recognize both ideal and reality. Chaucer’s consciousness is larger than his contemporaries: he embeds in a chivalric romance, told by an ostensibly idealized knight, the grim reality of knighthood. In other words, Chaucer recognizes in a single work, and with characteristic irony, the complexity of the ideal and the reality of knighthood, and denies emphatically the human capacity to meet the ideal.

#### IV. Thebanness and the Structures in *The Knight’s Tale*

Chaucer denies the human capacity to meet the ideal of chivalrous knighthood throughout the *Tale*. The most recognized instances concern Palamon and Arcite. These Theban cousins, knights themselves, are “embodiments of the forces of disorder,” for they are mired in Theban

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<sup>7</sup> Chesterton on Chaucerian irony: “There falls on it from afar even some dark ray of the irony of God, who was mocked when He entered His own world, and killed when He came among His creatures” (12).

history (Patterson, 208). Chaucer alludes to the curse of Thebanness in many of his poems, major and minor: *Anelida and Arcite*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Complaint of Mars*, and of course, *The Knight's Tale*. The curse is most economically represented in the story of Oedipus; his life, in its circularity, embodies the destructiveness of the Theban gene (Patterson, 76-77).

Lee Patterson offers a clear understanding of this:

Thebanness is a fatal doubling of the self that issues in a replicating history that preempts a linear or developmental progress. Theban history in its pure form has neither origin nor end but only a single, infinitely repeatable moment of illicit eroticism and fratricidal rivalry—love and war locked together in a perverse fatality (77).

The most prominent trait of Theban history, I would argue, is fraternal strife, which Palamon and Arcite exemplify. Though they are technically cousins—possibly the grandchildren of Oedipus<sup>8</sup>—Chaucer accentuates the fact that they consider each other brothers: in their first scene, when they are locked in Theseus's prison, Palamon and Arcite refer to each other as “brothers” six times and “cosyn” four. Chaucer uses “brother” only three more times in the remainder of the *Tale*. It is instructive that the word “brother” occurs so frequently in so few lines—around sixty—and in the scene that establishes the major conflict of the *Tale*. Chaucer, I believe, is acknowledging and stressing the existence of the Theban curse in his narrative.

Violence and disruption are the products of this curse. Theseus tries to control the chaos of the “brothers.” The grand structures of the *Tale*—the prison and the amphitheater—represent, often

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<sup>8</sup> In his essay “Theban Genealogy in the ‘Knight’s Tale’” David Anderson discusses the genealogy of Palamon and Arcite: “The opening passages of the *Knight’s Tale* summarize the closing books of Statius’s *Thebaid*, which describe Theseus’s siege of Thebes. Since this siege took place at the end of the long civil war between Oedipus’s sons Eteocles and Polynices...and since Palamon and Arcite are imagined to be very young when the heralds discover them on the battlefield, Chaucer would seem to be hinting that they are the sons of Oedipus’s daughters Antigone and Ismene” (314).

simultaneously, Theseus's attempt and failure to contain the chaos. I will examine the implications of each one.

Imprisonment is a blatant act of containment. It is Theseus's first action:

Out of the taas the pilours han hem [Palamon and Arcite] 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 (I.1020-1024)

The intention of this is clear: Theseus locks the cousins in his tower “for everemoore,” hoping to end the destructive pattern of the Theban gene (1032). In doing so, he violates the code of chivalrous knighthood. As Bonet writes in *The Tree of Battles*: “[m]ercy is indeed due to a prisoner, and his captor must give it to him and prevent discourteous treatment of him while he is in his power...If he do otherwise he is not a gentleman but a tyrant, and no knight” (152-153).

The interesting thing here is that Chaucer intends Theseus to violate the code; V.A. Kolve outlines succinctly the more chivalric actions of Boccaccio's Teseo (Theseus):

Boccaccio's Teseo orders the jail-keeper to guard the young knights carefully, and to treat them with honor: ‘These two were set apart to allow them greater comfort [ease], because they were born of royal blood. And he made them live in the palace and kept them in this way in a room where they were served at their pleasure.’ They are allowed servants of their own...Chaucer retains none of these chivalrous and courtly details, inventing for the young knights an imprisonment harsher by far (98).

Aers offers a convincing understanding of this scene: “If Theseus represents ‘the principle of order’ in this culture, then Chaucer is leading us to see that we should never celebrate abstractions such as ‘order’ but inquire about the kind of order and its specific human content” (177). My reading of the scene modifies the idea. Chaucer, I believe, is commenting on the natural impetus of the knightly class: Theseus answers chaos with diplomatic chaos. We see this mirrored in his actions against Creon. Indeed, we see it throughout the *Tale*, in almost all of Theseus’s actions. The intention of this scene—of almost all scenes involving Theseus and the Theban knights—is to reinforce the ineffectiveness of Theseus as an instrument of order. Theseus cannot order because he does not understand how to produce societal order. He understands chaos, and chaos alone.

The amphitheater affirms what has been suggested with my interpretation of the prison. But it also allows Chaucer to critique comprehensively the order of knighthood. Like the prison, the amphitheater functions—initially, at least—as an act of containment. Toward the end of the second part of the *Tale*, Palamon and Arcite, unable to control their jealousy any longer, fight in a forest. Their battle is one of the most chaotic moments in the *Tale*: the two knights, metaphorically dehumanized and transformed into a “wood leon” and a “cruel tigre,” completely disregard chivalric custom and fight in blood up to their ankles (I.1656, 1657). In response Theseus constructs the amphitheater.<sup>9</sup> This is another departure from the *Teseida*: Theseus builds “an amphitheater specifically for the tournament” in the forest whereas Teseo “orders [the Theban knights] to come together a year later ‘for combat in our theater’ (V, v. 97), referring without emphasis to a structure already in existence” (Kolve, 105). His constructing an

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<sup>9</sup> This, however, is not Theseus’s initial response. Before Ypolita and Emelye change his mind, Theseus condemns the cousins to death: “By myghty Mars, he shal anon be deed / That smyteth any strook that I may seen” (I.1708-1709). That Theseus’s natural response is linked to Mars—the god of war—is of course noteworthy. Again, we see that Theseus answers chaos with chaos.

amphitheater in the forest has great symbolic value. Broadly, the amphitheater is an act of order. Theseus constructs it to order the chaos of Palamon and Arcite; his placing it in the forest represents humanity's attempt to impose order on chaotic nature. In "Aspects of Order in the *Knight's Tale*," John Halverson writes about the amphitheater and the implications of Theseus's placing it in the forest: "It is a *temenos*—an official or sacred precinct—the connotations of which include those of the settler's clearing in the forest and of the *tun* as well as of a sacred area: it represents the imposition of social order on the wildness of nature" (615). The implementation of social order on nature is generally viewed as a heroic success.<sup>10</sup> Theseus's amphitheater, however, is anything but a success: not only does it fail to resolve the conflict of Palamon and Arcite, but it also represents the chaos of the universe and, more importantly, the chaos of knighthood.

The Temple of Mars—which is attached to the amphitheater along with two other temples—is the richest representation of this chaos: it is filled with "images of manslaughter, arson, suicide, treason, murder, and rapine" (Frost, 301). The first image is of a desolate landscape:

First on the wal was peynted a forest,  
 In which ther dwelleth neither man ne best,  
 With knotty, knarry, bareyne trees olde,  
 Of stubbes sharpe and hidouse to biholde,  
 In which ther ran a rumbel in a swough,

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<sup>10</sup> In *Beowulf*, for instance, Hrothgar's ordering is a success: Heorot is "a great mead-hall / meant to be a wonder of the world forever" (Heaney, 69-70). As Edward Irving, Jr. notes, however, the structure representing such implementation "implies a limit to the ordered space that can be cleared and held by the heroic effort" (46). In other words, the order represented by the structure is limited, infinitesimal even, when compared to the chaos of the universe. In *Beowulf* this chaos is represented in the form of monsters. Grendel's attack on Heorot articulates the chaos of the universe and the limit of heroic order.



As though a storm sholde bresten every bough.  
 And dounward from an hille, under a bente,  
 Ther stood the temple of Mars armypotente,  
 Wroght al of burned steel, of which the entrée  
 Was long and streit, and gastly for to se (I.1975-1984).

The obvious implication here is that violent actions—Martian actions—raze nature. What is more complex, and more interesting, is the way in which the Temple of Mars, as H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. notes, functions “as a transformation of previous symbolic places in the tale” (274). This desolate image transforms the garden outside the prison in part one of the *Tale*. The garden is a beautiful place in which nature and humanity flourish in harmony:

Till it fil ones, in a morwe of May,  
 That Emelye, that fairer was to sene  
 Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,  
 And fressher than the May with floures newe  
 .....  
 She was arisen and al redy dight,  
 For May wole have no slogardie anyght.  
 The sesoun priketh every gentil herte (I.1034-1044).

The description of the garden is reminiscent of the opening lines of the *General Prologue*: the arrival of spring is a moment of universal pleasure that awakens sexual feelings.<sup>11</sup> Leicester writes that *reverdies*—the poetic genre that celebrates the beginning of spring—sublimate “sexual and aggressive energies into the forms of courtship and ‘courtoisie’” (274-275). Emelye,

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<sup>11</sup> The word “priketh,” used in the *General Prologue* and the garden scene, has sexual connotations. The *Middle English Dictionary* has many definitions for the word, several of which are sexual.

like the “smale foweles” in the *General Prologue*, is integrated into the process of spring; lacking an identity, she is an ornament, no different than the “floures newe” (I.9, 1037). Her sexuality, then, is controlled, for it is part of the re-greening. Thus we must understand the garden scene as “a fantasy of order and control” (Leicester, 274). The image in the Temple of Mars corrupts this: it transforms the depiction of creation and order into one of destruction and chaos. When placed back into their contexts in the *Tale*, we will see that these images are part of a procession: the first image of nature in the *Tale* is the garden; the second is the grove in which Palamon and Arcite fight up “to the ancle...in hir blood”; and the third is the image in the Temple of Mars (I.1660). The *Tale*, then, envisions the inevitable degeneration of nature at the hand of man. Because the final image is housed in the Temple of Mars—the god with whom Theseus is emblematically joined in the opening lines of the *Tale*—and because Palamon and Arcite fight in the grove, we may accredit this degeneration to the institution of knighthood.

Even the Knight, whose love for knighthood is apparent, must acknowledge the degenerative and chaotic outcome of knightly action:

Yet saugh I Woodnesse, laughynge in his rage,  
 Armed Compleint, Outhees, and fiers Outrage;  
 The careyne in the busk, with throte ycorve;  
 A thousand slayn, and nat of qualm ystorve;  
 The tiraunt, with the pray by force yraft;  
 The toun destroyed, ther was no thyng laft.  
 Yet saugh I brent the shippes hoppesteres;  
 The hunte strangled with the wilde beres;  
 The sow devouring the child right in the cradle;

The cook yscalded, for al his longe ladel.

Noght was foryeten by the infortune of Marte (I.2011-2021).

This image appears to be a transformation of Theseus's conquest of Thebes: "The toun destroyed, ther was no thyng laft" (I.2016). The difference, though not as great as in the nature images, is notable. The emphasis here is on the negativity of military power. The point, it seems, in the poetic ekphrasis of the Temple of Mars is to remove the chivalric veil and expose the horrors of knightly action.

What is more interesting about the passage above, and each subsequent image preceded or followed by "saugh I," is the way in which the narrative voice interacts with the poetic ekphrasis. The images in the Temple of Venus—which "resemble the ekphrastic passages in the dream-visions"—are described statically as opposed to the active descriptions in the Temple of Mars: the Knight says "ther maystow se" with regard to the images in the Temple of Venus rather than "saugh I" (Epstein, 50). This adds a degree of intimacy to the images in the Temple of Mars: "the refrain 'ther saugh I,' 'yet saugh I,' acts to remind us not only that the speaker has seen these things—"The colde deeth, with mouth gapyng upright" (2008), 'Woodnesse, laughynge in his rage" (2011)—but that *he is seeing them again now as he speaks*" (Leicester, 277). The result of this reverberates throughout the *Tale* and the *General Prologue*. The Knight—for we must assume it is the Knight narrating this<sup>12</sup>—recognizes the chaos of Mars and militaristic action in the Temple of Mars because he has seen such things before in his military career: "At many a noble armee hadde he be. / At mortal batailles hadde he been fiftene" (I.60-61). Further, the Knight recognizes a universe that is governed by chaos and that is impossible to order: several images depict the many ways human life may end violently and randomly. The

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<sup>12</sup> There is, I believe, no convincing reason to assume otherwise. For a comprehensive analysis of the narration in *The Knight's Tale*, see Ebbe Klitgård's *Chaucer's Narrative Voice in The Knight's Tale*.

Knight's response to these initial images is instructive: he temporarily loses the ability to distinguish "between self and other, [his] own body and the world" and feels "an impulse to load all human misfortune into the here and now of the imagined scene" (Leceister, 281). His final description of the Temple of Mars imparts the sense that violence and death are universal and perpetual:

So was it shewed in that portraiture,  
 As is depeynted in the sterres above  
 Who shal be slayn or elles deed for love.  
 Suffiseth oon ensample in stories olde;  
 I may not rekene hem alle though I wolde (I.2036-2040).

Violence and death are ongoing, something written into the fabric of the universe. It is impossible to change this—to, in other words, order the universe—and the Knight recognizes this. He is overwhelmed, resigned; he cannot "rekene" all the stories of violence and death even if he desired to do so. This is a rare moment of awareness: no other knight in the *Tale* grasps as fully the destructiveness of his actions or the inherent chaos of the universe as the Knight does here. The Knight's awareness, however, is momentary; the chivalric veil returns in the final part of the *Tale*. The dangers of this veil, and of Martian activity, are accentuated in the final description of the Temple of Mars:

The statue of Mars upon a carte stood  
 Armed, and looked grym as he were wood;  
 .....  
 This god of armes was arrayed thus.  
 A wolf ther stood biforn hym at his feet

With eyen rede, and of a man he eet  
 With soutil pencil was depeynted this storie  
 In redoutynge of Mars and of his glorie (I.2041-2050).

The destruction of mankind at the hands of Mars (or at the hands his followers) is alluded to throughout the description of the Temple of Mars, but not as powerfully as it is here: the red-eyed wolf—tool of Mars—literally consumes mankind.

It is this image, and the Temple of Mars in general, that serves as a prelude to the tournament. The tournament itself is bloody and feral—despite the fact that Theseus, before the tournament begins, imposes a lengthy set of rules on the armies of Palamon and Arcite so as to prevent the loss of “gentil blood”:

The lord hath of his heigh discrecioun  
 Considered that it were destruccioun  
 To gentil blood to fighten in the gyse  
 Of mortal bataille now in this emprise.  
 Wherfore, to shapen that they shal nat dye,  
 He wol his firste purpose modifye.  
 No man therfore, up peyne of los of lyf,  
 No maner shot, ne polax, ne short knyf  
 .....

No man ne drawe, ne bere it by his syde (I.2537-2547).

Aers describes Theseus’s rules as “an apparently un-Martian act”: Theseus, ostensibly, levies the rules in order to limit the violence—to, in other words, make the battle more chivalric and less brutal. However, “[t]his modification cannot be taken as a rejection of his former life” or of the

ruling of Mars because Theseus still nonetheless has determined “to settle the question of whom Emily should marry by sheer violence—rather than by consulting the oracles, drawing lots, detailed inquiry into the knights, or by letting Emily do what she wants” (Aers, 180). Here, again, Chaucer is suggesting that Theseus is incapable of establishing social order; his tournament—an act meant to bring about social order—is itself one of the most violent ways of settling the dispute between the Theban brothers.

More importantly, Chaucer thoroughly demonstrates that Theseus’s rules do not make the tournament any less violent. He describes the fighting graphically: “helmets are hacked to pieces, blood flows in red streams, [and] bones are smashed” (Aers, 181). This, it seems, raises many questions about the ethical status of the medieval tournament: a topic that was very controversial in Chaucer’s lifetime.<sup>13</sup> Several writers have written about the violence of the tournament. Terry Jones, most infamously, used the violence of the tournament to support his contention that Theseus is a tyrant. My view is far less dramatic. I believe that the violence of the tournament is meant to underscore Theseus’s inability to achieve social order. More generally, I believe the violence demonstrates the “double-think,” as Aers writes, of Theseus: he organizes a violent tournament but then protests that he does “not wish to shed upper-class blood” (181). In other words, the violence highlights the chivalric veil that we have seen throughout the *Tale*: Theseus, believing he is acting to secure social order on behalf of his polity, fails to see the violence and chaos of his actions.

Far more crucial than the violence are the animal metaphors. Palamon and Arcite are both compared to wild animals:

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<sup>13</sup> G.A. Lester, in his wonderful essay on *The Knight’s Tale*, writes of the complex political controversy surrounding tournaments: “the church never issues a blanket condemnation of all types [of tournaments]...it was the melee, at that time standard practice, which was frequently condemned by church and state alike” (462). Theseus’s tournament, Lester notes, is “a strange combination of melee and duel to the death” (464).

Ther nas no tygre in the vale of Galgopheye,

Whan that hir whelp is stole whan it is lite,

So cruel on the hunt as is Arcite

.....

Ne in Belmarye ther nys so fell leon,

That hunted is, of for his hunger wood,

Ne of his praye desireth so the blood,

As Palamon to sleen his foo Arcite (I.2626-2633).

This is not, of course, the first time Palamon and Arcite have been equated with animals; earlier in the *Tale*, when they begin to fight in the grove, Palamon and Arcite are likened to a crazy lion and a cruel tiger.<sup>14</sup> The metaphors befit the grove: in the grove there are no rules; the grove itself symbolizes wildness, for it is a place untouched by society. They do not, however, fit Theseus's tournament: an event that has been rigorously arranged and has, supposedly, been made safe for "gentil blood." That Chaucer equates Palamon and Arcite with beasts in Theseus's tournament is instructive. It suggests that Theseus's rules—and indeed his grand amphitheater—have done nothing to contain the chaos of Palamon and Arcite.

The implications the word "beast" would have summoned in the Middle Ages seems to add credence to this understanding of Chaucer's animal metaphors. The *Aberdeen Bestiary*, written in England around the twelfth century, allows us to comprehend what the term "beast" meant to English people of the Middle Ages:

The name 'beast' applies, strictly speaking, to lions, panthers and tigers, wolves and foxes, dogs and apes, and to all other animals which vent their rage with tooth

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<sup>14</sup> See above, page 15.

or claw... They are called 'beasts' from the force which they rage. They are called wild because they enjoy their natural liberty and are borne along by their desires. They are free of will, and wander here and there, and where their instinct takes them, there they are borne (*Aberdeen Bestiary*).<sup>15</sup>

So the word "beast," in Chaucer's age, would have been understood as that which is wild and inhuman. Chaucer's animal metaphors, then, are "meant to show a degradation from human towards the bestial realm" (LaBurre, 1). Palamon's lament toward the beginning of the *Tale* seemingly supports this notion:

And yet encresseth this al my penaunce,  
 That man is bounden to his observaunce,  
 For Goddes sake, to letten of his wille,  
 Ther as a beest may al his lust fulfille  
 And whan a beest is deed he hath no peyne;  
 But man after his death moot wepe and pleyne (I.1315-1320).

The bestial freedom Palamon desires is precisely what the medieval people feared about knights. Several historians, medieval and contemporary, have written about this fear.<sup>16</sup> But we may see this fear most prominently in the religious initiation rituals for new knights. In these rituals, the knight is assumed to have to become through God a renewed and better man:

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<sup>15</sup> I have quoted a translation of the *Aberdeen Bestiary*. This is the original text, in Latin: "Bestiarum vocabulum proprie convenit leonibus pardis, et tigribus, lupis, et vulpibus, canibus et simiis, ac ceteris que ore vel unguibus seviunt, exceptis serpentibus. Bestie autem dicite, a vi qua seviunt. Fere appellate eo quod naturali utuntur libertate, et desiderio suo ferantur. Sunt enim libere eorum voluntates, et huc atque illuc vagantur, et quo animus duxerit, eo ferantur. Leonis vocabulum ex greca origine inflexum est in latinum. Grece enim leon vocatur, et est nomen nothum, quia ex parte corruptum. Leo enim grece, latine rex interpretatur, eo quod princeps est omnium bestiarum" (*Aberdeen Bestiary*).

<sup>16</sup> See above, page eleven; for a more detailed historical analysis see Nigel Saul's book *Chivalry and Medieval England*, pages 178-196.



O Lord, omnipotent father, eternal God, who alone establish and lawfully rule the order of all things...we humbly pray that, just as you granted to your child David the power to vanquish Goliath...so grant, through your heavenly bounty, to this your servant, who comes as a new recruit to put his neck under the military yoke, the power and valor to defend the faith and justice, increase in him faith, hope and charity, the fear as well as the love of God, humility, perseverance, obedience and good patience, and direct him lawfully in all things, so that he will never injure anyone unjustly with this or any other sword...and so that, just as he is raised from an inferior station to the new honor of chivalry, so, putting off the old man with his deeds, he will put on the new man (Miller, 171-172).

The Church, as Nigel Saul notes, has always had an “ambiguous relationship with chivalry” and knighthood (197). In the early Middle Ages, the Church condemned knighthood because it perpetuated the sin of killing. Many in the Church, in fact, “prescribed a forty-day penance for the sin of killing in war” (Saul, 198). Toward twelfth century, however, the Church was forced to reevaluate its stance on knighthood, for the Church “need[ed] to enlist the support of the knightly class in resisting the assaults of marauding heathens on Europe’s frontiers” (Saul, 199). The Church, therefore, conceived of a decidedly “Christian knighthood,” which “would not only refrain from violence but actually champion the cause of justice” (Saul, 199). To do this, the Church determined, knights had to be “chastened and directed to endeavours which were spiritually fulfilling” (Saul, 199). Pious initiation rituals, like the one quoted above, were part of the Church’s chastening of the knights: the knights were meant to cast off the disruptive, ungodly ways of their past and become warriors of God (Saul, 200).

Not surprisingly, Charny and Lull—the great espousers of chivalric reform—championed this conception of knighthood. In his *Book of Chivalry*, Charny describes at length the initiation and the duties of the Christian knight, concluding that if a knight were to fail to be properly initiated, or if he were to fail to do his Christian duties, “it would be better had he never been made a knight” (Miller, 168). The Church and reformatory writers like Charny and Lull took “Christian knighthood” very seriously: by Christianizing the knight, they could at least be sure that knightly violence was used, not against Christians, but against the enemies of the state and the Church.

In some respect, Chaucer, with his animal metaphors, is denying outright the possibility that violence can be controlled in any way. Theseus cannot control Palamon and Arcite and, just as important, the Theban cousins cannot control themselves. The cousins are bestial, driven only by their desire for bloodshed. This, it seems to me, is the ultimate point of the animal metaphors and, more importantly, of the structures of *The Knight's Tale*: to reject, first, that Theseus and knights in general are incapable of establishing social order and, second, to instill the notion that the disruptive violence of knights is unstoppable, a quality that is woven into the fabric of knighthood itself.

Christian knights were supposed to represent the best of humanity; more than that, Christian knights were supposed to become part of and help implement the “social order ordained by God” (Saul, 199). As Kaeuper writes, and indeed as Chaucer suggests, “the cads [knights] did not live up to the high ideals” (3).

#### V. The Ending of *The Knight's Tale*

Toward the beginning of *The Knight's Tale*, Arcite comments on man's inability to order his universe:

Allas, why pleynen folk so in commune  
 On purveiaunce of God, or of Fortune,  
 That yeveth hem ful ofte in many a gyse  
 Wel better than they kan himself devyse?  
 Som man desireth for to han richesse,  
 That cause is of his mordre or greet siknesse;  
 And som man wolde out of his prisoun fayn,  
 That in his hous is of his meynee slayn.  
 Infinite harmes been in this mateere.  
 We witen nat what thing we preyen heere;  
 We faren as he that dronke is as a mous.  
 A dronke man woot wel he hath an hous,  
 But he noot which the righte wey is thider,  
 And to a dronke man the wey is slider.  
 And certes, in this world so faren we;  
 We seken faste after felicitee,  
 But we goon wrong ful often, trewely (I.1251-1267).

This passage, I believe, elucidates the axis of disorder that we observe in much of *The Knight's Tale*: humans are incapable of attaining social order precisely because, as Arcite says, humans do not understand what they seek. Knights, in particular, are unable to implement social order because, as I think the *Tale* demonstrates, violence and chaos underpin their pursuit of that which they seek. The ending of the *Tale* addresses profoundly the notion of knightly disorder—perhaps more profoundly than any other segment of the *Tale* except the ekphrasis of the Temple of Mars.

But the ending is also concerned with the chaos of divine influence: something that Chaucer, until this point, leaves to the conjecture of his characters and audience. I hope to demonstrate that the ending of the *Tale* presents a world in which there is only chaos.

The culmination of Theseus's tournament is fundamental to our understanding the chaos of divine influence. When Palamon is beaten and Arcite is named the victor, Chaucer affords the poem a moment of joy: "Anon ther is a noyse of peple bigonne / For joye of this, so loude and heighe withalle / It semed that the lystes sholde falle" (I.2660-2661). But the promise of doom hangs over this joy, just as it does when Hrothgar finishes building his great hall Heorot.<sup>17</sup> The lists do not fall, as Chaucer writes, but what the lists represent to Theseus and his polity—man's ability to order and control his universe—is shattered:

This fierse Arcite hath of his helm ydon,  
 And on a courser, for to shewe his face,  
 He priketh endelong the large place  
 .....  
 Out of the ground a furie internal sterte,  
 From Pluto sent at requeste of Saturne,  
 For which his hors for fere gan to turne,  
 And leep aside, and foundred as he leep;  
 And er that Arcite may taken keep,  
 He pighte hym on the pomel of his heed,  
 That in the place he lay as he were deed (I.2684-2690).

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<sup>17</sup> "The hall [Heorot] towered, / its gables wide and high and awaiting / a barbarous burning" (Heany, 81-83).

Divine intervention, and not human design, resolves the conflict of Palamon and Arcite.

Chaucer makes the chaos of this intervention abundantly clear:

Swelleth the brest of Arcite, and the soore  
 Encreesseth at his herte moore and moore.  
 The clothered blood, for any lechecraft,  
 Corrupteth, and is in his bouk ylaft

.....

The pipes of his longes gone to swelle,  
 And every lacerte in his brest adoun  
 Is shent with venym and corrupcioun.

.....

Vomyt upward, ne downward laxative.  
 Al is tobrosten thilke regioun;  
 Nature hath now no dominacioun (I.2743-2758).

The “introduction of ‘clinical detail,’” Aers writes, is “quite alien to the Italian text” (183). All departures from Boccaccio’s text, of course, are noteworthy, but this, I believe, is one of the most important ones. By focusing intensely on the negative bodily consequences of the gods’ intervention, Chaucer forces us to question “generalities about the benevolent order of the whole”; in other words, he makes us consider whether chaos and injustice govern the world (Aers, 183).

Arcite, surprisingly, does not consider this problem; in one of the most poignant passages in all of Chaucer’s works, Arcite rejects metaphysical explanations and bemoans the chaotic nature of human existence:

What is this world? What asketh men to have?

Now with his love, now in his colde grave

Allone, withouten any compaignye.

Fare wel, my sweete foo, myn Emelye!

And softe taak me in youre armes tweye (I.2777-2781).

Here, again, Chaucer diverts from his source material. Arcite's lament in the *Teseida* is more standard and ritualized: he remembers "his past military and knightly values" and thinks "about an afterlife in Elysium" (Aers, 183). In other words, Boccaccio's Arcite dies in a romantic manner, reflecting, as all valiant knights do, on his years of chivalric and militaristic excellence. Chaucer's Arcite, however, mourns the randomness of human affairs and offers an "admirably honest response to his discovery that the whole framework provided for his life...is groundless" (Aers, 183). More importantly, Chaucer's Arcite "acknowledges that the patterns of chivalry...have failed to offer any account of human existence and its possibilities which even begin to seem adequate" (Aers, 183). Unlike the Knight's awareness in the Temple of Mars, Arcite's awareness of the failings of the institution of knighthood is not fleeting: Arcite, after lamenting his life as a knight, selflessly asks Emelye to marry Palamon in a moment of great human love that transcends the mentality of the knightly class as seen in *The Knight's Tale* (Aers, 185). This moment, Aers reminds us, is "a glimmer of the human potential [that is otherwise] distorted and perverted by the culture over which Theseus presides" (185).

In Boccaccio's text, Arcite, after he begs Emelye to marry Palamon, ascends into the heavens in a moment that is akin to Troilus's ascension in *Troilus and Criseyde*.<sup>18</sup> In *The Knight's Tale*, however, the state of Arcite's soul is unknown:

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<sup>18</sup> Troilus's death and ascension into the eighth sphere affirms the order of his universe:  
And whan that he [Troilus] was slayn in this manere,

His spirit changed hous and went ether,

As I cam nevere, I kan nat tellen wher.

Therefore I stynte; I nam no divinistre;

Of soules fynde I nat in this registre,

Ne me ne list thilke opinions to telle

.....

Arcite is coold (2809-2815).

Some critics believe it is the Knight, and not Chaucer, who denies the *Tale* this metaphysical moment.<sup>19</sup> For our purposes this is not of great importance: both interpretations deny the *Tale* the sense of cosmic order afforded to both the *Teseida* and *Troilus and Criseyde*. It is, however, worth noting that Chaucer draws from his sources inspiration for Troilus's ascension. So in the case of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer has no problem offering the cosmic order we find in his source material. But Chaucer clearly does not want *The Knight's Tale* to have that same sort of order that is in the *Teseida*.<sup>20</sup> This suggests that Chaucer would rather have his audience, and his characters, question the state of the universe. Given the fickle, insensitive, and, to a certain degree, thoughtless attitude of the gods, it is hard to summon anything but doubt as to whether the universe is governed by a grand principle of order:

And right anon swich strif ther is bigonne,

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His lighte goost ful blisfully is went  
 Up to the holoughnesse of the eighthe spere,  
 In convers letyng everich element;  
 And ther he saugh with ful avysement  
 The erratik sterres, herkenyng armonye  
 With sownes ful of hevenyssh melodie (1807-1813).

<sup>19</sup> See Ebbe Klitgard's *Chaucer's Narrative Voice in "The Knight's Tale"*; Klitgard offers an overview on the many critical interpretations concerning the narrative voice of The Knight.

<sup>20</sup> Aers interprets Chaucer's departure from Boccaccio clearly: "The opening three stanzas of Boccaccio's eleventh book [of the *Teseida*] describe the ascent of Arcita's soul, his vision of cosmic order and the delightful music of the spheres...The very idea of such a vision in the universe of [Chaucer's] Theseus and Saturn is bizarre, and Chaucer decided to delete it" (185).

For thilke grauntyng, in the hevene above,  
 Bitwixe Venus, the goddesse of love,  
 And Mars, the stierne god armypotente,  
 .....  
 Saturne anon, to stynten strif and drede,  
 Al be it that it is agayn his kynde,  
 Of al this strif he gan remedie fynde (I.2438-2452).

The grand human dilemma of the *Tale*, then, is but “strif” between the gods, a squabble that Saturn must settle. The language of the gods makes insignificant the human concerns of love and death. Such language disallows a vision of an ordered universe in which human matters are arranged benevolently by a divine power.<sup>21</sup> Saturn’s language further characterizes the state of the universe in *The Knight’s Tale*:

My cours, that hath so wyde for to turne,  
 Hath moore power than woot any man.  
 Myn is the drenching in the see so wan;  
 Myn is the prison in the derke cote;  
 Myn is the strangling and hangyng by the throte,  
 .....  
 I do vengeance and pleyn correccioun,  
 .....  
 Myn is the ruyne of the hye halles,  
 The fallynge of the toures and of the walles

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<sup>21</sup> The gods, in Greek tragedy, are often characterized in a similar way: disinterested in human affairs, but possessing the power to alter human lives.



Upon the mynour or the carpenter.  
 I slow Sampson, shakynge the piler;  
 And myne be the maladyes colde,  
 The derke tresons, and the castes olde;  
 My looking is the fader of pestilence (I.2454-2469).

Saturn glorifies visions of decay and death. The purpose of this, I believe, is to demonstrate that Saturn's sphere of influence, and therefore the universe of *The Knight's Tale*,<sup>22</sup> is chaotic. Saturn exemplifies little interest in human affairs: there is no indication that he would address the problems of Palamon, Arcite, Emelye, and Theseus were it not for the strife between Mars and his daughter Venus. And when Saturn does interact with and influence human affairs, it is clear that chaos is the result: his boast celebrates only violence and death.

It is this vision of the cosmos that informs the greatest irony of the *Tale*: Egeus's and Theseus's philosophizing that there is grand order in perceived worldly chaos. After Arcite's death, Egeus, the former king of Athens and father of Theseus, offers Theseus and his polity a mere platitude:

“Right as ther dyed nevere man,” quod he,  
 “That he ne lyvede in erthe in some degree,  
 Right so ther lyvede never man,” he seyde,  
 “In al this world, that som tyme he ne deyde (I.2843-2847).

In other words, Egeus reminds us of the mortality of man. Few critics observe wisdom in Egeus's speech. Aers, in particular, regards it negatively; he believes that Egeus is senile: “To utter such platitudes so portentously, especially in the present context, exemplifies marked

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<sup>22</sup> For it is Saturn at the forefront of the universe in *The Knight's Tale*.

intellectual and emotional debility” (186). Some critics, however, view Egeus’s speech as the characteristically pessimistic but otherwise wise words of an old man: “Egeus’ remarks do display the pessimism which Giles, following Aristotle, attributes to the old; but they are not meant to seem ridiculous. Rather, they represent the time-honoured wisdom of old age, just like the speeches of Elde in the *Parlement of the Thre Ages*” (Burrow, 43). I see merit in both interpretations. Egeus’s generalization concerning mortality ignores the complex problems underpinning the death of Arcite. But, as we have seen, the gods and, by extension, the universe are ambivalent to these problems. It, therefore, can be argued that Egeus generalizes about life and death because he exists in a universe that invites little more than generalizations: since the Knight (or Chaucer) refuses to even speculate about Arcite’s soul, what can be said concerning Arcite’s death except to say that he, like all men, has died?

Despite this, I ultimately agree with Aers and other critics who believe that Egeus is an inadequate philosopher. The final part of Egeus’s speech offers an Augustinian worldview that the *Tale* does not in any way support:

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.”  
 And over al this yet seyde he muchel moore  
 To this effect, ful wisely (I.2847-2851).

Aers offers what I believe to be the most convincing analysis of Egeus’s speech. He believes that Egeus’s statement

evaporates the vital and massive differences between lives such as those led by Theseus and those subjected to the miseries the poem has also

represented...Showing us Arcite calling for Emily, generous towards Palamon, and thinking about the marriage of his kinsman, duly to take place in courtly festivities, the poet makes it obvious that Egeus conveniently forgets how death is as much the end of every worldly joy as of worldly 'soore'. It is also clear that the line begs all the metaphysical problems raised by other figures, the poem's deities and the death of Arcite. Chaucer wryly observes that Egeus said, 'muchel moore/To this effect', and leaves us grateful that he chose not to report any more of this 'wise' discourse (187).

To this analysis I would add that the irony of the situation—the dark Chaucerian irony—is that Theseus's polity apparently finds comfort in Egeus's grossly inadequate philosophy. This may be read as a comment on the nature of the medieval worldview. To Theseus's polity, death is just a part of the natural order of the universe. Yet Chaucer, it seems to me, goes to great lengths to discredit this worldview. It is, therefore, ironic that the polity is comforted: they have observed the chaos of the universe but are confident that there is order in this chaos.

Theseus's "Firste Moevere" speech, the philosophical heart of *The Knight's Tale*, broadens this irony.<sup>23</sup> Like Egeus, Theseus attempts to persuade his polity that there is universal order. His grand speech begins with an observation and a theory about death:

"The Firste Moevere of the cause above,  
Whan he first made the faire cheyne of love,  
Greet was th'effect, and heigh was his entente.  
Wel wiste he why, and what thereof he mente,

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<sup>23</sup> This speech, it should be noted, is famous among critics for its Boethian wisdom. Many medieval writers and thinkers revered Boethius's philosophy. Boethian influence is everywhere apparent in Chaucer's writing, but in particular *Troilus and Criseyde*. Also, Chaucer translated Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*; his translation is called *Boece*.

For with that faire cheyne of love he bond  
 The fyr, the eyr, the water, and the lond  
 In certeyn boundes, that they may nat flee  
 That same Prince and that Moevere,” quod he,  
 “Hath stablissed in this wrecched world adoun  
 Certeyne dayes and duracioun  
 To al that is engendered in this place,  
 Over the whiche day they may nat pace (I.2987-2998).

A chain of love orders the world: the physical aspects of the universe—“the fyr, the eyr, the water, and the lond”—appear as the “Firste Moevere” arranged it (I.2992). Death, Theseus reasons, is arranged in just the same way: the “Firste Moevere” decides when each of us will die. Theseus believes that worldly experience shows us that all of this is true: “Ther nedeth noight noon auctoritee t’allegge, / For it is preeved by experience” (I.3000-3001). Aers notes the insufficiencies of Theseus’s reasoning: “Rather than trying to maintain the existence of a real but hidden structure to the phenomenal world, one which may be grasped by philosophic and religious reflection, he [Theseus] claims that the metaphysical order he gestures towards can be proved by immediate and unstructured experience” (189). But Theseus feels confident in his reasoning; he expounds on it throughout his speech:

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

.....

Of man and womman seen we wel also  
 That nedes, in oon of these termes two—  
 This is to seyn, in youthe or elles age—  
 He moot be deed, the kyng as shal a page;  
 Som in his bed, som in the depe see,  
 Som in the large feeld, as men may see;  
 Ther helpeth noght; al goth that ilke weye.

Thanne may I seyn that al this thyng moot deye (I.3017-3034).

Theseus believes that the universe is ordered precisely because all things decay and die. The irony of this is tremendous: Theseus thinks that death—the ultimate form of chaos—is proof of a divinely ordered universe. It is appropriate, of course, that Theseus thinks so, for, as I believe I have demonstrated, Theseus is incapable of recognizing any ordering principle, whether it concerns society or the cosmos. He understands only what is diametrically opposed to order.

The irony, however, is of secondary importance to the metaphysical issues of this argument. Aers identifies the main issue:

One hardly needs to be familiar with fourteenth-century criticism of traditional metaphysical proofs of God's existence to notice the incoherence of this particular version of the argument from design, vulnerable enough in any form and place let alone in the contexts established by the *Knight's Tale*. From a 'wrecched world' in which all is subject to decay and death the last thing one can simply read off is the existence of a loving, omnipotent and eternal first mover...[Theseus] asserts an argument from design which is not only inept in itself but made obviously so by the contexts in which Chaucer has placed it (Aers, 189-190).

Theseus identifies the First Mover as Jupiter.<sup>24</sup> This, as I see it, is part of the context to which Aers refers.<sup>25</sup> In *The Knight's Tale*, Jupiter, as Helen Cooper writes, "is seen as ineffectual in his astrological function" (78). Though Jupiter is "opposed to the workings of Saturn," Chaucer shows that Jupiter's power is inferior to the malign influence of Saturn (Cooper, 78). When Chaucer is writing of the conflict between Venus and Mars, he affords Jupiter one line, to demonstrate the inferiority of Jupiter to Saturn:

And right anon swich strif ther is bigonne,  
 .....  
 That Juppiter was bisy to stente,  
 Til that the pale Saturnus the colde,  
 That knew so manye of adventures olde,  
 Foond in his olde experience an art  
 That he ful soon hath pleased every part (I.2438-2446).

So Theseus's argument that there is divine order in perceived worldly chaos fails. This is Chaucer's final, and perhaps greatest, condemnation of the institution of knighthood. Theseus completely fails to live up the Lullian vision of the ideal knight: Theseus cannot secure social order, as Chaucer demonstrates here and throughout the *Tale*, and he cannot interpret divine will.<sup>26</sup> The irony of Theseus, and indeed of the *Tale*, is that Theseus believes he can do both things: just as he rides away wearing a laurel after ravaging Athens at the beginning of the *Tale*,

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<sup>24</sup> Theseus identifies the First Mover as Jupiter toward the end of his speech:

What maketh this but Juppiter, the kyng,  
 That is prince and cause of alle thyng,  
 Converynge al unto his proper welle  
 From which it is dirryved, sooth to telle? (I.3035-3038).

<sup>25</sup> Though Aers does not mention this. He mainly writes about what Theseus could have done to make a persuasive argument.

<sup>26</sup> The interpretation of divine will, of course, figures prominently in ideals of knighthood. Initiation ceremonies, for example, urged knights to do the will of the gods. It is implicit in Lull's hierarchical vision of the universe that he believes knights are the interpreters of God's will and the saviors of humanity.

he believes, at the end of his speech, that he has convincingly argued that the universe is ordered.

He thus concludes with a plea for marriage:

“Suster,” quod he, “this is my fulle assent,  
 With al th’avys heere of my parlement,  
 That gentil Palamon, youre owene knyght,  
 .....  
 That ye shul of youre grace upon hym rewte,  
 And taken hym for housbonde and for lord (I.3075-3080).

Since Theseus’s argument fails metaphysically, several critics have speculated that Theseus’s speech is not meant to be metaphysical but political. Aers writes: “Theseus’s motivation is plainly political self-interest perceived through that will for dominion which becomes so basic to those leading a society’s ruling class...Theseus transforms the *Consolation of Philosophy* into a *Consolation of Political Authority*. His oration...actually aims to persuade us that whatever is, is right” (30). Some may argue that Theseus succeeds in this enterprise: Emelye and Palamon marry and the two end the *Tale* living “in blisse, in richesse, and in heele” (I.3102). But this is a superficial understanding, one that, I believe, the *Tale* disallows. Theseus, we must remember, has not done anything to bring about this happiness: Chaucer gives us no indication that Emelye would not have married Palamon after Arcite’s plea, or that anything in Theseus’s argument helped Emelye decide to marry Palamon. I would, further, not credit the happiness of Palamon and Emelye to Theseus, but rather, to the end of the Theban curse of fraternal strife, which, of course, must be credited to the gods. So there are, as I read the text, two ways of interpreting Theseus’s argument: as a horribly incorrect metaphysical argument or as an attempt to manipulate his polity. Both interpretations lead us to the same conclusion:

Theseus does not live up to the ideals of knighthood and is an inadequate ruler. Theseus's speech, then, leads us back to what I believe is the central theme of *The Knight's Tale*: the inability of knights to secure social order. But it also connects to Chaucer's other themes: it suggests that the world is governed by chaos, and that those who believe otherwise are foolish, blind to the world.

*The Knight's Tale*, finally, is a dark conception of humanity and earthly existence, possibly a reflection, as Turner believes, of the chaos Chaucer encountered in his lifetime. Yet it appears to end happily:

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 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 (I.3101-3108).

This is an inadequate ending, if we are to judge it as an ending. As several critics have argued, however, this is not an ending, but a cessation of action: chaos awaits Emelye and Palamon, just as it does Arcite and the Argive widows before them.<sup>27</sup> The Knight does not tell of the terror of Palamon and Emelye's future "within the harsh limits of the iron world" (Irving, 59). Instead,

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<sup>27</sup> Jerold C. Frakes argues convincingly on this matter: "As Frye expresses it, the narrative does not end, but rather simply stops. As a consequence, one must see subsequent cycles as inevitable; since the characters, events, etc. are subject to the order of *fortuna*, no point of ultimate equilibrium can be attained; it is the same with the narrative, even if it is simply cut off at the end of a cycle, as in the *Knight's Tale*, where the final speeches of Egeus and Theseus do nothing if not emphasize that the culmination of event in this tale is only a temporary state which will pass inevitably into another of the cycles endemic to the life *and* narrative according to the order of *fortuna* (5-6).



the Knight chooses to leave the couple happily, an ending that, in the context in which Chaucer deliberately places it, rings unequivocally false.

## VI. Conclusion

The “life of man,” Bede writes in *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, is like “the swift flight of a sparrow through [a] house” during a winter storm: the sparrow is inside briefly, and there is safe from the tempestuous universe, but then goes back outside into the cold and dark (129). Chaucer’s writings—in particular *The Canterbury Tales*—support this bleak conception of the universe: a universe in which respite from chaos is only temporary. “For certain,” the Monk says in his tale, “whan that Fortune list to flee / Ther may no man the cours of hire withholde” (VII.1995-1996).

*The Knight’s Tale*, I believe, is especially bleak. It records the dissolution of what many medieval people thought to be, or at least hoped to be, the foremost institution of social order. Knights, as established by Lull and other reformatory writers, were supposed to interpret the workings of God and prevent social anarchy. Knights were, in other words, meant to be paragons of virtue, angels of God sent to maintain the social order. Chaucer’s social imagination, however, is firmly grounded in reality. His writings disallow even the prospect of such an ideal knight: neither the Knight nor Theseus can secure social order; both Theseus and the Theban cousins instigate chaos; and Theseus cannot interpret the workings of the gods. So *The Knight’s Tale* is not a romantic celebration of chivalrous knighthood told by a perfect knight. It is, rather, an ironic condemnation of knighthood and its principles, a work that suggests that the “[earthly] city,” as St. Augustine writes in *City of God*, “is often divided against itself” (434). The world of *The Knight’s Tale* is chaotic, divided, a place in which each action, human or divine, leads, inevitably, to either violence or death. It is a world in which there is no order.

And, as the Parson says in his tale, “in helle is noon ordre of rule...they that been dampned been nothyng in ordre, ne holden noon ordre” (X.217-218).

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