CHAUCER'S THESEUS AND THE KNIGHT'S TALE

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Although Chaucer refers to Theseus in *Anelida and Arcite*, the *House of Fame*, and the *Legend of Good Women*, it is only the Theseus of the *Knight's Tale* who has attracted much critical attention. What seems to have become the orthodox interpretation is most eloquently argued by W. Frost and C. Muscatine, both of whom see the Knight's Theseus as an ideal figure. Frost[1] says that Theseus "unites in his person successes in war and love alike" and considers him to be "the executant of destiny" (p. 106). Muscatine[2] sees Theseus as "variously the ruler, the conqueror, the judge, and, not least, the man of pity", and concludes that Theseus is "representative of the highest chivalric conceptions of nobility". Similar views are propounded by other notable critics,[3] who without exception ignore Chaucer's characterization of Theseus outside the *Knight's Tale*.

The first critic to articulate in some detail a very different view of Theseus is H.J. Webb.[4] Webb briefly discusses Chaucer's treatment of Theseus in the *House of Fame* and *Legend of Good Women* within the context of Theseus's later career as we know it from classical sources. He says, "It is not surprising, therefore, to find Chaucer [in the *Knight's Tale*] retaining or emphasizing or adding to those traits of character in Theseus which were ignoble or cruel. In so doing, he manages to suggest that Theseus, even at the time he was performing his most knightly deeds, was possessed of those frailties which, in later life, caused him to be damned" (p. 289). Webb also discusses several specific departures which Chaucer has made from Boccaccio's portrayal of Theseus in *Il Teseida* and concludes (pp. 290-94) with S. Robertson[5] that the Theseus of the *Knight's Tale* is a much less admirable figure than is the Teseo of Chaucer's source. This view is shared by T.K. Meier and K.A. Blake,[6] and specific instances of negative, or problematical, elements in Chaucer's Theseus are noted by D. Underwood, R. Neuse, J.S. Herz, D. Brooks and A. Fowler, and J. Helterman.[7]

In attempting to reconcile the two critical positions outlined above, we must remember that the problem of Theseus's character in the *Knight's Tale* is complicated in three ways: first, Chaucer is working from traditional, and to some extent intractable, accounts of the "duk of Atthenes"; secondly, he had elsewhere dealt with Theseus at some length;[8] and, finally, the Knight as narrator stands between Chaucer and Theseus, so that (as in other *Canterbury Tales*) the views and attitudes of narrator and author may not necessarily be identical. Each of these complications will be discussed here with a view to establishing both the tradition of Theseus as Chaucer

may have understood it and his modification of that tradition in the *Knight's Tale*.

I. THE TRADITION OF THESEUS

Although Ovid's account is earlier, Plutarch is the first writer to present a compendious account of Theseus. In both his "Life of Theseus" and in his "Comparison of Theseus and Romulus",[9] Plutarch describes Theseus as a morally ambivalent figure whose conceptual affinities with the Theseus of the *Knight's Tale* are striking, as I hope to show in Section III. Plutarch says that Theseus generally combined wisdom with his strength ("Life", II, p. 5), and that in his most famous exploit, the slaying of the Minotaur, he demonstrated "courage, magnanimity, righteous zeal for the common good, [and] yearning for glory and virtue" ("Comparison", I, p. 191). Of the same adventure, Plutarch had earlier said, "[Theseus] is accused of the desertion of Ariadne, which was not honourable nor even decent" ("Life", XXIX, p. 67); Theseus's "rape of Helen is said to have filled Attica with war, and to have brought about at last his banishment and death" ("Life", XXIX, p. 67). Although Theseus attempted to justify his transgressions against women ("Comparison", VI, p. 197), his explanations are unsatisfactory: "One may suspect that these deeds of his were done in lustful wantonness" (VI, p. 197); the consequences for Athens were "enmities, wars, slaughter of citizens" (VI, p. 199). In the "Comparison" Plutarch also criticizes Theseus for destroying "many cities bearing the names of ancient kings and heroes" (IV, p. 195), for embracing democracy (II, p. 191), for his treatment of his son (III, p. 193), for his causing the death of Aegeus (V, p. 197), and for abandoning his mother (IV, p. 199). Plutarch concludes that "the oracle given to Aegeus, forbidding him to approach a woman while in a foreign land, seems to indicate that the birth of Theseus was not agreeable to the will of the gods" (VI, p. 201).

Yet Plutarch's Theseus remains a largely admirable figure whose primary virtues are his intelligence, courage, and magnanimity. But each of these virtues has its correlative vice - intellectual arrogance, foolhardiness, and passion, respectively - and Theseus is susceptible, in Plutarch's view, to all of them. Above all, what Plutarch's Theseus lacks is what Chaucer would call "mesure", perhaps an irrelevant quality for a hero but an absolute necessity for a ruler, and implicit throughout Plutarch's account is the suggestion that not only are the two roles basically incompatible but that many of Theseus's difficulties result from his incapacity, or unwillingness, to recognize this fact and to abandon his life of heroic adventure for the more complex, and, in his view, less satisfactory, life of the statesman.

Whether or not Chaucer knew Plutarch is debatable. W.W. Skeat[10] suggested that Chaucer used a Latin translation of the "Life of Theseus" for the *Legend of Ariadne*, a view challenged by C.G. Child[11] and Robinson (see n.8, p. 851). One correspondence between Plutarch and Chaucer which is not paralleled elsewhere involves the statement in the *Legend of Ariadne* that Minos's "gayler", whom S.B. Meech[12] perceptively identifies as Daedalus, accompanies Theseus, Ariadne,

and Phaedra on their voyage by ship from Crete instead of fleeing separately on wings. Plutarch, citing Cleidemus, says, "Now when Daedalus fled from Crete in a merchant vessel to Athens, Minos . . . pursued him with his ships of war . . ." ("Life", XIX, p. 39). It is clear then that the account in *Ariadne* is not Chaucer's invention, although it is still doubtful whether he had direct access to a Latin translation of the *Lives*. Since this detail is preserved in Plutarch it may have been preserved elsewhere as well, perhaps in a manuscript gloss on the *Heroides*, and it seems likely that other relevant details from Plutarch's account were similarly scattered throughout manuscript glosses dealing with Theseus. It is not unreasonable to assume therefore that Chaucer was conversant with some of the particulars of Plutarch's discussion of Theseus which he encountered either in the *Lives* or in glosses on the *Heroides* derived from the *Lives*.

As we have seen, Plutarch's Theseus is a morally complex individual who embodies precisely those heroic qualities which make his attempts at political leadership unsatisfactory. For Plutarch, Theseus is an admirable military figure but a faithless lover, a defender of the powerless but the abductor of defenceless women. Other classical accounts of Theseus tend to emphasize exclusively either the positive or negative aspects of his character; what Plutarch had joined together, the Latin poets for the most part split asunder, a phenomenon most clearly seen in the work of two Latin poets, Ovid and Statius, to whom Chaucer frequently alludes.

Chaucer's indebtedness to Ovid in the *House of Fame* and *Legend of Good Women* has frequently been noted by editors and critics alike, and, in his discussion of the *Knight's Tale*, R.L. Hoffman[13] says that "it contains more allusions or parallels to Ovidian passages than any other of the *Tales*". For Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*[14] (VIII, 169-82) and *Heroides*[15] (X, "Ariadne Theseo"), Theseus is the unfaithful lover who abandons Ariadne after she helps him to escape from her father's prison (cf. *Fasti*, III, 461-516). The brief account in the *Metamorphoses* emphasizes Theseus's cruelty:

> . . . Aegides rapta Minoide Diam
> vela dedit comitemque suam crudelis in illo
> litore destituit (VIII, 174-76).

In the *Heroides*, Ariadne accuses Theseus of ingratitude and treachery:

> Mitius inveni quam te genus omne ferarum;
> credita non ulli quam tibi peius eram.
> quae legis, ex illo, Theseu, tibi litore mitto
> unde tuam sine me vela tulere ratem,
> in quo me somnusque meus male prodidit et tu,
> per facinis somnis insidiate meis (X, 1-6).

She also accuses him of lying to her (73-74), and, perhaps alluding to the legend which held that Poseidon was Theseus's father, says, "auctores saxa fretumque tui!" (132).[16] Little wonder that Chaucer, having some acquaintance with Ovid, concludes his account of Theseus

in the *Legend of Ariadne* with "the devel quyte hym his while!" (2227; cf. his similar statement in the *House of Fame*, "The devel be hys soules bane!" [408]).

When we turn to Statius's account of Theseus, it is as though Ovid had never lived. Although he is not a major character in the *Thebaid*, Theseus does figure prominently in the poem's conclusion (XII, 519-796). The Theseus who abandons Ariadne is ignored here[17] as Statius focuses upon the heroic and magnanimous Theseus who succours the Theban widows (XII, 540-610) and defeats the villainous Creon in single combat (XII, 752-81). Gone are Ovid's "crudelis", "facinus", "insidiate"; in their place, we find Statius consistently referring to Theseus as "victor" (e.g., XII, 532, 544) and as "Neptunius heros" (XII, 588), one for whom Fortune "subitae . . . maxima laudis / semina . . . aperit" (XII, 546-47). When Creon has been slain, the Theban widows "Thesea magnanimum quaerunt" (795). From beginning to end Statius's Theseus is a totally admirable figure, unmarred by any of the flaws suggested by Plutarch and emphasized by Ovid.

The epigraph to the *Knight's Tale* (*Thebaid*, XII, 519-20), which in somewhat expanded form is also used to introduce the story in *Anelida and Arcite* (*Thebaid*, XII, 519-21), may establish Chaucer's use of that portion of Statius's poem[18] which deals with Theseus's war against Creon, but we must remember that, as Hoffman (n. 13) and others have noted, Chaucer also uses Ovid's quite different account of Theseus. In an age which thrived on paradox, Chaucer's use in the *Knight's Tale* of such disparate accounts is considerably less strange than it may at first appear to be. We should note further Statius's tendency towards syncretism (see n. 16, Mozley, I, xvi; n. 18, Clogan, *SP*, 606), a tendency which may have exerted some influence on Chaucer's conception of Theseus in the *Knight's Tale* as well as in his other characterizations (see Section III, pp. 25-30).

However extensive Chaucer's use of Ovid and Statius may be, his immediate source for the *Knight's Tale* is Boccaccio's *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*.[19] Although Boccaccio had access to both the *Thebaid*, one of his primary sources, and Ovid's poems dealing with Theseus, his characterization of Teseo closely follows that of Statius, ignoring Ovid's account almost completely. Throughout, Boccaccio's Teseo is "buon" and "magnanimo", and there is no doubt that he is intended to be an ideal figure: his war against the Amazons (Bk. I) is the result of their excessive cruelty ("crudeltate a dismisura", stanzas 12-13) to Greek mariners and thus recalls his early adventures against those who, like Procrustes, persecuted the weak. His war against Creon proceeds from essentially the same motives (II, 25-39); further, in his treatment of Palemone and Arcita, he is consistently magnanimous and sympathetic in spite of the fact that he and they are sworn enemies.[20] Considering the length of the *Teseida* and the prominence of Theseus throughout, it is striking, even remarkable, that the Minotaur and Ariadne are never mentioned, and that Theseus's abduction of Helen is referred to only in passing (I, 130; V, 92; XI, 62). The closest Boccaccio comes to overt criticism of Theseus is his gloss of V, 92: ". . . la madre di Teseo la [i.e.,

Elena] a Castore e a Polluce, suoi fratelli, senza essere ella stata tocca da Teseo: per che gli cotale ingiuria perdonata" (p. 399). Although Teseo is a milder, and also a far more highly developed figure than Statius's Theseus, the virtues which the two characters display are very similar and are consistent with those admirable qualities which Plutarch had described in the *Lives*.

But if Teseo is the Apollonian figure of Statius, the Dionysian Theseus of Ovid is not ignored by Boccaccio, although he is radically transformed. In the *Genealogia Deorum* it is the Theseus of the Minotaur and Ariadne about whom Boccaccio says: "Hic insuper a Theseo ab Adriana predocto occiditur, id est a prudenti viro cui virilitas, quam per Adrianam accipio, eo quod andres grece, vir sonet latine, ostendit detestabile tam scelesto vitio subiacere et quibus armis etiam conficiendum sit" (IV, 10, 33-37; cf. XI, 29-30; for Boccaccio's treatment of Theseus and Hippolyta, see X, 48-53). There can be no doubt that Boccaccio used Ovid's account since he specifically refers to "Ovidius" (XI, 29 l. 21); yet he refuses to accept Ovid's moral judgment of Theseus. For Boccaccio, it is the Minotaur which "ostendit detestabile tam scelesto vitio subiacere", and Theseus is the "prudent man" who demonstrates "virilitas", no less in the *Genealogia* than in the *Teseida*. Boccaccio is familiar with the two different accounts of Theseus, but he makes no attempt to synthesize them.

Although D.W. Robertson, Jr. (n. 3, p. 261) and H. Webb (n. 4, 294) speak of a "Theseus tradition" in the Middle Ages, the former assumes that the tradition presented a consistently favourable attitude towards Theseus, the latter an unfavourable one; neither of these views is tenable. The moral ambivalence of Theseus is first discussed explicitly by Plutarch, while Statius and Ovid respectively portray the virtuous and vicious aspects of Theseus's character. For Boccaccio, Theseus is basically the admirable figure of Statius, and, although he is familiar with Ovid's characterization, he does not make use of it except for substantive narrative material. Such then is the "Theseus tradition", which was available to Chaucer; Section II will illustrate the manner in which it was utilized by him.[21]

II. CHAUCER'S THESEUS: *ANELIDA AND ARCITE*, THE *HOUSE OF FAME* AND THE *LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN*

1. *Anelida and Arcite*

Although many problems confront the reader of *Anelida and Arcite*, Chaucer's presentation of Theseus does not seem to be one of them. Theseus is mentioned in the very first line of the poem proper (22); since Chaucer claims to be following "Stace" (21), we would expect to find the noble figure of the *Thebaid*, and such is indeed the case. Returning home from his war against the Amazons, Theseus appears "With laurer corouned, in his char gold-bete" (24), and the people "So cryeden that to the sterres hit wente, / And him to honouren dide al her entente" (27-28). As in the *Knight's Tale* A 975-76), Theseus appropriately displays the image of Mars on his banner (29-31). He brings much treasure from Scythia (32) as well

as his new wife and sister-in-law (36-42). Having described Theseus "In al the flour of Fortunes yevynge" (44), Chaucer says that he will leave him (45-46) and turn to his primary subjects, ". . . quene Anelida and fals Arcite" (49). The triumphant return of Theseus then is to provide the context in which Arcite's "falsing" of Anelida will be described.

Although Pratt (n. 19, *PMLA*, esp. 603, 604, n.) has noted the correspondences between *Anelida* and the *Teseida*, the characterization of Theseus in both poems differs little from what one finds in Statius. It may be enough to say that Chaucer is simply following here in outline form the sequence of events in the *Teseida*, where Theseus's war against the Amazons comprises what Boccaccio calls a "prelude" (". . . si come premessioni alla loro [i.e., Palemone and Arcita] istoria due[22] se ne pongono." "A Fiametta", p. 3) to the love story which is his primary concern. But considering the traditional view of Theseus's behaviour towards women, especially Ariadne, and the absence of such material from both the *Thebaid* and the *Teseida*, it is possible that Chaucer had originally intended to use in the *Anelida* precisely that Ovidian view of Theseus which he presents in the *House of Fame* and *Legend of Good Women*. Whatever the explanation, Chaucer's juxtaposition of the conqueror of "Femenye" and "fals Arcite" contains the potential for the ironic development which, as we shall see, is fully realized in the *Knight's Tale*.

2. *House of Fame*

The Dido and Aeneas story in Book I of the *House of Fame* (219-382) leads Chaucer to mention other faithless lovers (388-426): Demophon (388-96), Achilles (398), Paris (399), Jason (400-01), Hercules (402-04), and Theseus (405-26). Theseus, who is treated at greater length here than all of the others combined, owes his characterization almost exclusively to Ovid's *Heroides*, X, although some details may come from Machaut and the *Ovide Moralisé*. It is perhaps significant that Chaucer's list begins with one "duk of Athenys" (388) and ends with another, and although Chaucer is willing to make allowances for Aeneas (427-32), he offers no excuses for Theseus or the others. As in Ovid, Theseus is specifically accused of betraying Ariadne (407), who had saved his life out of "pite" (412), a highly ironic comment since this is the virtue for which Theseus himself is known and the reason, in Statius and Boccaccio, for his wars against the Amazons and Creon. Again, as Ovid had done, Chaucer accuses Theseus of breaking his sworn pledge to marry Ariadne. This brief account of Theseus in the *House of Fame* is to provide Chaucer with the basic material for his most extensive description of the Ovidian Theseus, the *Legend of Ariadne*.

3. *Legend of Good Women*

E.F. Shannon (n. 13, p. 235) suggests that at the outset of the *Legend of Ariadne* Chaucer is less concerned with his heroine than with her betrayer, and the poet himself says that he writes this story in part because he wishes "to clepe ageyn unto memorye / Of Theseus the grete untrouthe of love" (*Legend of Good Women*, 1889-90). *Ariadne* begins with Chaucer's somewhat confused reference to Minos

(1886) who, to avenge the death of Androgeos, besieges "Alcathoe" (1894-1905). The siege is unsuccessful until Scylla, the daughter of Nisus, falls in love with Minos and delivers her father's city up to him (1906-17). Chaucer's account of Minos's subsequent behaviour towards Scylla is significant in the light of what is to occur later in the *Legend*:

> But wikkedly he quitte hire kyndenesse,
> And let hire drenche in sorwe and distresse,
> Nere that the goddes hadde of hire pite (1918-20).

Like Scylla, Ariadne betrays her father for the sake of love; each young woman is betrayed and abandoned by her beloved who sails home, and each is saved from certain death by the pity of the gods.[23]

The legend proper contains details from various sources, but basically it follows the version in the *Heroides* which Chaucer cites (2220). Like Ovid, Chaucer emphasizes Theseus's falseness (1952-58, 2226), treachery (2174, 2188), cruelty (2198), and ingratitude (2146-47). There is also a suggestion of the uncontrollably passionate Theseus of Plutarch in Chaucer's statement that Theseus abandoned the sleeping Ariadne for her sister because Phaedra "fayrer was than she" (2172). Chaucer says, as he had in the *House of Fame*, that Ariadne saved Theseus out of "routhe" (1982), a quality in which the Ovidian Theseus is himself lacking as he ignores Ariadne's plea to "turn ageyn, for routhe" (2200).

Throughout the *Legend of Ariadne*, Chaucer interrupts his narrative with authorial comments in the form of moral judgments directed at Theseus; twice he consigns him to the devil (2177; 2226-27), and he abandons Theseus as abruptly as the latter abandons Ariadne: "Me lest no more to speke of hym, parde. / These false lovers, poysoun be here bane! " (2179-80). Not even Ovid, speaking through Ariadne, goes this far (for reasons of decorum he would have found it difficult to do so), and although it is possible to see these imprecations as merely conventional or even comic, they make of Theseus a thoroughgoing villain.[24] He himself tells Ariadne that if he does not serve her with the proper humility, his spirit will never rest and he will forever bear the name of traitor (2060-73); Chaucer seems to derive some satisfaction from describing the realization of Theseus's expectations. And the irony of Theseus's abandonment of Ariadne so that she can be slain by wild beasts (2192), when she has saved him from precisely the same fate, serves further to damage his reputation.

III. THESEUS IN THE *KNIGHT'S TALE*

Chaucer's initial decision to call his poem "Palamon and Arcite" rather than the "Theseid" suggests either that he did not find Boccaccio's explanation in the dedicatory epistle to "Fiametta" entirely satisfactory or that he found Boccaccio's handling of the story unsuitable for his purposes.[25] The *Knight's Tale* begins, in several manuscripts, with a quotation from the *Thebaid*, and, in the opening lines of the poem (A 859-74), it does indeed seem that the Theseus who is described is similar to the figure in Statius.

Theseus is lord, governor, and conqueror, the greatest military figure of his age; he combines wisdom and valour (cf. Plutarch, "Life", II, p. 5), and, given both the Statian beginning and the profession of the tale's teller, we would now expect to see these virtues of Theseus manifested in action. But we are told immediately that such is not to be the case (875-8). The Knight will not describe to us either the Scythian expedition or, more significantly, the war against Creon, even though the latter event occurs within the tale. So much then for the substance of Statius's Theseus.

As we have seen, Boccaccio's Teseo is, except for his milder nature, quite similar to the figure in Statius. If Chaucer intended to pattern his Theseus on Teseo, his departures from Boccaccio require explanation. Webb (n. 4, p. 290) notes: (1) Theseus's total destruction of Thebes *after* Creon has been slain, (2) Theseus's pillaging of the countryside, (3) the severity with which Palamon and Arcite are imprisoned, (4) the description of Arcite's release from prison, as well as, with Blake (n. 6, *MLQ*, 9-13), Theseus's quickness to anger, his impetuosity, and his wilfulness. In addition, we should note that Chaucer's references to the Minotaur which is emblazoned on Theseus's "penoun" and to Crete (978-80) do not occur in Boccaccio, nor does Saturn who seems to bear some relation to Theseus (see pp. 27-30 below); the Boethian material in Theseus's "Firste Moevere" speech is entirely Chaucer's addition, and the crucial scene in the grove is described very differently by Chaucer and Boccaccio.

To begin with Webb's points, the first three suggest what Statius explicitly says, namely that Theseus is an implacable foe to his enemies. After mortally wounding Creon, for example, Theseus stands over him and says:

> "iamne dare exstinctis iustos, . . . hostibus ignes,
> iam victos operire placet? vade atra datur
> supplicia extremique tamen secure sepulcri" (XII, 779-81).[26]

The war against Thebes is waged not only for justice but for punishment, and the severity with which the campaign is executed by Theseus in the *Knight's Tale* is in keeping with the tone, if not the substance, of Statius's account. It seems likely that Chaucer found in Statius's characterization a more likely conqueror of Thebes than is Boccaccio's Teseo, and that he modified his Theseus accordingly; I do not believe, as Webb suggests, that these three changes are intended to have us recall the Theseus of the *House of Fame* and the *Legend of Ariadne*. It is more difficult to find an alternative explanation for Webb's fourth point: why does Theseus so readily release Arcite at Pirithous's request, permitting Palamon to remain imprisoned? Here we see the consequences of Theseus's magnanimity and "pite", his passion and impetuosity as they are described by Plutarch. But the question of imprisonment is a crucial one in the context of the *Knight's Tale*, and we need to examine it more closely since it pertains to all the changes from the *Teseida* noted above.

When Theseus imprisons Palamon and Arcite, he does so "Perpetuelly, -- he nolde no ransoun" (1024); neither of these details is in Boccaccio who notes instead Teseo's compassion for the Theban

knights: "ma verso lor piu ne divenne pio" (II, 89). As suggested above, the Theseus of the *Thebaid* might well have responded as Chaucer's Theseus does. Although Theseus's act is certainly justifiable, it nevertheless is not entirely satisfactory morally; after all, Theseus had himself been imprisoned by Minos, and one would expect him to have been more aware than most just how severe a sentence of perpetual imprisonment would be. But at this point in the tale, as opposed to his release of Arcite, it is Theseus's sense of justice, one of his most important characteristics, in Plutarch especially, rather than his "pite", which is most prominent.

As in Boccaccio, Chaucer's Palamon and Arcite variously blame Juno and Fortune for their imprisonment (e.g., III, 66; cf. 1329), but each of Chaucer's knights also attributes his imprisonment to Saturn (Arcite, 1086-89; Palamon, 1328; noted by Blake, n.6, *MLQ*, 14). And Saturn himself says, "Myn is the prison in the derke cote" (2457). Since it is Theseus who is directly responsible for imprisoning Palamon and Arcite, and since Saturn in the *Knight's Tale* is Chaucer's addition to Boccaccio, we would expect to find further correspondences between Theseus and Saturn, and these are indeed present.

Theseus, after winning Thebes, "rente adoun both wall and sparre and rafter" (990; not in the *Teseida*), an incident referred to by Palamon (1331); Plutarch had earlier censured Theseus for needlessly destroying many cities ("Comparison", IV, p. 195). Saturn says: "Myn is the ruyne of the hye halles, / The fallynge of the toures and of the walles" (2463-64). By imprisoning Palamon and Arcite and by destroying the walls of Thebes,[27] Theseus would seem to be acting as Saturn's representative.

In the scene in the grove (1683-1880), it is Theseus rather than Emily (*Teseida*, V, 80) who discovers the Theban knights. Upon learning their identity, Theseus immediately condemns them to death (1742-47); he relents primarily because Hyppolyta and Emily burst into tears: "his herte hadde compassioun / Of wommen, for they wepen evere in oon" (1770-71). This scene recalls Theseus's earlier meeting with the Theban widows, but it also anticipates Saturn's behaviour later in the tale when Venus begins to weep (2470, 2478, 2663-67); both Theseus and Saturn base their judgments upon the same subjective and emotional grounds. It is important to note here too the irony of Theseus's "compassioun of wommen" within the context of his own earlier relationship with them.

The most obvious correspondence between Theseus and Saturn, and the one most frequently cited in the criticism, is that each occupies the position of greatest authority and power within his own realm.[28] But Theseus himself never mentions Saturn; instead he attributes all that happens to Jupiter (e.g., 3035, 3069), and several critics identify him with that deity,[29] their common argument being that Theseus and Jupiter represent a beneficent alternative to the traditionally maleficent Saturn. We have examined briefly the correspondences between Theseus and Saturn; in the tale itself the only parallel between Theseus and Jupiter seems to be their inability to impose their will upon events. Jupiter is incapable of settling the disagreement between Mars and Venus (2442), and the initiative passes to Saturn. Theseus cannot arrive at an equitable

decision in the love-dispute, so he establishes the tournament; once he makes this choice, the decision in the love-dispute is no longer his.[30]

Although Theseus's relationships with women bear some similarity to Jupiter's, there is no reason to suppose that Chaucer wishes us to make this connection. Less peripheral, however, is the ironic connection between Theseus and Juno, who, in order to punish Thebes for her husband's dalliance there, has as her unwitting human agent none other than Theseus, himself a philanderer of some note. But what are we to make of Theseus's references to Jupiter? If Jupiter is the prime mover why is it that the most important events in the tale are controlled by Saturn? For answers, we must return to our examination of imprisonment with which this discussion began.

Chaucer's references to the Minotaur (never mentioned in the *Teseida*) and to Crete recall Theseus's imprisonment by Minos *immediately before Theseus himself is to imprison Palamon and Arcite*. While in prison, Arcite and Palamon lament their fate in patently Boethian terms (e.g., 1251-74, 1303-33); and in his "Firste Moevere" speech (2987-3074), again drawn from Boethius, Theseus refers to "this foule prisoun of this lyf" (3061), an especially interesting reference, since, from the point of view of the Theban knights, it is Theseus himself who is responsible for turning metaphor into reality. Parallels between the *Legend of Ariadne* and the *Knight's Tale* are noted by Robinson,[31] and not the least of these is the fact that in both works it is imprisonment which is crucial in determining subsequent action. Now we can more easily understand the reasons for Chaucer's addition of Boethian material to what he found in Boccaccio. The most significant occurrence in Boethius's life, in the *Consolation* at least, is *his* imprisonment, and it is unlikely that Chaucer could have found a more suitable context for his Boethian passages than the *Knight's Tale*; a former prisoner, Theseus, imposes the same penalty upon Palamon and Arcite, and all three resort to the words of yet another prisoner, Boethius, in order to comment upon the human condition while the deity who controls imprisonment generally, Saturn, determines the course of events.

That the concept of imprisonment, and its converse, freedom, are important in the *Knight's Tale* is indisputable. Throughout the tale this concept is consistently treated in such a way that it becomes inextricably tied to the character of Theseus and thus recalls his earlier career: when Saturn declares that he is responsible for imprisonment, we realize that Theseus, by his actions, has become Saturn's agent; when Palamon and Arcite attribute their incarceration to Saturn, Juno, and Fortune, we understand that all are in part metaphors for Theseus; and it is Theseus himself who compares life literally to the sentence which he had imposed upon the Theban knights. Theseus's own inability to perceive the ineffectiveness of his actions, or that, whatever his wishes, he is serving a master of whose very existence he seems ignorant, raises serious questions about his capacity for understanding himself and the world about him. His behaviour in the *Knight's Tale* is precisely what we would expect of Plutarch's Theseus or of some combination of the disparate characterizations of Ovid on the one hand and Statius and Boccaccio on the other: a reasonable man, when his own passions

are not aroused, who consistently finds himself confronted with situations which make the application of reason impossible; a passionate man whose oscillation between an intellectual desire for justice and an emotional commitment to mercy attenuates his control over events; and a courageous man whose valour is employed in both the defence of righteousness and in the satisfaction of his own desires.

In the *Knight's Tale*, Theseus is above all the champion of the just cause, as his war against Creon demonstrates. But how is justice to be arrived at in the dispute between Palamon and Arcite? Chaucer makes Theseus's choice all the more difficult by obliterating significant distinctions between the Theban knights.[32] Entirely competent in military matters, Theseus is unable to resolve the conflicting claims of Palamon and Arcite. His attempt at a political solution, the tournament, is in effect a refusal to render judgment, and he defers for a year a decision which, in any event, he cannot make. Thus, he says to Palamon and Arcite, "ech of yow shal have his destynee / As hym is shape" (1842-43), a clear admission of his own helplessness, and in his self-appointed role as "juge and officere" he will control only the form which the dispute will take, not its substantive outcome. And when Theseus says that he himself had succumbed to love when younger (1813-14) and asks, rhetorically, "Who may been a fool, but if he love?" (1799), he is not commenting only upon the irrationality of the two young lovers but upon his own earlier experiences as well.

As we have seen, Chaucer parallels the roles of Saturn and Theseus, even though the latter identifies himself with Jupiter. We have seen too that Chaucer, outside the *Knight's Tale*, makes use of two very different conceptions of Theseus. I believe that Theseus in the *Knight's Tale* represents Chaucer's attempt to combine these different conceptions, the potential for either productive or destructive action, which, because Theseus is a powerful lord, are symbolized by Jupiter and Saturn respectively. Considering what Chaucer knew of Ovid's Theseus and what he himself says in the *House of Fame* and *Legend of Ariadne*, it is difficult to believe that he could have created an idealized characterization for him. But he also knew of Theseus's virtues from Statius and Boccaccio and he could not possibly have ignored them. The Theseus whom we find in the *Knight's Tale* then parallels Plutarch's Theseus, a morally ambivalent, highly complex individual, more virtuous than not, but ultimately unable to impose his will upon events.

If Chaucer knew Plutarch's characterization of Theseus, we need look no further for the model upon which he based the central character of the *Knight's Tale*. But even if he were totally ignorant of Plutarch's account, he would have found in Ovid, Statius and Boccaccio sufficiently disparate material to make some attempt at synthesis necessary. In *Anelida and Arcite* and in the *House of Fame* and *Legend of Ariadne* he dealt exclusively with one conception of Theseus or the other, much as Ovid and Statius had done. But in the "Palamon and Arcite", later assigned to the Knight, he combined these conceptions in such a way that one could, by being sufficiently selective, perceive exclusively the Statian Theseus or the Ovidian, just as Theseus himself perceives Jupiter but not Saturn, just as

Palamon, Arcite, and Emily each perceive the importance of one deity but not the others,[33] and just as the Knight sees in Theseus only the admirable qualities he wants to see. Such a perception, as the tale indicates, is not wrong, but it is only partially right. Various studies have demonstrated Chaucer's habitual practice in his use of sources to be one of eclecticism and synthesis; his characterization of Theseus in the *Knight's Tale* is perfectly in keeping with this practice.

NOTES

1 "An Interpretation of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*", *RES*, 25 (1949), 290-304; repr. *Chaucer Criticism: The "Canterbury Tales"* ed. R. Schoeck and J. Taylor (Notre Dame U.P., 1960), pp. 98-116.

2 *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Univ. of California Press, 1964), p. 183.

3 J. Halverson, "Aspects of Order in the *Knight's Tale*", *SP*, 57 (1960), 606-21; D.W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton U.P., 1962), p. 261; B.F. Huppé, *A Reading of the "Canterbury Tales"* (State Univ. of New York Press, 1964), pp. 49-74; R.M. Jordan, *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation* (Harvard U.P., 1967), pp. 156, 180; P.G. Ruggiers, *The Art of the "Canterbury Tales"* (Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1967), p. 162; A.T. Gaylord, "The Role of Saturn in the *Knight's Tale*", *Chaucer Review*, 8 (1974), 171-90.

4 "A Reinterpretation of Chaucer's Theseus", *RES*, 23 (1947), 289-96.

5 "Elements of Realism in the *Knight's Tale*", *JEGP*, 14 (1915), 226-55. Of Chaucer's Theseus Robertson says (250), "There is much less of the domineering, imperious feudal lord in the milder character of Boccaccio". H.G. Wright, *Boccaccio in England from Chaucer to Tennyson* (London, 1957), pp. 46-47, also notes the relative sternness and ruthlessness of Chaucer's Theseus in comparison with Teseo.

6 "Chaucer's Knight as 'Persona': Narration as Control", *English Miscellany*, 20 (1969), 11-21; "Order and Noble Life in Chaucer's Knight's Tale", *MLQ*, 34 (1973), 3-19.

7 "The First of The *Canterbury Tales*", *ELH*, 26 (1959), 455-69; "The Knight: The First Mover in Chaucer's Human Comedy", *UTQ*, 31 (1961-62), 299-315; Chaucer's Elegiac Knight", *Criticism*, 6 (1964), 212-24; "The Meaning of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*", *ME*, 39 (1970), 123-46; "The Dehumanizing Metamorphoses of *The Knight's Tale*", *ELH*, 38 (1971), 493-511. Two critics attempt to bridge the gap between the respective positions of Frost-Muscatine and Webb by arguing that the character of Theseus matures as the tale progresses: R.S. Haller, "The *Knight's Tale* and the Epic Tradition", *Chaucer Review*, 1 (1966), 67-84; M. Fifield, "The *Knight's Tale*: Incident, Idea, Incorporation", *Chaucer Review*, 3 (1968), 95-106.

8 *Anelida and Arcite* and the *House of Fame* almost certainly were written before the "Palamon and Arcite". Because of its subject matter and treatment of Theseus, the *Legend of Ariadne* seems likely to have antedated the "Palamon and Arcite" as well, although the question is still disputed. See *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass., 1957), pp. 669-70; 779; 788; 839-41. All textual references are to this edition.

9 *Plutarch's Lives*, ed. and trans. B. Perrin, *Loeb Classical Library*, 11 vols. (1914, repr. 1948). All references are to vol. I of this edition, and are cited in the text by chapter and page.

10 Ed. *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894, repr. 1963), III, p. 333 n. See also M. Bech, "Quellen und Plan der 'Legende of Goode Women' und ihr Verhaeltniss zur 'Confessio Amantis' ", *Anglia*, 5 (1882), 313-82, esp. 337-42.

11 "Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and Boccaccio's *De Genealogia Deorum*", *MLN*, 11 (1896), 476-90.

12 "Chaucer and an Italian Translation of the *Heroides*", *PMLA*, 45 (1930), 110-28; "Chaucer and the *Ovide Moralisé* — A Further Study", *PMLA*, 46 (1931), 182-204.

13 *Ovid and the "Canterbury Tales"* (Univ. of Penn. Press, 1966), p. 39. Like Frost, *et al.*, Hoffman sees Theseus as an admirable figure (pp. 46, 60). For Ovid's influence on Chaucer, see also E.F. Shannon, *Chaucer and the Roman Poets, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature*, 7 (Harvard U.P., 1929), pp. 15-44, 63-75, 228-58, 302-07.

14 Ed. and trans. F.J. Miller, *Loeb Classical Library*, 2 vols. (1916, repr. 1939). References are to this edition.

15 "*Heroides*" *and* "*Amores*", ed. and trans. G. Showerman, *Loeb Classical Library*, (1921, 1931). References are to this edition.

16 This legend is also referred to by Plutarch (*Lives*, I, vi, p.13), Statius (*Thebaid*, XII, 588, 665, 730), and Boccaccio (*Gen. Deor.*, X, 48). For all textual references to the *Thebaid* see J.H. Mozley ed. and trans. *Loeb Classical Library*, 2 vols. (1928, repr. 1967); for all references to the *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium Libri* see V. Romano, ed., *Scrittori D'Italia* 200-01, 2 vols. (Bari, 1951).

17 When Statius does refer to Ariadne (as "Gnosida", XII, 676), he does so only to recall Theseus's adventures in Crete.

18 It is impossible to know whether the epigraphs are Chaucer's, but even if they are only scribal, they indicate the precise section of the *Thebaid* which Chaucer used. The standard study of Chaucer's indebtedness to Statius is B.A. Wise, *The Influence of Statius Upon Chaucer* (Baltimore, 1911; repr. New York, 1967); see also Shannon, *Chaucer and the Roman Poets*, pp. 329-32 *et passim*, and P. Clogan, "Chaucer's Use of the *Thebaid*", *English Miscellany*, 18 (1967), 9-13. In "Chaucer and the *Thebaid* Scholia", *SP*, 61 (1964), 599-615, Clogan argues for Chaucer's knowledge of several *Thebaid* glosses.

19 Ed. A. Roncaglia, *Scrittori D'Italia* 185 (Bari, 1941). All references are to this edition. For Chaucer's indebtedness to *Il Teseida*, see Robinson (n. 8 above), pp. 669-70 and 671-83 *passim*; R.A. Pratt, "The Knight's Tale", *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales"*, ed. W.F. Bryan and G. Dempster (New York, 1941, repr. 1958), pp. 82-105; Pratt, "Conjectures Regarding Chaucer's Manuscript of the *Teseida*", *SP*, 42 (1945), 745-63; Pratt, "Chaucer's Use of the *Teseida*", *PMLA*, 62 (1947), 598-621; H.S. Wilson, "*The Knight's Tale* and the *Teseida* Again", *UTQ*, 18 (1948-49), 131-46; H.M. Cummings, *The Indebtedness of Chaucer's Works to the Italian Works of Boccaccio, Univ. of Cincinnati Studies*, X (Menasha, Wisc., 1916).

20 See, for example, the description of his imprisonment of them in which the guards are told to treat them with "onore" (II, 98-99; cf. *Knight's Tale* A 1030-32) and his words on discovering them in the grove; "vincerá il fallo la mia gran pietate" (V, 92; cf. *Knight's Tale*, 1743-47).

21 Chaucer may have known the *Ovide Moralisé* and almost certainly knew Machaut's *Jugement dou Roy de Navarre*, both of which follow Ovid in their presentations of Theseus's character; but although Ovid, Statius, and Boccaccio need not have been Chaucer's only sources of information concerning Theseus, there is every reason to believe that he relied more heavily

upon them than upon other accounts which added little, except incidental details, to what he already knew. See Meech, n.12, "Chaucer and the *Ovide Moralisé* - A Further Study", 182-204, and J.L. Lowes, "Chaucer and the *Ovide Moralisé*", *PMLA*, 33 (1918), 302-25. Theseus material contained in the commentaries and chronicles of such authors as Servius, Macrobius, Isidore, Higden, *et al.*, is not considered specifically here because most of it is included in the works considered above, Chaucer's knowledge of which is unquestioned.

22 The second prelude is the war against Creon.

23 For the story of Scylla, see *Metamorphoses* VIII, 11-151.

24 They are conventional both verbally and contextually, and comic to those who see Chaucer as reducing to absurdity here the idea upon which the *Legend of Good Women* as a whole is based; i.e. Theseus is so clearly an admirable figure elsewhere, especially in the *Thebaid* and the *Teseida*, that one cannot take seriously the disparaging remarks made about him here.

25 Chaucer's decision could have been based on other reasons which are not dependent upon Boccaccio's explanation in "A Fiametta." A reading of *Il Teseida* alone would have demonstrated that all of Bk. I and much of II could be eliminated without affecting the basic narrative.

26 Teseo simply leaves the corpse where it falls and returns to his own men (II, 67).

27 Cf. 1880; Wise (n. 18 above) p. 51, cites a distant parallel in *Thebaid* XII, 703. Chaucer also suggests (881) what Boccaccio specifically states (*Teseida*, I, 118), i.e., that had it not been for Hippolyta's surrender, Theseus would have destroyed the walls of Scythia.

28 See, for example, Blake (n. 6 above) *MLQ*, 13, n. 14; Underwood (n. 7 above) *ELH*, 463; Muscatine (n. 2 above) p. 178, and T.A. Van, "Theseus and the 'Right Way' of the *Knight's Tale*", *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 4 (1971), 83-100, esp. 99.

29 Gaylord (n. 3 above) 175; Neuse (n. 7 above) *UTQ*, 307; and Brooks and Fowler, *ME*, 125.

30 Chaucer emphasizes Theseus's inability to control events at this point, for no sooner does Theseus declare that "Arcite of Thebes shal have Emelie" (2658), than Saturn makes a very different decision (2669-70); Boccaccio, as usual, is somewhat more discursive (VIII, 124-31).

31 (n. 8 above) p. 851, l. 1960, n. To these we might add the ironic similarity between the two sisters who fall in love with the incarcerated Theseus and the two sworn "brothers" who are smitten by Emily.

32 For example, Chaucer's description of "Two yonge knyghtes liggynge by and by, / Bothe in oon armes" (1011-12) is not paralleled in Boccaccio (cf. *Teseida*, II, 85-86), and Chaucer does not distinguish between Palamon and Arcite physically as Boccaccio does (III, 49-50). Most important, Arcita is clearly the more noble of the two knights in the *Teseida* (see e.g., III, 11-12, 60; V, 13, 33-63; VIII, 126; X, 21, 28, 61; XII, 26), whereas Chaucer's treatment of Palamon and Arcite makes it extremely difficult to choose between them.

One of Chaucer's most significant departures from the *Teseida* is his identification of Palamon, Arcite, and Emily with Venus, Mars, and Diana respectively. In Boccaccio, each of the three prays to various deities at different points in the action, and the parallels between the human and divine characters are therefore less distinct. Arcita, for example, prays to Apollo (IV, 42) and to Venus (IV, 77) as well as to Mars, and Boccaccio tells us that prior to the tournament Palamon prays at every temple in Athens before returning to the temple of Venus (VII, 42).