Reversals of Fate in "The Knight's Tale"

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Reversals of Fate in the Knight's Tale

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Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Chance and the fortuitous govern a series of seven crucial events in the Knight's Tale, which form the controlling pattern of its advancement and outlook. While Boethian language, such as the words cas or aventure, is used in describing many of these chance events, the attendant Boethian values of perceivable justice and divine order are absent. For example, along with the constant inter­vention of the irrational, Chaucer also suggests the near equality of the protagonists as moral beings, making their fates irresolvable in terms of justice and reason. Chaucer emerges as the ultimate philosopher in the Knight's Tale, with a proverbial exhortation to make a virtue of necessity in a world which has an abiding sense of the mysterious.
The Knight commences the tales of the Canterbury pilgrims because "by aventure, or sort, or cas," the cut falls to him: Chaucer as narrator has very simply introduced via this detail the mundane reality of chance, which in the Knight's Tale will be an ineluctable motif, pervasive and philosophic, inciting sympathy in the audience. Whether or not the divine mind impels the slightest tendre Aprill flour, pilgrimage, each cas or aventure, and the deeds of a furie infernal, things lie beyond the control of persons -- an other imposes itself -- and personal responsibility, at least for the events of this world, becomes a moral illusion or a mystery.

From its first sounding in the drawing of the cut ("Welcome be the cut, a Goddes name!" says the Knight, l. 854), the motif of chance constitutes a seminal structure in series leading to "the grete effect for which [the Knight] bygan." Within the tale itself, the first event attributable to cas or aventure is the discovery of Palamon and Arcite. They are very nearly dead amid death when found by the pillagers in the heap of bodies, once Creon's army. Since the knights might easily have succumbed to their wounds, their very lives become identified with fate. The significance of timing is reflected in this happenstance, and asserts a value on each chance event. For example, the next fortuitous occurrence is the sighting of Emelye. It happens one particular "morwe of May," after an imprisonment of long duration: "yeer by yeer and day by day." Emelye might have been seen before -- upon some earlier May -- which suggests a discrete moment within a great extent of possibility. Moreover, in the matter of timing, it is important that Palamon sights Emelye first; otherwise there might never have ensued a mutual challenge for the lady.
The next key development in the *Knight's Tale* is the chance release of Arcite from prison, governed as it is by the chance circumstance that Perotheus knew Arcite at Thebes and not Palamon: "Duc Perotheus loved wel Arcite, / And hadde hym knowe at Thebes yeer by yere [sic]" (1202-03). The knights are grieved reciprocally by the release which sets them physically apart, thus serving to further their rivalry and lead toward their first martial confrontation.

In preparing for that very confrontation, the Knight's phraseology parallels -- as it has consistently -- that of Chaucer's the narrator when he spoke of *aventure* or *cas* in the fall of the cut to the Knight. Indeed, the Knight draws attention to the timeliness of Palamon's escape:

"It fel ... in the seventhe yer, of May / The thridde nyght" (1462-63): such timing will bring it about that Palamon meets Arcite in the grove. Then follows the familiar refrain, which has its eyes on fate: "Were it by aventure or destynee -- / As, whan a thyng is shapen, it shal be" (1465-66). Arcite's May observance in turn involves a mystic navigation which will take him to within Palamon's hearing:

Out of the court, were it a myle or tweye.  
And to the grove of which that I yow tolde 
By *aventure* his wey he gan to holde. . . .  
(1504-06, italics added)

Fifth in the chance motif series within the *Knight's Tale* is the intervention of Duke Theseus into the combat of the two warriors. As I shall later discuss the entire series in detail, here I wish only to note the Knight's testimony of faith, in Boethian fashion, as to the timeliness of the event (1663-69) and the divinity behind human appetence (1670-72).

Two additional unforeseeable developments concatenate to give the
Knight's Tale its special mystery: one of these is Theseus' sudden modification of the battle conditions. For although Duke Theseus gives a well-received reason for the new rules of the contest (to save lives), whatever serves him with the impetus for reaching his decision at so late a stage is never revealed. Instead, like the Athenian audience and the protagonists, we receive from the herald the impersonal and formal injunction, and its dramatic effect has the unpredictability and finality of an event in nature, beyond ourselves, and especially beyond the influence or control of those directly involved, Arcite and Palamon. Conversely, the injunction exerts a crucial influence on the destiny of the knights.

The denouement of this series is Arcite's accident on the tournament field. It is an event for which reasoned justification is inadequate, and neither the character and conduct of the gods behind Arcite's demise nor the avenue of moral casuistry with regard to the knights may satisfy us with the outcome. Chaucer emerges as the ultimate philosopher in the Knight's Tale, exhorting for acceptance and hope in a mysterious world which has an abiding sense of the unintelligible.

Being the initial teller of tales is appropriate to the Knight, since his deferential and wise earnestness is all to the purpose of sentence and solaas. As he commences, nothing has been said of experience: we are at the point of a tabula rasa, and it is contributory to his stature that the Knight begins his tale free from the need to "quite" anyone. Rather, the Knight's approach to his tale is much like the Parson's. St. Augustine advises 3 teachers to enter into a bond of love with students, and I believe the Knight enters into such a bond and offers his narrative because he is humbled by it. The Knight conducts himself with humility ("meeke as is
a mayde"), first of the Christian virtues, and courtesy, both reflections not of mere propriety, but of the wise compassion for which his tale is the basis.

In brief contrast, the vain Prioress is very occupied with manners and ostentatious appearances. However, she is not a superior realist, she is a sentimentalist (and this with her hounds and mousetraps!). Her tale carries out her contrast with the Knight by fully revealing the other side of the coin of her sentimentality: a kind of fierce vindictiveness. Amor vincit omnia (in the sense of caritas) is the antithesis of her tale, which is intractable in its prejudice and designed to gratify the most bald kind of bigotry. The Prioress is perfectly unconscious of the ironic comment her brooch makes upon her story; nonetheless, just as she counterfeits cheer of court, she wears a brooch which in her possession is a counterfeit -- not made of true mettle (caritas) -- beneath the surface.

Elsewhere in the Canterbury Tales the Knight's authority is signified when he becomes a peacemaker (see the Pardoner's Tale 960-968). For Chaucer, especially as a medieval poet, it goes without saying that such an action is revelatory of the idea, or the type of "a verray, parfit gentil knyght;" and that peace-making poses a genuine spiritual dimension to the ideal figure and his authority. Further, unlike even the Prioress, who is also high in station, the Knight is given no personal name: he is to be identified strictly with all that evinces his acumen and moral force. The Knight exercises his authority (in the Prologue of the Nun's Priest's Tale), to curb the Monk from dwelling interminably upon tragedies: "for litel heavynesse / Is right ynough to muche folk," he says. The Knight desires not to burden persons; he believes they need as well to hear of those who rise from poor condition and who "wexeth fortunat," in which is "joye and
greet solas." To return to his tale, its teller is of the stuff of affirmation; there is no burden in it, unless it be the burden of the mystery. Mystery is not diminished in one of great experience and knowledge, but rather is given a local habitation and a name.

Fortune's contrasting faces (Boethius, Bk. 2, Pr. 1) encounter each other as Theseus, the triumphant warrior and bridegroom, comes upon the wailing women of Thebes, who are bereft in a sordid way of even the obsequies for their husbands: the princes' bodies have been left for the hounds. This "worldes transmutacioun" is arrayed before Duke Theseus in the words of the oldest lady, who refers to Fortune twice in her appeal to his might and mercy. Of course Boethius' Lady Fortune admonishes Boethius about grief over worldly welfare, which is her possession, to disburse as she pleases (Bk. 2, Pr. 2). But the unsuitability here of such a remonstration suggests that the *Knight's Tale* is more than simply an illustration of Boethius' philosophy, or, as I hope to indicate, of conventional medieval iconography and doctrine. The *Knight's Tale* accepts the wailing women as refugees of war who have no philosophy of consolation; and this acceptance, before and after their imperfections, is extended to the two protagonists, Arcite and Palamon.

Even Duke Theseus, of "chivalrie the flour", is not chivalry's perfect exponent. Idealized as he is, he shares with Arcite and Palamon the ambiguity that complicates symbol which is also flesh. Theseus, responding to the lamenting women, quickly puts on his martial nature and personally defeats the former conqueror, Creon. Theseus' power is established, and it thus becomes implicative of human limitation when much later his purposes are thwarted. The Duke's power is not morally pure, as evidenced by the plundering
he now presides over after Creon's defeat, much as that which had gone before under Creon. His redres is really more like revenge, and this from an exem­plary, righteous sovereign.

In the initial chance situation of the poem, the protagonists are discovered (incidentally, during the plundering) and placed in prison. Their incarceration, the slimmest survival, sets the tale in motion, and seems to suggest both their restricted freedom and (like the manner in which they were found, it prophesies their mutual struggle: equals, found lying side-by-side, neither is free, and it is merely by a tether that they continue to survive in their (symbolic) confinement, as servants of love.

When Palamon expresses what seems to be (and will be), pain for the knights, Arcite describes the conditions the cousins have had thrust upon them, along with the Edgar-like toleration requisite for it:

Cosyn myn, what eyleth thee,
That art so pale and deedly on to see?
Why cripestow? Who hath thee doon offence?
For Goddes love, taak al in pacience
Oure prisoun, for it may noon oother be.
Fortune hath yeven us this adversitee.
Som wikke aspect or disposicioun
Of Saturne, by som constellacioun,
Hath yeven us this, although we hadde it sworn;
So stood the hevene whan that we were born.
We moste endure it; this is the short and playn.

(1081-91)

Arcite attributes their adversity to Fortune, or he posits that Saturn, by working the influence of virulent stars, ordained the imprisonment. The cousins' fate, they feel, is in the hands of things external, beyond, and not due to themselves: in fact, it happens despite them ("although we hadde it sworn"). The very act of Palamon and Arcite being torn from the heap, revived and incarcerated, reflects their complete passivity at this stage. Yet Emelye's appearance to these observers in the tower compounds the sense
of their being acted upon, and makes Arcite's "For Goddes love, taak al in pacience" ironic in a comic sense: he has yet to learn that Emelye is the source of Palamon's "A!" When he sees her, how absolute his expression becomes, in contrast to his former smug sermon on pacience:

The fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly
Of hire that rometh in the yonder place,
And but I have hir mercy and hir grace,
That I may seen hire atte leeste weye,
I nam but deed; ther nis namoore to seye.

(1118-22)

D.W. Robertson identifies as medieval conventions both the 'I shall die if I do not get her mercy' expression of Arcite, and Palamon's confession of love's arrows striking through his eyes to his heart (1096-7). It is certain that both descriptions reveal the vulnerability of the protagonists, but I believe Chaucer has appropriated such conventions for another purpose than simply to indict moralistically and to fault Palamon and Arcite for what happens to them in the Knight's Tale. For most importantly, the Knight's Tale returns to the caprice of the gods and cas or aventure, which puts events beyond the control of even a (speculative) reformed humanity. But also it is a poem occupied with the freshness of May, Arcite (or Palamon) as bold lover and warrior, and the beauty of Emelye, which appears to the youths after they have passed many years in their cell:

This passeth yeer by yeer and day by day,
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 May with floures newe --
For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe,

Er it were day, as was hir wone to do,
She was arisen and al redy dight;

...
Yclothed was she fressh, for to devyse:
Hir yelow heer was broyded in a tresse
Bihynde hir bak, a yerde long, I gesse.
And in the gardyn, at the sonne upriste,
She walketh up and doun, and as hire liste
She gadereth floures, party white and rede,
To make a subtil gerland for hire hede;
And as an aungel hevenysshly she soong.

This description is the narrator's, and not either protagonist's. It has the elan vitale which the Knight demonstrates when later he jokes about Emelye's bathing, and that is further evinced in his son the Squire, who sleeps "namoore than dooth a nyghtynagle," and is "fressh as is the month of May" (Prologue, ll. 98 and 92). Especially the last simile of her description suggests how Emelye might well seem to Palamon to be the goddess Venus. The narrator attributes the event of Palamon seeing Emelye to chance:

And so bifel, by aventure or cas,
That thurgh a wyndow, thikke of many a barre
Of iren greet and square as any sparre,
He cast his eye upon Emelya,
And therwithal he bleynte and cride, "A!"

This is the second great reversal to affect the knights, because their response to Emelye elicits two separate oaths which commit them to a struggle to the death. The twin protagonists become differentiated by their oaths, yet differentiation does not of itself adjudicate in favor of one or the other. Rather, Charles Muscatine develops the contrary in "Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer's Knight's Tale," PMLA, 65 (1950), 911-29. His comparison with the Teseida develops the point that Chaucer completely altered Boccaccio's Palemon, who in the Italian poem is merely a foil for the hero, Arcita. In exercising selectivity in the reduction of the original narrative, Chaucer also balances the contestants, at least in comparison with the Teseida.
A chief opponent of this view, William Frost, attempts to delineate the knights along neat categories, as do many proponents of a sharp distinction in the two warriors. In "An Interpretation of Chaucer's Knight's Tale," Review of English Studies (1949), 289-304, Frost condemns Arcite, and says that his oath repudiates friendship (p. 296); yet the oath does not stop Arcite from dealing in an honorable and knightly fashion with his rival. Arcite fetches food and armor for Palamon that later morning in May to do proper battle: he is not ruthless, though in his oath he says what Chaucer often demonstrates is true of human strife in love:

Wostow nat wel the olde clerkes sawe,  
That 'who shal yeve a lovere any lawe?'  
Love is a greeter lawe, by my pan,  
Than may be yeve to any ertthely man;  
And therfore positif lawe and swich decree  
Is broken al day for love in ech degree.  
A man moot nedes love, maugree his heed.  

(1163-69)

The knights seem to me to represent the good and bad sides of the irascible and concupiscent in humankind. If the knights are not precise equals, at least they are complementary: Arcite shares Palamon's concupiscence and Palamon shares Arcite's irascibility. For example, Palamon prays to Venus as though she appears to him alone ("me", 1106). Yet, when Arcite sees her as well, he becomes possessive (of Venus!), and answers the challenge for his Lady, when he says: "I love and serve, / And evere shal til that myn herte sterve" (1143-44). Palamon seems to be using his oath for his own purposes, rather than simply upholding an ideal. There is no criticism in this, except to show that Palamon, despite his loftiness, lives in the same world as his cousin. Again, when Palamon escapes and comes upon Arcite doing his observance to May, he self-righteously tells
Arcite: "[Thou] hast byjaped heere duc Theseus, / And falsly chaunged hast thy name thus!" (1585-86). Yet of his own trickery he is affected, and euphemistic: "[I] out of prison am astert by grace" (1592). We know in reality that he escaped through the help of a friend, and by drugging the prison guard.

Though I shall have one more observation on Palamon and Arcite, the concern of the Knight's Tale seems to me not to be uncovered by disputing the relative merits of the knights. The greatest apostasy, from the point of view of my thesis, would be to accept Palamon absolutely as the superior knight, and to see justice done in Arcite's death. The comparable intrinsic worth of the two protagonists is meant to disturb, to incite sympathy and wonder in the audience.

The mutual jealousy and spite of the contestants locked in the tower, festers in their isolation. Then, for the third time the fate of the knights is altered, by the chance that Perotheus knew Arcite (and not Palamon), years before, and due to his strong friendship with Theseus. Theseus' arbitrary action is a breach of justice for a man of "gentil herte," if only from the understanding of the one who is left in prison. However, in this case there are complications unknown to Theseus, and as the Knight simply says, "It happed on a day" (1189).

The competitiveness of Arcite and Palamon, and the similarity of their predicaments, is suggested by their parallel speeches on Fortune at the point of Arcite's exile. Each envies the other, and says the victory has fallen into his hands. Arcite tells Palamon, "Wel hath Fortune yturned thee the dys," ever conscious of the apparently chaotic power ("dys") over him. As Jefferson notes (pp. 142-43), Boethius is the source for Arcite's
speech, with its main thematic thrust that God gives persons better than they themselves might devise, who often seek after only false felicity. But Arcite seems to be begging the question, and getting no real consolation by his thoughts. It is true that he had wished to be delivered from prison, and that now he is mortified by his deliverance. But his release is under the condition of exile: surely, that is not his wish after all. It is the same with the man who "wolde out of his prisoun fayn, / That in his hous is of his meynne slayn" (1957-58).

Arcite attempts a Boethian view of his situation, and tries to see himself at fault for his predicament, but it is more effective as a revelation of his disheartenment. Prison seems better to him now because at least Palamon may view Emelye, but exile seems more advantageous to Palamon, because Arcite may raise an army and win her from Athens. The essential purpose of both knights' speeches is to show their mutual jealousy and dissatisfaction. Palamon's soliloquy distills some of the most sublime questions in the Consolation of Philosophy, such as that of apparently unrewarded good and unpunished evil, and especially that of humankind's relation to prescient "crueel goddes," who control their creation and seem immune or opaque to suffering:

O crueel goddes that governe
This world with byndyng of youre word eterne,
And writen in the table of atthamaunt
Youre parlement and youre eterne graunt,
What is mankynde moore unto you holde
Than is the sheep that rouketh in the folde?
For slayn is man right as another beest,
And dwellesh eek in prison and arreest,
And hath siknesse and greet adverstee,
And ofte tymes giltelees, pardee.
What governance is in this prescience,
That giltelees tormenteth innocence?

(1303-14)
Arcite leaves the matter to divines (1323), and the **Knight's Tale** proceeds without ever resolving Arcite's questions. Boethian detail in the words of the knights serves to amplify the difficulties inherent in a tale whose protagonists seem mutual victims of the arbitrary. Arcite makes his explanation and refuge by invoking the peevishness of the gods:

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But I moot been in prisoun thurgh Saturne,
And eek thurgh Juno, jalous and eek wood,
That hath destroyed wel ny al the blood
Of Thebes with his waste walles wyde;
And Venus sleeth me on that oother syde
For jalousie and fere of hym Arcite.
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(1328-33)

Completing the first part of the poem, the Knight turns to the audience to ask whether Palamon or Arcite has the greater suffering. The question is in fact moot, like the one at the end of the **Franklin's Tale**. No distinction can be made between either knight's penance, thus serving again to balance the competitors of the **Knight's Tale**.

After some time in exile in Thebes, Arcite has a dream which fulfills his desire, and he decides at once to return to Athens. But as Lumiansky points out in "Chaucer's Philosophical Knight" (pp. 63-64), the Ovidian story of Argus' slaying by Mercury for Jupiter is clearly suggested by Mercury's dress, and Arcite recognizes this: "Arrayed was this god, as he [Arcite] took keep, / As he was whan that Argus took his sleep" (1389-90). But Lumiansky adds that Arcite's alternatives are either to die of lover's malady in Thebes or to "risk death in returning to Athens" (p. 64). Only by being a saint (such as Boethius was regarded) might Arcite escape being Arcite (or Palamon escape being Palamon), and win release from Fortune and Love.

Seven years elapse when one night "by aventure or destynee," Palamon
engineers and executes his escape. The Knight creates the sense of timing in the fateful by telling us that Palamon's escape "fel . . . in the seventhe yer, of May / The thriddle nyght . . . Were it by aventure or destynée -- / As, whan a thyng is shapen, it shal be" (1462-66). In this fifth chance event, Arcite is guided "by aventure his wey to holde" (1506) to the grove that will later be his grave. With Palamon hiding in this grove about the palace, the Knight turns with this comment to Arcite, "That litel wiste how ny that was his care, / Til that Fortune had broght him in the snare" (1489-90). Arcite is about to meet Palamon, whose commitment to Love is to the death: identical with that suggested by Arcite's dream of Mercury.

For Palamon has escaped to war on Theseus:

And shortly, outher he wolde lese his lif,  
Or wynnen Emelye unto his wyf.  
This is th'effect and his entente pleyn.  
(1485-87)

Arcite's love-lamenting during his observance to May sends a "coolde sverde" through Palamon's heart. Imagine Arcite's surprise, after confessing himself to May and lapsing into a swoon, when his cousin accosts him from behind: "I wol be deed, or elles thou shalt dye" (1587). After their first clash, Arcite performs the chivalric service of obtaining battle gear, and then the poet poignantly and ironically exhibits the sworn brothers innocently preparing each other for doom:

Everich of hem heelp for to armen oother  
As freendly as he were his owene brother;  
And after that, with sharpe speres stronge  
They foynnen ech at oother wonder longe.  
Thou myghtest wene that this Palamon  
In his fightyng were a wood leon,  
And as a cruuel tigre was Arcite;  
As wilde bores gonne they to smyte,  
That frothen whit as foom for ire wood.  
(1651-59)
The Knight's point of view about the affair may be distinguished from that of the victims of destiny, Palamon and Arcite. True to his Christian beliefs and crusading, he invokes the Boethian hierarchy of "destinee" as Providence's chief minister. The Knight seems to have a sense of some discernible will governing all; yet he is aware of the fickleness of events, happening once in a thousand years (1669), and that "oure appetites heer" — such as those of Palamon and Arcite as well as Theseus — are ultimately under divine control:

The destinee, ministre general,
That executeth in the world over al
The purveiaunce that God hath seyn biforn,
So strong it is that, though the world had sworn
The contrarie of a thyng by ye or nay,
Yet somtyme it shall fallen on a day
That falleth nat eft withinne a thousand yeer.
For certeiny, oure appetites heer,
Be it of werre, or pees, or hate, or love,
Al is this reuled by the sighte above.
This mene I now by myghty Theseus,
That for to hunten is so desirus. . . .

(1663-74)

Some interpreters have read this passage to mean that Theseus is God's minister on earth, a symbol of His Authority, who arrives in the nick of time to secure justice. But "ministre general" stands in apposition to "destinee," is Boethian, and the question of justice in the world of the Knight's Tale is a large one. Chaucer's Knight is only referring to Theseus' desire for hunting, which necessarily brings him to a particular place at a particular moment. Theseus stops the knights' fighting (temporarily), forgives them and decides to formalize their challenge. Theseus is a comparatively noble figure; therefore it is implicative that he reaches his decision not only because of the requests of the women but because he identifies with the struggling lovers:
A man moot ben a fool, or yong or oold, --
I woot it by myself ful yore agon,
For in my tyme a servant was I oon.
And therfore, syn I knowe of loves peyne,
And woot hou soore it kan a man distreyne,
As he that hath ben caught ofte in his laas,
I yow foryeve al hoolly this trespaas. . . .

(1812-19, italics added)

The poet closes pars secunda with an evocation of the ardor of the
two young fated ones, which, if Chaucer's audience knew the outcome
of the story, must elicit caritas, or sympathy very like that suggested
by the Knight's courtesy. Once the outcome is known, this moment demands
to be reconsidered. For the Knight's Tale is epic-like not only by
the nature of its elevated philosophic language, but also because of
its scope and design. As with epic poems, the Knight's Tale requires
that the reader or listener go back to certain moments whose full import
are only known upon the completion of the work. (This is true of the
Canterbury Tales as a whole.) In light of the whole tale, there is a
beautiful and solemn pathos in the Knight's announcement about Palamon's
and Arcite's joy upon Duke Theseus' action. It is more deeply felt than
irony because although Arcite is the one who will die at the tournament,
we see merely how each man is in the same condition, facing a strange
future (to be seized or slain) in unknowing bliss:

Who looketh lightly now but Palamoun?
Who spryngeth up for joye but Arcite?
Who kouthe telle, or who kouthe it endite,
The joye that is maked in the place
When Theseus hath doon so fair a grace?
But doun on knees wente every maner wight,
And thonked hym with al hir herte and myght,
And namely the Thebans often sithe.
And thus with good hope and with herte blithe
They taken hir leve, and homward gonne they ride
To Thebes, with his olde walles wyde.

(1870-80)
In the third section of the poem, Chaucer closely follows the **Teseida** in describing the pavilions, but he also reveals the influence of the **Romance of the Rose**, down to specific details such as Ydelenesse, the porter (Robinson, p. 676). As she is represented in Theseus' royal lists, the Venus to which Palamon will pray is the image of concupiscence. The scenes depicted on the wall of her Temple are of "broken slepes" and "waymentynge," and the allegorical figures in her retinue include Fool-hardyness, Lesynges, Flaterye, Force, Bisynesse and Jalousye. They reflect human experience and the "up-so-down" distortions she calmly wrings from her devotees. Venus' statue is illusory and seductive; Mars' effigy is direct: Mars appears "as he were wood," and his temple is grimly clear:

\[
\text{Ther saugh I first the derke ymaginyng} \\
\text{Of Felonye, and al the compassyng. . . .} \\
\text{(1995-96)}
\]

However, the issue of the prayers of Palamon and Arcite is not closed by a simple description of the two temples, because each knight goes to his supplication with a much simpler view of whom he is praying to, and what it is he is praying for. Perhaps that is their illusion, yet little do Palamon or Arcite imagine the machinations taking place over their heads, or the reasons the gods will use to bring Arcite to his demise. When the gods take final action, they bring destruction and misery; they intervene and transform reality itself, and leave the plea for justice in this world essentially unanswered. Venus, Mars and especially Saturn are immune and detached from the protagonists, whom they treat as chess pieces in a game. They are peculiar agents to be seen as ministers of Boethian Providence, and I believe Chaucer's portrayal of Saturn in particular
suggests that a rational resolution is not attainable in the *Knight's Tale*. Over against the philosophic ideas of Boethius, such as that by the workings of Providence all evil is punished and all good is rewarded (Bk. 4), Chaucer's work, with its chance motif, emphasizes something mysterious and unresolved in the nature of things. Although a kind of design emerges from the tale, and from its iconography and astrology (right down to the medical details of Arcite's wound), that design makes requisite human reconciliation and acceptance, for the gods to whom the protagonists pray are solely concerned with their internecine prestige.

Both prayers are earnest, and both votaries offer absolute service to their deities. Palamon speaks what is appropriate to Venus, and Arcite decorously asks victory of Mars. Arcite's prayer is more solemn and martial in tone (after all anticipating battle, while Palamon's prayer is more lyric and addresses itself not to battle, most importantly because battle is Mars' forte. In this regard, the original Boccaccio and the corresponding Chaucer passages shed light upon each other; first, a prose translation of the *Teseida*:

You must find the way, for I do not care what it is. Whether I am the vanquished or the vanquisher matters little to me, if I am not certain of taking possession of my love's desire. Therefore, O goddess, take the course that is less difficult for you, and bring it to pass that I may be lord.\(^{10}\)

(Book 7, Stanza 47, italics added)

Fynd thow the manere hou, and in what wyse:
I recche nat but it may bettre be
To have victorie of hem, or they of me,
So that I have my lady in myne armes.
For though so be that Mars is god of armes,
Youre vertu is so greet in hevene above
That if yow list, I shal wel have my love.

(2244-50)

Though Palamon does stress Emelye over victory, he is merely being a practical servant of a goddess whose powers succeed not in combat.
A final attempt to justify the outcome of the tournament might be considered, in terms of the intent of the combatants. When the knights pray, their assumption about the battle is that all weapons will be used and most probably it will be a fight to the death. In other words, a prayer for victory is a prayer for the death of the other. Since Arcite prays for victory, his intent is to kill Palamon. But this argument would have to show that Palamon refuses to kill Arcite for moral reasons, rather than because Palamon knows Mars is the master of battle. Furthermore, there is no previous evidence upon which to base such an assumption about Palamon, and later he fights just as fervently as Arcite. Chaucer transferred the prayers of the protagonists from the Teseida with little or no apparent alteration, suggesting that he regarded them as stock materials of the concupiscent and the irascible figures.

In the wake of the moral parity of the protagonists, we must turn to an irrational explanation for the outcome of the tournament, one which contributes to the mysterious in the Knight's Tale. That "reason" is that Venus is kin, either daughter or granddaughter (Robinson, p. 681), to Saturn. And Saturn takes the initiative to satisfy Mars' pride but also to see that his descendant is pleased.

*Saturnus the colde* is a representative wizard of the many disasters of experience, a being of the furthest planet who encompasses a "cours, that hath so wyde for to turne":

Myn is the drenchyng in the see so wan;
Myn is the prison in the derke cote;

Myn is the ruyne of the hye halles,
The fallynge of the toures and of the walles
Upon the mynour or the carpenter.

And myne be the maladyes colde,
The derke tresons, and the castes olde;
My lookyng is the fader of pestilence.

(2456-2469)
Those are the deeds of the strange peacemaker, who sets the ominous tone of the final part of the *Knight's Tale*:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Bitwixe yow ther moot be som tyme pees,} \\
&\quad \ldots \\
&\text{I am thyn aiel, redy at thy wille;} \\
&\text{Weep now namoore, I wol thy lust fulfille.} \\
&\quad (2474-78)
\end{align*}
\]

As the lists swell with their assemblage of champions, the sixth fortuitous event occurs when we hear the unforeseen modified instructions of the Duke. The Knight records the chorus-like echo of the grateful crowd at the proposed sparing of bloodshed: such is Theseus' explanation for his new course. Theseus' decision is completely unexpected at this time, albeit understandable. Yet it is crucial to the fate of the knights since the loser need not die. The real key to Theseus' decision is that it cooperates with Saturn, and brings a chain of events beyond the control of Arcite and Palamon to its most dramatic conclusion.

A vast sense of motion and excitement is created as we scan the faces in the lists east and west, and once again the similarity of the knights is suggested:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{For ther was noon so wys that koude seye} \\
&\quad \text{That any hadde of oother avauntage} \\
&\quad \text{Of worthynesse, ne of estaat, ne age . . .} \\
&\quad (2590-92)
\end{align*}
\]

When Palamon is finally drawn to the stake, Theseus, the man of state and "bisy cure," makes his pronouncement: "Arcite of Thebes shal have Emelie."

The Duke has had his contest, and spared any death. Now the stage is set for some other reality to impose itself. Initially, all is explosive mirth, boisterous and raucous, at the ducal pronouncement:
Anon ther is a noyse of peple bigonne
For joye of this, so loude and heighe withalle,
It seimed that the lystes sholde falle.

... The trompours, with the loude mynstralcie,
The heraudes, that ful loude yelle and crie,
Been in hire wele for joye of daun Arcite.

(2660-73)

Yet the Knight, preparing his listeners for the "myracle," the "grete
effect," commands:

But herkneth me, and stynteth noyse a lite... .

(2674)

Arcite is described as removing his helmet and mounting a steed to prick
up and down the lists. Riding with his face toward Emelye, with her
returning his favor, Arcite is suddenly pitched onto his head in the field.

Out of the ground a furie infernal 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 deel,
His brest tobrosten with his sadel-bowe,
As blak he lay as any cole or crowe,
So was the blood yronnen in his face.

(2684-93)

Saturn has worked his plan, through the agency of Pluto and Pluto's fury.

Theseus will later speak of

Juppiter, the kyng,
That is prince and cause of alle thynge... .

(3035-36)

But we, Chaucer's seers, know this flatly contradicts the metaphysical facts,
because Jupiter balked at the task of settling the gods' dispute, and relin-
quished all to Saturn's awesome ingenuity. Moreover, what Theseus is about
to "cause to be proclaimed" (Robinson, p. 681, line note 2731) to his
martial guests erodes the integrity of his "First Mover" address. He
is about to let the word aventure be used much as I have been using "chance" (in
the usual sense), which is a Boethian apostasy, since chance may not be in the Consolation of Philosophy. Theseus, the man of state and "bisy cure," tries to smooth over the atmosphere of the company of warriors after the contest by diminishing the significance of its outcome. The Knight summarizes Theseus' reassurance that Palamon fought bravely, and that one or the other succeeds is a matter of chance: "For fallyng nys nat but an aventure, / Ne to be lad by force unto the stake / . . . with twenty knyghtes take, / . . .It nas . . no vileynye" (2722-29). On the one hand, from his perspective what Theseus proclaims is true, and good after-battle diplomacy. But judging his comment from the perspective of Arcite's sacrifice (again, seeing the poem as a whole), the insignificant contest becomes all the more questionable, and disturbing, in terms of justice and individual responsibility.

Lady Philosophy does mention -- rather quickly, in what seems Boethius' attempt to include all possibilities -- that the work of devils is congruent with the design of Providence (Bk. 4, Pr. 6). But even acceptance of the "resolution" of Palamon's and Arcite's seemingly irresolvable conflict (the machinations of Saturn unknown to Theseus) only returns us to the tale in its entirety for the shaping metaphor, the answer, to the close connection between path and pathos which the tale has created.

Theseus' "First Mover" address is an attempt to provide an answer for the uncertainty of the Knight's Tale by positing a mind behind events, much like Boethius' Providence. Theseus seems to contradict the spirit of what he had said just after the joust by implying that events are bound in an order by the faire cheyne of love, and not just aventure:
Yet, this passage from Duke Theseus' address and the ensuing matter on the doctrine of the chain of love sounds somewhat perfunctory, and tentative, notwithstanding his final eulogistic words on the youthfully dead, and his post factum human resolution, the marriage of Palamon and Emelye. Theseus has already ascribed the contest in a less formal moment to aventure, a comment which must be considered, as the contest is connected to Arcite's death and weighs in the balance in the overall vision of the Knight's Tale. Furthermore, Theseus posits a stable Jupiter behind events in his discourse, one which we cannot discover, who know more about the contest and Arcite's death than Theseus. Many of Theseus' examples of the fair chain of love show not love but death: the oak dies; the hard stone dies, and the broad river, and the great towns, and man and woman die: "the kyng as shal a page." To find a transcendent pure land or a place of love and life beyond this certainty is what seems required, but this is not what Theseus' powers can give us. It is Duke Theseus' quixotic pronouncement that the First Mover knows an entente and a meaning beyond the decay of the oak, but such is clearly Theseus' hope and desire, while he sees only the white-gloved corpse of Arcite.

Theseus' address is not chiefly a discourse on transcendence. It is at end not Boethian, but essentially Chaucerian and proverbial in emphasis. The speech, which is filled with the many faces of death, leads inevitably for Theseus to a simple exhortation to acceptance, and to make a virtue of
necessity. As rational doctrine is ineffectual here, stepping back into the tale as a whole we may perceive the limits of reason, and moralism, when the very nature of events repels human control, responsibility, and most of all human understanding. In the chance motif the tale has uncovered something "other" in the sequence of events, each of which has proven to affect fundamentally the lives of the protagonists. The Knight's Tale has told us everything about the story of Palamon and Arcite, and that knowledge has only encountered mystery: not in some imagined world beyond, but at the center of this mundane one. The Knight's consignment of Arcite's soul to its unnamed destiny is therefore consonant with the necessary reticence and humility of his tale, which has demonstrated what a supreme statement on experience in this world can become. As the Knight holds the flimsy pattern of experience up to the light of his intellect, he reveals the points at which that pattern seems unaccountable, but at the same time he opens the door to the metaphysical possibility in which he believes.
END NOTES

1. R.M. Lumiansky, in "Chaucer's Philosophical Knight," *Tulane Studies in English*, 3 (1952), 47-67, identifies the terms cas or aventure as Boethian in origin. Bernard Jefferson, in *Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy* (Princeton, 1917), pp. 53-77, has a discussion of cas and aventure where he cites the *Knight's Tale*, but Jefferson states (p. 64) that these terms are difficult to see in their proper relation to Providence, even in the *Consolation* itself.


4. Robertson, p. 248.

5. Though I am not in agreement with his accompanying statement, I am indebted to Richard Neuse for bringing this matter to my attention in "The Knight: The First Mover in Chaucer's Human Comedy," *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 31 (1962), 307.


8. See Jefferson's discussion (pp. 78-80), where he cites the *Nun's Priest's Tale* in particular in support of his conclusion that Chaucer never completely accepted Boethian doctrine concerning evil or freewill, but formulated the interrogative side of these dilemmas based on the *Consolation*.


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