

## Chaucer's Knight's tale – Lecture Notes

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### Writing and Sources

Knight's tale possibly written before Canterbury tales then incorporated into it

What is the order of the Canterbury tales?

- Elsmere manuscript in California
- Hengwrt Manuscript, Welch manuscript, has a different order

### **Source studies**

- Boccaccio *Teseida* is immediate source
- Boethius *Consolation of Philosophy* is added to it
  - Is universe governed by chance or an intelligence?
  - What is evil? Manikin heresy says good and evil eternal in universe  
Evil is absence of good
  - Nature of time – humans have two times  
Past and future (present is future becoming past.)  
God eternal present – no beginning, no end.
  - Extremely important work, several translations

In 15<sup>th</sup> century important texts were tales of high morality– Knight's, Melibee, Parson's etc. (Now texts like Wife, Miller)

### Romance

**Genre:** Chivalric Romance (Typical English Style) Roman de Thebes  
Change Boccaccio's Epic to Chivalric romance

What is Romance?

- Epic deals with culture hero. High national policy (Iliad, Charlemagne)
  - Chanson de geste (ie Chanson de Roland)
  - Guy of Warwick (frontier narrative)
  - King Horn (established boundaries)
  - Beowulf
- Supplanted by *Roman*
  - Shifts from political to individual moves in political environment already established
  - Concerned with individual matters – interpersonal relationships
  - Chivalry, social behavior

Roman de Thebes (Matter of Greece and Rome)

- Because set in past can avoid contemporary events without censorship

West wanted to be heir of Rome

Classical lit reintroduced (not entirely gone away) in 12<sup>th</sup>. Rewritten as romance like Knight's tale

Example:

*Ovide moralisee* – Ovid's *Metamorphosis* rewritten for Christian interpretation

## Structure

2 events mirror each other (Hughes)

Possibly mnemonic devise

|      |   |   |      |
|------|---|---|------|
| I.   | Theseus' winning of Hippolyta   | Palamon's winning of Emily  | IV.  |
|      | Cappaneus' Wife on Fortune  | Theseus on Providence   |      |
|      | The widow's lament. The destruction of Thebes, and the burning of the Bodies. | The laments for Acite, the destruction of the forests, and Arcite's funeral pyre. |      |
|      | Palamon and Arcite found among the dead                                       | The death of Arcite   |      |
| II.  | The lover's rivalry over Emily  | Arcite's yielding of Emily to Palamon   |      |
|      | Arcite's sickness   | Arcite's injury   |      |
|      | Palamon's escape  | Palamon's defeat  |      |
|      | The combat in the wood  | The tournament  |      |
|      | Theseus decrees the tournament  | Theseus' rules for the tournament   |      |
| III. | Three temples   | Three prayers   | III. |
|      | The description of Lygurge  | The description of Emetreus   |      |
|      | → III. →  | → III. →  |      |

Appropriate for Knight – poem re: order and sadness, love and war

### Zodiac Order

Gods Temple hour after sunrise  
 2271 Monday East- Moon Diana – Emily  
 2209 Venus North- Sunday Palamon  
 2307 Mars West- Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> hour after sunrise  
 Saturn South

Tournament held on Tuesday – day of Mars

Palamon loses just before Sunday (Saturn)

Remember: Day begins at evening

- Sunset to sunset Christmas Eve, All Hallows Eve

Zodiac in May shows Scorpio in West

- Domicile of Mars
- South Capricorn – Saturn
- Temple follow Zodiac signs in May

Saturn by not being mentioned is associated with his control of the whole thing.

### Establishing and Keeping Order

According to this story, cosmos dictates human events. The problem is that it is pagan.

Appropriate for the knight this worldview limited. Little passion or humanity in this tale.

Quasi epical behavior. No humanity such as what characterizes prologue

- Harmony, respect, union, honor
- Mechanical workings of orderly society

Suffering and pain are associated with the loss of order

## Political Order

Political order shown in beginning

- Theseus conquering amazons (866).
- Women ruling way worse. Disturbance in God's order, which dictates that man was first, therefore should rule.
  - Example: French missionaries Wenden tribe – equal men and women. Missionaries' priority to restore Gods' order. Man in charge.

## Domestic Order

- Domestic order restored Emily is (for political reasons) married and will do what is told.
- Emily, who is passive, not allowed to remain a virgin (not Christian world.)

## Social Order

- War brings glory honor social order-
  - **Positive**
    - Except few dark corners
    - Theseus positive military type bestower of marriages
  - **Negative**
    - 1005-1008 pillaging
    - 2690-2810 death agonies

## God and Fortune (Masculine and Feminine)

God = Masculine

- God 1st mover l. 2987
- He has power over change
- Ideal – Theseus – reality in knight's world more difficult

Fortune = Feminine

- Fortune is servant of God
- Emily disruptive merely by existing
- Feminine: fortune, change, chaos, disruptive force

## Some General Themes

- Male relationships
  - Masculine discourse by men re: men
- Women disempowered
- Knights
- Love vs. suffering
- Thebes = Tyrant (Creon desiring simplicity, order)
- Athens = Theseus (Order, complex world need to be flexible)
  - Justice tempered by mercy, Thesis l. 1774
- Men vs. Women
  - (Margery Kemp refers to self as creature)
- Youth vs. maturity
- Intellect and reason
  - Men – who allow passion to get better of them are less manly than men who are not (Thesis)

### Incorporation of Sources

Speeches – from *Consolation of Philosophy*

l. 1251 Fortune

l. 1303 Palemon – complaint about gods

l. 2543 Consolation

l. 2987 Theseus providence

### Some scholars believe that passages are inappropriate.

Inappropriate Passages? (Too light hearted)

1043-45 May pricking to heart

1078 Palemon stabbed in heart

Exaggeration undermines seriousness of work

2817 Weird response to death, Emily not a widow

Knight's tale conservation traditional narrative to few individuals

Undercutting high secular pretensions.

### **Discussion Questions for End of Unit:**

What is the tale about?

What does it have to do with the knight?

Why would the knight tell a tale dealing with fortune and reason?

Why do you think the focus has shifted from the stories like Knight's to stories like Wife of Bath's?

How does the structure of the text reflect the themes?