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**Narrow Margins of Meaning  
and the Metamorphoses of the Power-holder.**

**The political figure of Theseus in Chaucer,  
and in Chaucer's predecessors:**

**Euripides, Statius, *Le Roman de Thèbes*, and Boccaccio's *Teseida***

The role of political power-holder, evoking awe and approval in subordinates, functions more smoothly in literature than in life, since the discourse of fiction makes it simple to be on his side, share in his exploits, applaud his successes. But this suspension of disbelief whereby fictive power-holders extend readers' egos rather than their political awareness is, I think, no longer useful as hermeneutic paradigm for the analysis of Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale".<sup>1</sup> Therefore I focus in what follows on Chaucer's political power-holder figure of Theseus and aim to uncover any hidden criticism that Chaucer might be making of power-holders in general and of Theseus in particular which can be seen as relevant to the real-world reactions of subordinates to their power-holders and particularly (topically) of those engaging their countries in war.

The figure of Theseus in "The Knight's Tale" is presented in much the same way as is the Knight in the "General Prologue", i.e. with many approbative adjectives, such as 'worthy', 'great', 'noble' and, most notably, 'gentil', all of which purport to be the expressions of genuine public opinion. However, Theseus's actions so frequently belie these epithets that one can think that Chaucer is finally condemning the character of the conqueror, not praising him, along the lines of Shakespeare's Antony's praise of Brutus as 'honourable'

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<sup>1</sup> *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry E. Benson, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1987) 1990), pp. 37-77, ll. 859-3854.

(which, by its mounting sarcasm, finally arouses the Roman mob to murder).<sup>1</sup> Most critics (not all)<sup>2</sup> accept these apparent praises both of the Knight and of “The Knight’s Tale”’s Theseus, but then wonder why the tale fails to inspire much serious interest as a political statement and continue to read it as Chaucer’s reverent translation / adaptation of his sources, the *Thebaid* of Statius<sup>3</sup> and the *Teseida* of Boccaccio,<sup>4</sup> which present power-holders as meritorious and Theseus as unquestionably ideal, a model to others. By analysing the metamorphoses of Theseus across the sources and analogues, particularly across the least studied *Roman de Thèbes*,<sup>5</sup> I hope to arrive at a clearer idea of what Chaucer’s drastic summarising and changing of his sources in “The Knight’s Tale” means.

The motivation of Theseus, his *causus belli* for involving Athens in war against Thebes, is presented in the episode of the demands of the Argive women for decent burial for their dead. This plea can only be seriously assessed as a just cause for war if it is related to Theseus’s private moral integrity, and the same questions asked which are relevant to power-holders’ decisions still today. Is this war really a last resort in favour of others or is it a secretly favoured strategy for personal gain? Is it undertaken for the altruistic reasons proclaimed, or for selfish reasons occluded?

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act III, Scene 2, ll. 74-261.

<sup>2</sup> A useful list of the two sorts of critics: a) uncritical of and b) critical of Theseus is given in A. J. Minnis’s *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982), p. 178, note 40.

<sup>3</sup> Statius: vol II: *Thebaid*, V-XII, *Achilleid*, trans. J. H. Mozley (Loeb Classical Library Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, London: William Heinemann, (1928) 1949).

<sup>4</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *Teseida*, trans. into English as *The Book of Theseus*, Bernadette-Marie McCoy (Medieval Text Association, New York: Teesdale, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> *Le Roman de Thèbes*, Edition du Manuscrit S (Londres, Brit. Libr., Add. 34114). Traduction, présentation et notes par Francine Mora-Lebrun, Collection Lettres Gothiques (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1995). *Le Roman de Thèbes*, (Manuscrit C) présentation par Guy Renaud de Lage, 2 vol. Collection: Classiques français du Moyen Age (Paris: Champion, 1991). *Le Roman de Thèbes*, (Manuscrit C) traduction en français moderne d’Aimé Petit (Paris: Champion, 2002).

Since the Theban conflict in which Theseus intervenes is never explained in Chaucer's text, one needs to recall the issues at stake. In the past Oedipus, the ruler of Thebes, cursed his sons, so that they should never enjoy power and as, after his death, the elder, Eteocles, refused to keep his promise to the younger, Polynices, to take turns as rulers of the city of Thebes, Polynices proceeded, with his Argive allies led by Adrastos, his father-in-law, to attack his brother and Thebes. After the two brothers had killed each other in single combat, Polynices's forces suffered defeat and their uncle, Creon, took over power in Thebes. Chaucer picks up the story at the moment when Creon is refusing honourable burial to Polynices and the Argives, (allowing it only to Eteocles) and the widows of the Argives, outraged, appeal to Theseus to persuade Creon to allow the funeral rites, by force if necessary. Theseus espouses the widows' cause, fights Creon and wins, but his profound motivation has to be guessed at and is stated more or less clearly.<sup>1</sup> Chaucer's version is particularly problematic.

As later writers address the problem of the just war more thoroughly than earlier tellers of the oral myth, the questions of Theseus's motivation are explored in every rewriting of the story. Chaucer alone makes no mention of the names of the original protagonists, Oedipus, Polynices, Eteocles and their dynastic civil war over Thebes, an omission arguably deliberate. Ostensibly Chaucer tells the tale to entertain his audience through a fictitious poet-narrator (himself as pilgrim), who avers he is repeating the words of another pilgrim, the Knight, who in turn purports to recount a story he has once heard. The Knight is presumably little interested, as a military man, in the controversial issues of just causes for the wars of his hero Theseus, and leaves such problems to the "divines", the men of religion, just as he leaves to them speculation upon life after death.<sup>2</sup> Yet while the author's three fictive filters – himself as teller, the Knight as teller, the original myth's anonymous teller(s) – may be supposed to care little for such "just war" issues, to the author himself and to those among his readers / listeners who know something of

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<sup>1</sup> Most versions of the Theseus legend likewise fail to explain Theseus's reasons for abandoning Ariadne.

<sup>2</sup> *Riverside*, ll. 2809-2815.

Roman writers of epic such as Statius, or Greek tragedians such as Euripides, the figure of Theseus in this context of the Theban war necessarily brings to mind the paradigm of the dysfunctional family, that of Oedipus, and of the dysfunctional political state, that of the city of Thebes. Thus Chaucer's Theseus is to be measured by the knowledgeable reader or listener not only against the virtues of the ruler of Athens but also against the viciousness of the rulers of Thebes and against assessments of behaviour made in ethical and political terms.

So to judge Theseus's status in Chaucer as admirable or deplorable power-holder, model or warning, I survey the five texts that discuss in greater or lesser detail Theseus's *causus belli* for war as presented in the episode of the Argive widows:

1) the Greek Euripides's late fifth century B.C. tragedy, *The Suppliant Women*<sup>1</sup> which deals solely with this episode;

2) the Roman Statius's late first century A.D. conclusion to his epic poem, *The Thebaid*, which deals with the entire Theban conflict but not with the initial story of Oedipus;

3) the anonymous Anglo-Norman Christian cleric's mid-twelfth century conclusion to his long verse narrative, the *Roman de Thèbes*, an adaptation / translation of Statius, which adds on to the entire story the birth, life and crimes of Oedipus;

4) the Italian Boccaccio's mid-fourteenth century, long verse romance, the *Teseida*, which deals in its first two books with Theseus's (Teseo's) victory over Creon and then continues the story with the Theban prisoners' (Palamone and Arcita's) rivalry for the hand of Emilia (Teseo's sister-in-law);

5) the late fourteenth century shortened translation / adaptation of Boccaccio's tale of Theseus by Chaucer in his *Knight's Tale*. Finally, I return to the text least studied to date in relation to Chaucer, the *Roman de Thèbes*, and examine its probable influence on the notion of pity.

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<sup>1</sup> *Euripides: Suppliant Women*, trans. Rosanna Warren and Stephen Scully (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Since, in Chaucer, Theseus's espousal of the Argive widows' cause is supposed to stem from the supposed emotion they arouse, this theme of spontaneous pity as motive for war will be studied across all the five texts according to five relevant points:

a) *the feelings of pity* – how they inwardly and privately motivate action, and are then exteriorized publicly;

b) *the promptings of reason* – how they restrain feelings and (for greater effectiveness) delay action, and so allow for rational judgement, consultation and negotiation;

c) *the aftermath of victory* – allowing feelings full rein in e.g. taking, ransacking, destroying the enemy city or, on the contrary, using reason and forgoing such actions as unworthy of the initial intentions;

d) *the fulfilling of the stated war aims* – persisting in the initial promises prompted by feeling and reason by e.g. returning the remains of the defunct and arranging funeral rites with reverence or, on the contrary, forgetting initial commitment and neglecting / forgoing such actions;

e) *the assumption of power* – not overstepping the initial commitment by delegating responsibility to the people concerned and signing treaties for defence only or, on the contrary, taking over and expanding empire.

### 1. Euripides's Suppliant Women

Euripides takes the incident from existing Greek legend and adapts it to his own hard, sad vision of human nature which recognizes that in real life pity is precisely what soldiers do not, must not feel, to be able to kill without guilt. Thus sentimental pity is initially lacking from the figure of a young, tough, unmarried Theseus in *Suppliant Women*.<sup>1</sup> When Adrastos, leader of the Argives, appeals to him on behalf of the widows, Euripides's Theseus lectures his senior on how his defeat is his own fault and his own responsibility, and how his Athenian soldiers' lives must concern him more than the demands of Adrastos's Argive women. For Theseus acts out the

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<sup>1</sup> Published 424-419 B.C.

classical world's (and still today's) main power-holder virtues (traditionally controlled by reason and gendered as masculine, and later to be adopted / adapted by the Christian church as the cardinal virtues): justice, prudence, fortitude, temperance or, in modern terms, the moral integrity of speaking out from deep conviction, using forethought, keeping promises once given, forgoing hidden agendas. Euripides's Theseus acts on the basis of 'manly' reason, and only on such emotions as patriotism and military honour which this 'manly' reason approves, but not on sentiments traditionally gendered as feminine and 'womanly', such as pity. The Theseus of Euripides is important for a comparison with Chaucer's, not as possible source, but because of providing the most striking contrast to Chaucer's Theseus from the point of view of demonstrable moral integrity.

Judged by the five points listed below, Euripides's Theseus will be seen to move from initial (understandable) resistance to war to pure, whole-hearted commitment to the cause once he has decided to defend it. As regards a) *feelings of pity*, it is not Theseus who reacts spontaneously towards the grieving Argive widows, but his mother, (Aethra),<sup>1</sup> who then, by an appeal to his soldier's honour, makes him see his duty to uphold the pan-hellenic law of honourable burial for the enemy dead that Creon of Thebes (also a Greek city state) is flouting. Theseus is led by b) *the promptings of reason* to be open-minded, attentive to the claims of both sides, and to attempt negotiations to avoid actual war. The enemy's (Creon's) position is explained and, while cruel, at least appears politically comprehensible,<sup>2</sup> and although Creon stands for tyranny and Theseus for democracy, the discussion of the two systems remains rational. It is the illegality of Creon's refusal to follow the humane Greek laws of honouring the enemy dead that first stirs Theseus to outrage, and pity only comes later.<sup>3</sup> Regarding c) *the aftermath of victory*, Theseus's overcoming of Creon is remarkable in Euripides in that Theseus takes

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<sup>1</sup> Added by Euripides to the myth of Theseus. See *Euripides: Suppliant Women*, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> By treating Polynices as the traitor who attacked his own brother, Eteocles, Creon in Euripides has the reasonable political motive of consolidating his own power. He is also acting out of feelings of vengeance since his own son, killed by the allies outside the walls of Thebes, was left unburied.

<sup>3</sup> The Theseus of Euripides matures into sharing the feelings of others. See *Euripides: Suppliant Women*, p. 7.

the deliberate decision to forgo entering, ransacking, or destroying the city of Thebes, insisting he is in the war for the stated aims and not for loot, power or vengeance. As for d) *the fulfilling of the stated war aims*, he makes clear his true reverence for the rites of honourable burial by attending to the cremation of the dead Argives with his own hands and forbidding his soldiers even to touch the bodies. Finally, as regards e) *the assumption of power*, Euripides's Theseus proves his disinterestedness as well as his political wisdom by delegating responsibility for the future rule of Thebes to the peoples concerned, the Thebans and Argives and, at the same time, contracting an alliance with the Argives for defence only, in the future. The Theseus of Euripides ends as victor over Creon, but not as power-holder, conqueror or coloniser of Thebes. The Theseus of Euripides is the ideal power-holder of classical Greek democracy, and is shown, unlike Chaucer's Theseus in "The Knight's Tale", to be so without ambiguity.

## 2. Theseus in Statius

Writing in the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian,<sup>1</sup> and recognized as a court poet adept at flattery, Statius gives a rather different picture of the power-holder's virtues. With his admirable morals and cardinal virtues now taken for granted, Statius's Theseus acquires an additional quality that ensures most easily the widest popularity, i.e. the common touch, humane pity and concern for others. So the Theseus of Statius is a mature, successful and popular general, a kind husband to a subdued / devoted / ex-Amazon wife, a man capable of spontaneous feelings for others whenever these reflect the magnanimity of his personal success. As regards a) *the feelings of pity*, he is deeply stirred when the Argive widows appeal to him directly, but less to pity than to righteous anger, particularly as Statius's Argive widows appear to be proud women who scorn to grovel or kneel, but who, with outstretched hands, almost defy Theseus to become their champion.<sup>2</sup> The very notion of sensitive pity

<sup>1</sup> Domitian reigned 81-96 A.D.

<sup>2</sup> "She spake: they all with hands outstretched make clamorous echo to her words; the Neptonian hero flushed, deeply stirred by their tears; soon fired by righteous anger he cries: "What Fury has inspired this strange unkindly conduct?" See Statius, vol 2, p. 489.



in a power-holder is made plausible by Statius by formal means: poetic rhetoric and the institution of a goddess, Clemency, in whose temple the Argive widows meet Theseus in quasi-official manner. Thus Theseus in Statius appears publicly to follow both feelings (righteous anger rather than pity) and also b) *the promptings of reason* in taking up the Argive widows' cause. He too, reasonably, attempts negotiations with Creon before declaring war, but when these break down, swiftly passes to action, which suggests such feeling commitment to the widows' cause that he (easily) musters universal support for war, and even offers of help from his ex-Amazon bride, (which he considerately forgoes).<sup>1</sup>

The Theseus of Statius is the popular version of the conventionally heroic and concerned leader of men, earning kudos from personally killing Creon in single combat, but not above (before finishing him off) taunting his enemy for refusing burial, while promising him burial from the righteous law-abider, himself. As to c) *the aftermath of victory*, there is no pillaging or ransacking of the city since Theseus has been welcomed as liberator by grateful Thebans; and d) *the fulfilling of the stated war aims*, no personal involvement in the burial rites since these are held in common for both sides after the signing of a peace treaty. There is e) *the assumption of power*, no problem about delegating responsibility, since the Theseus of Statius takes over power in Thebes as of natural right and enjoys to the full, the fame, glory, material advantages and above all vaunted popularity that his conquest brings. The Theseus of Statius is flatteringly representative of the ideology of the expanding Roman empire, in its self-credited civilising effect of establishing the *pax romana*.

### 3. Theseus in the Roman de Thèbes.

In the *Roman de Thèbes*, written, it is thought, to promote the dynastic ambitions of Henri II Plantagenet, Theseus becomes a medieval duke (as in Chaucer), who takes the feudal duties of vassalage and the dogmas of Christianity seriously and strictly (unlike Chaucer's Theseus who is explicitly pagan). As before, Theseus is the

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<sup>1</sup> The Theseus of Statius entreats Hippolyta to consider that she is pregnant and to dismiss thoughts of battle. See Statius, vol 2, p.493.

victor in the war for the Argive widows' cause, but in this early medieval metamorphosis he is not so much the bringer of peace and civilization as the divinely appointed scourge sent to punish the wicked, above all for the sin of pride (as God punished Lucifer). As the whole of Christian dogma relies on the notion of God's displeasure at the proud and pity for the humble, the sentiment of pity is no longer considered, (in theory, at any rate), as weakness, or simply an offshoot of magnanimity or of temperance, but is promoted to the position of the highest virtue of the power-holder, who metes out pity to the repentant and punishment to the unrepentant with a justice that sees itself as divine. Feelings as such – on which the three specifically Christian theological virtues: faith, hope, charity depend – are promoted and overtake in importance the cardinal virtues based on reason. They are thereby deemed superior to and transcendent of merely intellectual reason.

Thus the *Roman de Thèbes* Theseus experiences a) *the feelings of pity*, unrestrainedly and immediately for the Argive widows when, in one version (MS C)<sup>1</sup> they appeal to him directly (as in Statius), or when, in another version (MS S),<sup>2</sup> King Adrastus, the leader of the Argives, is the widows' spokesman. Duke Theseus shows himself so much the merciful Christian that he is moved to pity not only by the weeping Argive widows themselves (in MS C),<sup>3</sup> but also (in MS S)<sup>4</sup> by the defeated King Adrastus (whose daughters head the vast group

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<sup>1</sup> Paris, B.N. fr. 784

<sup>2</sup> London, Brit. Libr. Add. 34114. This version was thought to have been copied in England for an English patron possibly in the 1390s and could thus have been available to Chaucer.

<sup>3</sup> *Roman de Thèbes* (MS C), traduction en prose d'Aimé Petit, pp. 191–194. « Le duc vient leur parler, et elles se mettent à pleurer. Elles vont à la rencontre de ce seigneur ; celui-ci ne peut retenir ses larmes ; descendu du palefroi, il va embrasser les filles du roi, toutes deux se jettent à ses pieds, et il les relève en homme de parfaite éducation. » (p. 192)

<sup>4</sup> *Roman de Thèbes* (MS S), traduction en vers de F. Mora-Lebrun, pp. 730-735, ll. 11781-11831. « Le roi Adraste était prostré par terre / retenant le duc qu'il voulait supplier ; / il implorait humblement sa pitié / et pleurait très doucement / » ll. 11781-11785 ; « Le noble duc écouta tout cela / et son cœur fut ému d'une vive pitié ; / il prit le roi Adraste par la main et le releva : / 'Seigneur roi, dit-il, relevez-vous, vous aurez tout ce que vous demandez ; / s'ils ne vous rendent pas vos morts, / ce sera un désastre pour eux. / » ll. 11824-11831.

or 'army' of women) when he throws himself at Theseus's feet pleading for pity. Feelings clearly precede reason in the *Roman's* tactics of persuasion and, in both the MS C and MS S versions, the pleaders show their humility by kneeling or prostrating themselves before their protectors. Yet if, in the first place, it is this humility that affects the feelings of protectors, some reasonable grounds for complying with the suitors' demands are also included, and as regards b) *the promptings of reason*, Theseus (here simply called 'noble duke' and rarely if ever mentioned by his legendary pagan name) is reasonably as well as passionately mindful of his feudal duty: bound as vassal to rally to the cause of a king and his daughters. A further reasoned action undertaken by the early medieval Theseus is his attempt to negotiate with Creon.

Yet passion speedily takes over from reason when Creon, refusing even to listen to the messengers' demands, sends them away with direst threats, provoking the fury of Theseus in return. In the immediate mustering of his army, medieval Duke Theseus and everybody else seem to forget the avowed *causus belli* of the siege of Thebes – the recovery and burial of the bodies of the Argive dead – and the war is engaged and the city besieged in a spirit of violent hatred. Thus c) *the aftermath of victory* over Creon is achieved by besieging the city and then foregoing ransack or pillage for the greater satisfaction of punishment (burning it down with all its inhabitants), which shows passions of hatred overcoming any sense of even reasonable selfish advantage. A typically early medieval (almost fanatical) sense of religious duty outweighs personal glory, so that, for instance, the *Roman* Theseus does not kill Creon himself, but seems to follow implacable divine ordinance in having Creon, as usurper, correctly executed (by beheading), and in correctly punishing recalcitrant prisoners (by torturing to death, drawing and quartering). As regards d) *the fulfilling of the stated war aims*, the recovery and burial of the Argive dead is also undertaken by the orders of (but not personally by) this passionately severe Theseus on the Argive widows' behalf. As for e) *the assumption of power*, Duke Theseus has no hesitation about taking over Thebes, which he sees as a duty that he confirms by arranging the funerals of the original combatants, Polynices and Eteocles, according to formal rites. The Theseus of the *Roman de Thèbes* is representative of the ideology of militant

medieval Christianity whereby pity and punishment become part of a quasi-divine right of final judgement, through which the power-holder must, at all extremes of cruelty, be seen as representing justified and sanctified authority.

#### 4. Theseus in Boccaccio's *Teseida*

With Boccaccio, writing at the dawn of the Italian Renaissance, Theseus, or Teseo, becomes again, even more than in Statius, a peace-bringing power-holder, with authority so firm that it needs no further accounting for, once the opening book has elaborately described and fully justified his victory over the Amazons. Issues of war and justice are in later books relegated to the background, and life-style, leisure, pleasure and above all love become paramount. Rather than the final victor in an epic, Boccaccio's Theseus appears as the hero, instigator, and in conclusion, the master of ceremonies of romance. The pleading Argive widows are seen in parallel to the initially wild and terrible Amazons and the notion of pity in Boccaccio has become so integrated into the codes governing civilized social behaviour as to distance itself from spontaneous feeling,<sup>1</sup> and to appear rather as the supremely useful social grace of easy sympathy. As regards a) *the feelings of pity*, from the start the Argive widows decide consciously, reasonably, and with a (probably unintended) hint of calculated self-interest,<sup>2</sup> to arouse Theseus's pity by their tears as well as by their arguments, and to ensure his knowing they are noble and their dead husbands his near equals, not so much as human beings but as Greek males of high social rank.<sup>3</sup> They wait with patience for him in the

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<sup>1</sup> See Barbara Nolan's Chap. 5, "Boccaccio's *Teseida* and the triumph of Aristotelian virtue" in *Chaucer and the Tradition of the Roman Antique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 155-197.

<sup>2</sup> "Because they were grieved by such wickedness, they resolved to beg Theseus with tears to avenge so great a wrong" in *Teseida*, Bk. II, verses 14; and/or *The Book of Theseus*, trans. Bernadette Marie McCoy, p. 55-56.

<sup>3</sup> The Athenian spectators of the widows' arrival in the city begin to feel pity for them only when they learn that the petitioners are not beggars, but high-ranking noble women. The Athenian ladies keep them company out of a sociable sort of pity, particularly as the widows are concerned more with the duke's arrival than with their own dead. See *Teseida*, Bk. II, verses 15 and 16; and/or *The Book of Theseus*, trans. Bernadette Marie McCoy, p. 56.

temple of Clemency (Boccaccio's Teseo is again pagan), and apologise for their disrupting his triumph to a conqueror apparently more shocked by their dress (black for mourning) than by their grief. Allusions to the Oedipus dynasty feud have already established Creon as a villain of incomprehensible vicious cruelty, and possible political reasons for his obduracy are by now hardly considered and the accent is not on redressing wrong or on punishing wickedness, but on instant emotional reactions current in social settings, such as deploring the vagaries of fortune<sup>1</sup> and of worldly success, and considering / calculating the worldly advantages of the fame and glory to be won by war.<sup>2</sup> Manners are decorous in Boccaccio, geared to social deference, with the widows crying silently, attendant Greek barons feeling pity and weeping silently also and Teseo (assured of their rank), first moved to silent respect for the widows, and only later, after some talk with his wife, awakened to the pity which stirs him to fight in their cause. The Teseo of Boccaccio is a thoughtful leader as well as a considerate husband, and harangues and helps his soldiers in a particularly affable way (even helping them back onto their horses in the thick of battle).<sup>3</sup> Creon must, as formerly, be humbled for his pride, but is still accorded, through b) *the promptings of reason*, some attempts at negotiations. With their failure, Teseo marches on Thebes with the avowed purpose of earning fame and glory in battle and, a peculiarly Renaissance humanist touch, of ensuring the victory of reason. Any further questions about a just cause for war have now been eluded and will not be raised again.

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<sup>1</sup> Fortuna was "not the goddess of the soul, but of worldly interests alone", see H. R. Patch, "The Tradition of the Goddess Fortuna in Roman Literature and the Transitional Period", *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages*, vol. III, n° 3 & n° 4 (1922), 132-210, p. 149.

<sup>2</sup> The widows use a rationale that suggests that they hope and expect that their patron will also think of his own interests: "If someone other than yourself wanted to undertake it, you ought to be enraged and to prevent his doing so, that you might have the glory for yourself of punishing such excesses." See *Teseida*, Bk. II, verses 15 and 16; and/or *The Book of Theseus*, trans. Bernadette Marie McCoy, p. 59, verse 33.

<sup>3</sup> See *Teseida*, Bk. I, verse 56 and/or *The Book of Theseus*, trans. Bernadette Marie McCoy.

After killing Creon in elegant single combat, Boccaccio's Teseo does not, as regards c) *the aftermath of victory*, have to deal with any real-life war problems of ransacking or pillaging, and places Thebes, to quote N. R. Havelly, "at the disposal of the Argive ladies," who are then empowered as regards d) *the fulfilling of the stated war aims*, to look after the funeral rites themselves, and thereupon "burn both the corpses and the city".<sup>1</sup> Dutiful last rites (as in Euripides and Statius) are hereby linked inextricably to hate-filled vengeful destruction (as in the *Roman de Thèbes*), the moral integrity of both power-holder and pleaders is not further explored and rational inquiry into the just causes for war is dismissed from the minds of both characters and readers. But since Boccaccio's romance-Teseo is probably the furthest from a real-life war-time leader of any of the analogues, he confronts no unpleasant problems on the battlefield, and the two wounded Theban princes, Palemone and Arcita, are found by good Greek soldiers and not by sinister pillagers as they are in Chaucer. No mention is made, as regards e) *the assumption of power*, of Teseo showing concern for the future of Thebes, either by taking power himself or delegating responsibility for it. The Teseo of Boccaccio can be thought representative of the mentality of the mid-fourteenth century Italian city states where power-holders tend to forego the themes and thinking of military epic in favour of the artistic and literary idealisations of romance love and individual fulfilment in the conduct of equally idealised power-holders.

### 5. Theseus in Chaucer

Although Chaucer follows Boccaccio in allotting more space to the peace-time than to the war-time Theseus, the English author's power-holder is usually tougher, more reminiscent of epic themes and real-life war and more clearly linked to the realistic image of the conqueror than the gracious figure in Boccaccio.<sup>2</sup> If, in Boccaccio, the episode with the Argive widows seems almost too stylish to be

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<sup>1</sup> N. R. Havelly, *Chaucer's Boccaccio* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> Paul M. Clogon suggests that in an attempt to present a more credible version of the *Thebaid*, Chaucer uses Statius as "a check and commentary on Boccaccio". See Paul M. Clogon, "Chaucer's Use of the Thebaid," *English Miscellany*, 18 (1967), 9-32.

profoundly felt, lacking the convincing spontaneity of both the formally forceful Statius and the unrestrained *Roman de Thèbes*, the same incident in Chaucer can appear, despite the apparently haphazard meeting on the road between Theseus and the widows, even more artificial. There are anomalies about the interview in Chaucer which, while making it in some ways more true to life, in others drain off much of the scene's expected emotional impact.

For as regards the first point, a) *the feelings of pity*, "The Knight's Tale" Argive widows' initial focus on their hard luck and their fall in social rank (the malevolence of the goddess Fortune), rather than on their dead or on their grief, makes their speeches, tears and swoons<sup>1</sup> oddly unmoving to readers who, unless familiar with the original story, can find it hard to grasp what exactly the widows are pleading with such impressive humility for. Their noisy and hence unmannerly lamentations in front of Theseus contrast with the suavity of their predecessors in Boccaccio, and make it difficult to imagine that Chaucer's Theseus's alleged pity "as if his heart would break" (l. 954) can be truly felt. Irony on Chaucer's part can be suspected, since the impressions of a gracious and humane Theseus as in Boccaccio are, in Chaucer, continually undercut.

Having allegedly felt pity to excess for the widows, Chaucer's Theseus then switches to a ruthlessness that suggests he is bent less on a just cause than on fighting to win, on destruction and its profits. Killing Creon immediately is the sole option he envisages, and Chaucer's Theseus does not, as in all the other texts, pause for a second to attend to b) *the promptings of reason* and attempt negotiations to recover the bodies for burial. No hint is given of any rational thinking about justice or prudence: Chaucer's Theseus consults nobody; not his army, nor his allies, neither his Athenians, nor even his new bride, but goes straight off to attack. It is not even clear whether he declares war honourably on Thebes (no messenger is sent) or whether his battle is not a surprise attack at dawn which takes

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<sup>1</sup> In "The Knight's Tale", the eldest of the widows, Evadne, answers Theseus immediately when he enquires as to why the widows are in black and not rejoicing at his arrival, but she is then said to have first swooned before speaking and aroused the spectators' *routhe* or pity. This sudden swoon so inadvertently remembered produces a faintly absurd effect in the description of events and makes it impossible to visualize the scene convincingly.

advantage of an unprepared enemy. As for c) *the aftermath of victory* over Creon and the taking and destroying of the city of Thebes (energetically pulling down *bothe wall and spar and rafter*, *Riverside* l. 990), Chaucer's Theseus, far from forbidding pillaging or ransacking, gives a free hand to the pillagers, who later find the bodies of Palamon and Arcite at the bottom of a pile of dead. Meanwhile (it is not clear when), Chaucer's Theseus gives back the bones of their dead to the Argive women who, d) *the fulfilling of the stated war aims*, duly have them burnt, but with so much clamorous *waymentyng* that their grief sounds as if it aroused irritation rather than sympathy, possibly that of Theseus, probably that of the Knight-narrator, who is reluctant to discuss it further. Finally, e) *the assumption of power*, far from delegating responsibility for the future rule of Thebes, Chaucer's Theseus takes over not only the city, but the whole country and does with it what he likes; a comment vaguely sinister which suggests the worst behaviour of soldiers rampant with the flush of victory.

Stille in that feelde he took al nyght his reste,  
And dide with al the contree as hym leste. (ll. 1003-1004)

Chaucer's Theseus, unlike Boccaccio's, shows no humane or even human interest in the visibly high-ranking captives whom he refuses to ransom, for reasons that remain conjectural.<sup>1</sup> He could well be using the severity of their punishment solely as a warning to any persons in Athens opposing resistance to his will, or showing a less than enthusiastic welcome. Chaucer's Theseus, unlike that of Statius or of Boccaccio, can hardly be expecting a rapturous welcome or crowning as conqueror by his people, since it is he himself who puts laurels on his head before returning to Athens.<sup>2</sup> Nor is he chivalrously concerned, as in Boccaccio, with his prisoners' well-being. Only the teller of the tale, the Knight, has thoughts for the prisoners' bleak future, and contrasts it to the unending joy and honour that, the Knight naïvely believes, awaits the power-holder. Chaucer's Theseus, in the reading of those who, unlike the blindly loyal Knight-narrator, can see

<sup>1</sup> Readers find their own explanations: admiring, deploring or accepting Theseus's severity to these pathetic survivors.

<sup>2</sup> See M. K. Greenwood, "Garlands of Derision: the thematic imagery of garlands in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*," *Collection Theta*, vol. 6, Centre d'Etudes supérieures de la renaissance (Peter Lang, 2002), 21-39.



his defects, can be taken to represent a realistically drawn, late fourteenth century power-holder who must be publicly acclaimed and can only be criticized tacitly and at third person remove.

## 6. *Pity in the Roman de Thèbes*

The hidden criticism and even satire of the power-holder emerges when Chaucer's version of Theseus is compared with his predecessors and the five points briefly examined earlier expanded. If at present I focus on only one, *the feelings of pity*, it is because this first point can induce doubts about Theseus's moral integrity as to the "just war" motivation of the power-holder from the very beginning of "The Knight's Tale". While the pity of Theseus is made credible in previous versions by the context, so that readers can accept it as a justified and convincing motive for war, it can, by the unaccountable stress laid on it in Chaucer's text, pose a problem to readers. Why does Chaucer state that his Theseus feels such overwhelming pity, while making it difficult, by the woodenness of the widows as well as by the inconsistency of the figure of Theseus, for readers to share this emotion?<sup>1</sup>

Arguably, this motif of the overwhelming pity of Chaucer's Theseus stems from the *Roman de Thèbes* rather than from Boccaccio or Statius, the explicitly acknowledged sources for Chaucer's "Knight's Tale". Although not actually cited, as is Statius ("Knight's Tale", l. 2294), the *Roman de Thèbes* was almost certainly well known to Chaucer.<sup>2</sup> By insisting on common sentiment and overflowing feeling, Chaucer stresses the link-up between pity and popularity which Statius introduced and Boccaccio refined, but which was most fully elaborated by the *Roman de Thèbes*, wherein it not only suited the twelfth century world-view but also formed a part of that same

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<sup>1</sup> Chaucer the poet, who in other parts of *The Canterbury Tales* is an acknowledged master of pathos!

<sup>2</sup> Thought to be the book in *Troilus and Criseyde* designated as 'The Theban Tale' which is being read aloud to Criseyde and her ladies when her uncle, Pandarus, visits her on behalf of his nephew, Troilus. See Alistair Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1982), p. 105.

century's literary developments which, to put it briefly, consisted in involving readers more intimately in characters' inner experiences.<sup>1</sup>

It is clear that in the *Roman de Thèbes* feelings of pity are used to make literary characters sympathetic to listeners / readers. At the start the infant smiles of Oedipus (condemned to death at birth) arouse the pity of his executioners who spare him for his destiny of unconscious crime but with the listener / reader involvement of, precisely, pity on his side.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore the *Roman de Thèbes*'s account of the mutual fratricide of the two brothers, Polynices and Eteocles, makes Polynices sympathetic by having him feel such remorse and pity after striking the death-blow that, dismounting, he rushes to his brother to embrace him, while Eteocles is shown to be evil by not sharing such feelings, but seizing the chance to slay his brother with his last sword-thrust.<sup>3</sup> Listeners' / readers' involvement in characters is facilitated in the *Roman de Thèbes* by such clarity of loyalties. The supportive father and legitimate power-holder, King Adrastus of the Argives, is opposed to the hostile father and criminal power-holder, Oedipus, while the Duke Theseus of the *Roman*, combining the concern of the one with the severity of the other, becomes the ideally righteous justice bringer (in medieval terms), able to separate equitably saints from sinners. Yet the central figure of the *Roman* is nonetheless King Adrastus, the defeated power-holder, whose spectacular pity for his daughters, his soldiers and himself, is supposed to gain him the greatest listener / reader sympathy. King Adrastus bursts into tears and faints repeatedly, yet this show of emotion, while excessive, is understandable in context. The Argive women themselves weep, lament and faint continuously, but the extravagance of such emotional reactions does not totally destroy even modern readers' sense of the credible, linked as it is to deep feeling, decisive action, and courageous stamina. Indeed, the very phrase "as if his heart would break", used of King Adrastus on his learning the death of one of his

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<sup>1</sup> The *Roman de Thèbes* belongs to those "romans" (translations, adaptations into Anglo-Norman) such as the *Roman d'Enée / Aeneas*, the *Roman de Troie / Troy*, the *Roman d'Alexandre / Alexander*, written usually by clerics for a public without Latin.

<sup>2</sup> See *Roman de Thèbes*, trans. F. Mora-Lebrun, p. 51, l. 115.

<sup>3</sup> See *Roman de Thèbes*, trans. F. Mora-Lebrun, p. 711, l. 11425-l. 11450.

own best knights killed in the Theban massacre, is far more convincing in context than when one finds it applied to Theseus in Chaucer. One can suppose that Chaucer actually borrows these words about a desperate loser (King Adrastus) and uses them about a confident conqueror (his own Duke Theseus) to instil subtle incongruity in his own version of the power-holder. One can also suppose that the raising up of King Adrastus by Theseus in MS C of the *Roman de Thèbes* and the raising up of the widows “all at the same time gathered into his arms” in MS S of the *Roman*, serve to parody the exaggerations, however forceful, of the twelfth century text and its pretensions to epic grandeur, and at the same time to mock the indulgent contemporary vision of the fourteenth century power-holders as represented in Theseus by Chaucer.

For clearly, Chaucer’s Theseus does not inherit the *Roman*’s Theseus’s ideal medieval power-holder characteristics. In the MS C version of the *Roman*, Duke Theseus is correctly feudal and takes no unfair advantage when he assures King Adrastus that, as his vassal, he and not the king (however diminished) should bow. The Theseus of the S version of the *Roman*, who meets King Adrastus only after he has been approached by the widows, also forbears to take advantage to usurp power or even deference, so that both versions present a Theseus whose compassionate words accord with deeds and are free of self-interest.

As for the *Roman* Theseus’s attitude to Creon, both versions show it as severe towards an opponent who refuses terms but who is not as emblematically evil as he later becomes, first in Boccaccio and then, even more succinctly, in Chaucer. Politically speaking, Creon in the *Roman* is not always shown as a usurper, but in fact as a ruler elected by his people, and his main fault is not so much cruelty or passionate anger (since everybody in the *Roman* gives full rein to emotion, however negative) as defiance of the injunctions of the duke of Athens, Theseus. Rather than “evil” Creon is called “olde” (and as Boyd Ashby Wise remarks, the term acquires the force of an ‘epic epithet’),<sup>1</sup> to imply “difficult”, “obdurate”, yet Chaucer, in his own text, seizes on this one adjective to denote a rebarbative hard-

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<sup>1</sup> Boyd Ashby Wise, *The Influence of Statius on Chaucer*. Dissertation 1905 (Baltimore: J. H. Furst Company, 1911), p. 130.

heartedness which cannot be accounted for, and opposes a Creon unrelievedly wicked to his, as I believe, superficially idealised Theseus.

## 7. Pity in Chaucer

My contention is, evidently, that knowledgeable readers should see through this superficiality by means of the paradoxical juxtapositions that the author himself must be considered as having put in place. The incongruous effect produced by the contrast between the pity of Theseus for the Argive women kneeling before him (in their excessively neat, “two-by-two arrangement”) with his ensuing ruthlessness as a warrior suggests (as analyzed at length in an earlier article)<sup>1</sup> that the whole episode of the Argive women in Chaucer is a pre-arranged ploy for further war and conquest for the power-holder. Without the magnanimity of the successful general, as in Statius, or the graciousness of the successful ruler, as in Boccaccio; without, above all, the consistently justified passions of the *Roman de Thèbes*, the Theseus of Chaucer speaks, acts and thinks in such contradictory ways that it stretches credibility in his sincerity and integrity to breaking point – not for the Knight-narrator, who believes only good of his ‘noble’ and ‘worthy’ Theseus – but for (some at least of) Chaucer’s audience, both within and without the frame of the tale. Finally it appears more plausible to see Chaucer’s Theseus as telling calculated lies and even, starting at the episode of the widows’ pleas, secretly staging most of the action narrated in the tale in order to promote his own popularity and power.

Although the leitmotif of *For pitee renneth soon in gentil herte* (*Riverside*, l. 761) seems to corroborate Theseus’s claims to sensitive gentleness, the second time he ostensibly acts out of pity (begged by the kneeling Hippolyta, Emily and ladies to spare the young knights fighting over their lady), Theseus again cannot, on reflection, be plausibly imagined as experiencing feelings of spontaneous pity, since Chaucer shows him needing to reason (or rationalise) himself into such feelings. Indeed, in this case, the internal focalisation used by the

<sup>1</sup> See M. K. Greenwood, “Pointlessness, Parody and Paradox in Chaucer’s The Knight’s Tale,” *Hier et aujourd’hui : points de vue sur le Moyen Age anglais*, ed. Guy Bourquin (Publications de l’A.M.A.E.S., 21, 1997), 45-55.

Knight-narrator is fuller than during the initial episode of the widows. Theseus persuades himself to show pity in terms that recall the judgemental righteousness of the Theseus of the *Roman de Thèbes*:

And in his *gentle herte* he thoughte anon,  
 And *softe unto hymselfe he seyde*, “Fy  
 Upon a lord that wol have no mercy,  
 But been a leon both in word and dede,  
 To hem that been in *repentaunce and drede*,  
 As wel as to a *proud despitous* man (KT ll. 1772-1780, my emphases).

The discourse of the conscientious judge of the Theseus of the *Roman* combined with the discourse of the *Roman*'s caring father, King Adrastus, is put into the mouth of Chaucer's lax and erratic Theseus, and Chaucerian realism then undermines and ironizes this conflation of characteristics. The irony reflects retrospectively on Theseus's earlier show of pity for the Argive widows, which was presented and accepted as a just cause for war through its excessively stated commitment and without recourse to any rational discussion or argument in private or in public. And in the present instance, the terms of 'repentance and dread' apply incongruously to the two knights caught fighting over a lady, since they are not, in so doing, defying any of the power-holder's express injunctions. Nobody mentions or even seems to think about the real transgressions which are particular to each – that Palamon has escaped the ruler's prison and Arcite come back to the land from which the ruler had banned him. An air of absurdity builds up around the scene as both the power-holder and his prisoners disappoint our expectations of logically worthy chivalric behaviour by their unpredictable changes of stance.

Some lines later, moreover, when the fact that the whole encounter has been transmuted from the serious subject of life and death to the comedic subjects of courtship and sport, the discourses of reason and of feeling clash in the mouth of Chaucer's Theseus in the comic manner of bakhtinian 'polyphony'.<sup>1</sup> Having allegedly felt pity in his 'gentle heart', he then starts mocking the lovers with entire insensitivity and professing the rational, even cynical, opinion that love is folly. His tasteless, jokey comments go so far as to hold up the

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<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin's term for dissonant voices, or at least differentiated voices. See ed. Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin, and his World* (London & New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 34, 108, 164.

lady Emilia to public scorn by likening her unawareness of the males' desires to the obtuseness of despicable animals:

She woot namoore of al this *hote fare*,  
By God, than wot a *cokkow* or an *hare!* (ll. 1809-1810).

Chaucer's Theseus's last mention of 'pitee' reveals his concept of it in all its cruel inanity. Having ordered Emily to accept her surviving suitor Palamon, he addresses her with what amounts to a challenge: "Let see now of youre *womanly pitee*" (l. 3082), evoking not true feeling, but simply the Courtly Love euphemism for female submission to masculine desire. Theseus here belittles the very idea of a woman's freedom in matters of love or marriage. The "womanly pitee" is inoperative, since Emily (and everybody else) knows she is powerless to refuse the suitor imposed upon her by the power-holder. She is making a political marriage in the power-holder's interests and according to his timing alone.

The final message from Chaucer's Theseus to all power-holders can finally appear as "follow your own will and whims, but take care to appear compassionate when it can earn you popularity and secretly further your own interests,"<sup>1</sup> a model for power-holders which looks forward to Machiavelli. As on comparison with the other texts Chaucer's Theseus is revealed as basically self-interested and vain, Chaucer can arguably be using Theseus's moments of alleged altruistic motivation to demonstrate how easily audiences can fall for shows of pity, however ephemeral or insincere, in their power-holders.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that Chaucer's originality lies in not, as in the four earlier texts under study, unambiguously idealising his Theseus as a morally superior character truly meriting his power-holder status. Chaucer allows us, though does not force us, to perceive his power-holder's moral limitations and even immoral deviousness and mendaciousness, if we feel so dissidently inclined. He does this by borrowing from his sources not just words, phrases or motifs but

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<sup>1</sup> On the predominance of the will of Theseus in "The Knight's Tale" (as suggested by the film, *A Knight's Tale*), see Agnes Blandeau, "A Knight's Tale : la très noble histoire d'une comique imposture," *Bulletin des Anglicistes Médiévistes*, 65 (2004), 19-35.

ways of thinking as expressed in varied and frequently contradictory discourses, exaggerating them deftly, and then setting them against each other so that the composite picture becomes paradoxical and faintly (never explicitly) absurd. By occluding the “just cause for war” theme even more effectively than Boccaccio, Chaucer presents us with a Theseus who gains reader sympathy and approval in the manner of the Arthurian knight setting out to demolish the ogres of fairy tale, and yet whose character and actions can be discussed in terms of the real world of politics and power.

Chaucer also secretly acknowledges the sad truth openly proclaimed by Euripides, that sincere pity for others is hardly to be expected of power-holders whose interests are all in the uses of power for dominating, exploiting and governing their subjects according to their own ideas (as in Statius), particularly if they are not even trying, as Chaucer’s pagan Theseus is not, to be Christian (as in the *Roman de Thèbes*). At the same time, Chaucer manages to suggest that Theseus’s canny public shows of chivalry, of ‘gentillesse’ and of pity are possibly preferable to none at all, as long as the power-holder is finally judged, in literature as in life, not on his words, nor even on his deeds but, pragmatically, on the final outcomes of his projects. For “The Knight’s Tale” does have some sort of a happy ending; at least possibly for the newly-weds, Palamon and Emily, and certainly for the power-holder, Theseus.

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