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Garlands of Derision: the thematic imagery of garlands. Part II
The Garlands of Power: Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale"
and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

In my first article entitled "Garlands of Derision,"¹ which dealt with the "garlands of love and glory" in Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, garlanding as the rewarding of natural or artistic beauty or merit was examined for the criteria of judgment implied. Garlanding was found not always to suggest straightforward accolades, but to suggest criticism, irony, even derision in both tale and play. Both works questioned the suitability of garlands: how far the garlanded deserve the admiration, and how far the garlanders' choice is wise or unwise, sincere or insincere. Since garlanding reveals both the free choice of individuals and the social pressures of consensus, I will now consider it in its most formal aspect: no longer as ephemeral celebration, but as definitive crowning, the mark for both garlanders and garlanded of the bestowing and acceptance of power or, perversely, of powerlessness.

In both texts, garlanding as acknowledgement of power concerns the ruler Theseus, Duke of Athens and, as acknowledgement of the limits of power, those who are either the ruler's subjects and dependents (his consort, his courtiers, the elders, the young); or those aspiring to be his equals (allies or enemies). The garlands of power appear explicitly only in the poem and not in the play: Chaucer's Theseus is the sole autocratic authority, whereas Shakespeare's Theseus appears to share power voluntarily with his subjects, and involuntarily with natural and supernatural forces. In both poem and play, garlands of love or of glory must be won by overcoming difficulties and ordeals, whereas he who wears the garland of power

¹ See Greenwood, "Garlands of Derision", Part I (2002).

decides how and on whom garlands of limited power shall be bestowed.

1. Chaucer's Theseus

Chaucer subversively mocks Theseus's merits as ruler but in so dead-pan a way that the satire has rarely been suspected by commentators. Henry J. Webb's perspicacious criticism of Chaucer's Theseus, made shortly after the Second World War, was later rejected by critics who had settled into automatic respect for peace-time power-holders.¹ So we will again examine Chaucer's Theseus, and his particular garland of power, the wreath or crown of laurel. The first mention of this laurel crown in "The Knight's Tale", (discounting the *incipit* of the laurels-on-his-chariot-after-Staius, added to only some of the extant MSS and possibly made by scribes and not by the author himself)² adds so surprisingly little to Theseus's traditional reputation, that it needs close attention. For the Athenian Theseus's initial battlefield encounter with his Theban enemies (Palamon and Arcite), is sinister rather than glorious. The young men are taken not in "manly fight,"³ but are dragged out of a heap of dead bodies by the pillagers and brought three-quarters dead to the general's tent solely for their possible value as ransom money:

Out of the *taas* the *pilours* han hem torn
 And han hem carried soft unto the tent
 Of Theseus, and he ful soone hem sente
 To Athenes, to dwellen in *prison*
 And when this worthy duc hath thus ydon,
 He took his hoost, and hoom he writ anon
 With *laurer crowned as a conqueror*,
 And ther he lyveth in joye and in honour
 Terme of his lyf; what needeth wordes mo?
 And in a tour, *in anguish and in wo*,
 This Palamon and his felawe Arcite
 For *evermore*, ther may *no gold* hem quite. (*KT*, l. 1022-1032, my emphases).

¹ See Webb (1947).

² *Riverside* (1984), p. 37.

³ Theseus is recounted as slaying Creon *manly as a knight / In pleyn bataille*, *Riverside*, ll. 986-8.

Only after he has sent his two high-born prisoners back to Athens, does the laurel crown of the conqueror appear on Theseus's head, with no mention of laurels where readers might have expected them – at the tale's beginning and Theseus's purportedly glorious homecoming with Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, newly won for wife. Unlike the hyperbolic praise in Statius's *Thebaid*, where Theseus's laurels of victory overflow from his head to his chariot,¹ in Chaucer the garland of laurel appears too late to point to prowess. It is not until Theseus's spectacular act of severity (one wonders at his refusal to ransom the two young men, as hoped for by heralds and pillagers alike),² that Theseus decides the war is won, sets laurels on his head and takes his army home.

This follow-up of Theseus and his host seems strangely slow if supposed to celebrate victory, so why Chaucer's pains over redundant detail? As frequently with Chaucer, however, it is the ostensibly boring bits that reward investigation. Chaucer makes Theseus sport laurels precisely when his actions lack glory: he has shown no exceptional courage or heroism, nor do the frustrated pillagers evoke admiring troops rejoicing at their leader's hard-won victory. The Knight-narrator affirms that Duke Theseus is "worthy," but his merits remain as vague as his victory. What exactly has he accomplished apart from the prospect of a comfortable life thenceforward? The Knight naïvely asserts that joy and honour will attend the Duke as long as he lives, contrasting his happiness with the prisoners' punishment, reiterating "perpetually" and "evermore". Yet all that Theseus's victory amounts to is that the prisoners will serve as warning to those who defy, even involuntarily, the holder of power. By sending the prince-prisoners on to Athens, Theseus prepares the propaganda of his trumped-up triumph. The severity of the punishment will make Athenians think that the two played an important part in battle or acted criminally; perhaps attacked Theseus

¹ See note 2 above.

² Some critics speak of Theseus's "nobility of heart" in going against the natural inclination of the common man to make some money out of every situation. But to my mind the refusal of ransom points to Theseus's careerist instinct and lack of pity for his prisoners. For a similar critical attitude to Theseus, see David Aers (1980), pp. 174-195.

together just before his (presumably) single combat with Creon.¹ The Athenians will not imagine the truth – that the prisoners had been dragged, unconscious, out of a heap of corpses – but will be sufficiently impressed to survey the laurel crown with awe.

Now while it is logical to think that the power-holder Theseus aims for precisely such an effect on his people, the author Chaucer is arguably sending a different message to his readers / listeners who, as observers, can judge characters by deeds not words. Such critical judgments are invited explicitly in *The Canterbury Tales*, at the end of “The Franklin’s Tale” (the debate as to which of the characters acted most freely); and in “The Knight’s Tale” itself, (the debate as to which of the knights, Palamon or Arcite, are most to be pitied as lovers, if not as political prisoners). So readers / listeners noticing the discrepancies of connotation around Theseus’s wreath can take it as derisive and critical. Theseus’s laurels can appear as the rewards of the clever rhetorician and cunning propagandist, of the military leader moved by nothing other than personal advantage, private self-aggrandizement and increased political power.² But this message is so heavily masked that the self-seeking of Chaucer’s Theseus is never noticed or resisted within the tale, nor often criticized outside it; and we can recall briefly our discussion in “Garlands of Derision, Part I” of the conflicts arising over the conferring and transmission of the garlands of power.³ Chaucer’s Theseus, using the prisoners as

¹ Theseus’s slaying of Creon is so under-narrated that its heroic or unheroic nature cannot be assessed. Deciding *to speken of this thyng* [...] *shortly* the Knight-narrator glosses over the actual killing with the word *manly* without making it clear what this means in the context: fair fighting according to the chivalric rules of single combat, or unfair fighting according to principles of winning by any means, like surprise attack, outnumbering, attacking from behind, ambush, trickery, treachery, lies. *Riverside*, ll. 986-990.

² Louise Fradenburg quotes Donna Stanton in defining self-aggrandizement: “the aristocracy of the later Middle Ages [...] must depend upon the recognition of others for the difference that defines its distinction. In enacting himself [...] the sovereign uses the selves of other people as well as his own and over those [...] he tries to exert a power of change.” Fradenburg (1991), p. xi.

³ Oberon’s transforming Titania’s playful garlanding of Bottom into a political crime of illegal allegiance by applying to it the terms of “crowning” and “coronet”, and in this way justifying his extortion from her of the Indian boy. Greenwood (2000), p. 30.

evidence that the battle against Creon was no massacre but a chivalric engagement where some at least survived, dons the symbolic wreath to proclaim that he merits the political power he already wields and the “noble” wreath of laurel clinches this claim.

For while the garlands of love or of glory allow for mutual endowment, the garland of military glory ritualised into the garland of power becomes definitive, and denotes unassailable power which cannot be shared or taken in turns. Supreme power vested in one individual suppresses dialogue and eliminates competition, precluding derision by turning it into blasphemy. For once the king has been crowned, the military hero made general (or the president or general manager or rector of the university installed), one can no longer deride his right to command or one’s duty to obey and his most laughable decisions can no longer be only laughed at. If garlands of love or glory permit nuance, garlands of power specify only intensity; no longer symbols but signals of power. Theseus’s laurel crown does not need to stand for love of country or service to it, and rare are the dissidents who dare, or even think of daring, to bring such consecrated power into question. Theseus has the laurel crown not because he is worthy of it but, like every ritualised holder of power, he is thought worthy of it because he has it.

The garlands of powerlessness

The last five references to garlands in “The Knight’s Tale” confirm this view of the garland as a signal of power in greater or lesser degrees of intensity and, shorn of the spiritual and moral values of the garlands of love or of glory, can be read as deliberately derisive. These five references are, in order, firstly and secondly, the garlands worn by the two champions at the tournament, Lygurge and Emetrius; thirdly, Emily’s oak garland, worn to pray to Diana to let her off the imposed marriage; fourthly and fifthly, the two references to the garlands adorning the bier of the dead Arcite, the garlands of death.

The two warriors – Lygurge

As regards the two champions invited to help the main combatants, the Knight-narrator gives us long and elaborate

descriptions of each, which contrast with the brevity of his description of Emily. The Knight-narrator doubtless finds little of interest about the young woman, since although so closely allied to Theseus (his sister in law), she is, within the masculine society, so powerless that her person and actions can be considered as of no account. The warriors on the other hand arouse the Knight-narrator's unflagging interest in their splendid appearance, if not in their insignificant actions.

The tougher and older of the two warriors, Lygurge, whose aid is promised to Palamon, gives an initial impression of heroic glory through the elaborate description of his sumptuous riches, with his raven-black hair setting off his wreath of jewels and gold.

“In stede of cote-armure over his harnays,
With *nayles yelwe* and bright *as any gold*,
He had a beres skyn, *col-blak for old*,
His longe heer was kemed behind his bak;
As any ravenes fethere it shoon *for black*;
A *wrethe of gold*, arm-greet, of huge wight
Upon his head, set full of stones bright,
Of fine rubies and of dyamauntz.” (KT, ll. 2140-2147, my emphases)

On a symbolic level however, the contrast of gold and black can also work to undermine rather than to enhance the impression of heroic worth. The wreath may dazzle with gold and jewels and Lygurge's whole chariot shine with gold, but the detail of the rivets in his armour being “yellow” and “bright as” but only *like* gold, is disconcerting. Perhaps the rivets are not real gold, but only designed to give that impression. For since these tiny rivets are mostly hidden by the black bear-skin that the warrior wears instead of heraldic devices, one suspects that their actual composition hardly matters. The impression of glitter without authenticity is strengthened by the ambiguity of the phrases qualifying the bearskin as “black for old,” and the man's hair that “shone for black.” Is the black colour of the bearskin natural and that of the man's hair artificial, i.e. does the elderly warrior like an ageing actor have to resort to dying (back to black) hair that is turning grey? Later in the description, the collars of the warrior's wolf-hounds are also specified as gold and their craftsmanship detailed so minutely that it seems this warrior is more devoted to his dogs than to his men, and that gold for him is no symbol of glory but simply a flashy sign of wealth. The incongruous

details of the description thus suggest the meretricious nature of Lygurge's spectacular image and destroy the glorious symbolism of his wreath of gold, linking it not to a supposed reputation of chivalric renown, but to a probable history of barbaric violence and looting. That Lygurge does not deserve a wreath of gold for his prowess is amply borne out by his subsequent failure to be of any use at all in supporting his lord, Palamon, who is ambushed and taken by Emetrius and twenty men, with the supposedly invincible Lygurge nowhere in sight.

The two warriors – Emetrius

In the description of the second champion, the younger and smoother Emetrius, engaged to support Arcite, the gold around his person is mainly in the cloths covering his horse and the saddle that he sits upon, while pearls adorn his heraldic tunic, rubies sparkle in his mantle, so that his wreath, when it is finally mentioned, appears surprisingly simple and natural by being made of green laurel only, presumably underlining this great king's youth.

His crispe heer lyk rynges was yronne,
 And that was yellow and glytered as the sonne.
 His nose was heigh, his eyen bright citryn,
 His lippes rounde, his colour was sangwyn;
 A fewe frakenes in his face yspreynd,
 Bitwixten yellow and somdel black ymeynd;
 And as a leon he his looking caste.
 Of five and twenty yeer his age I caste.
 His beard was wel begonned for to sprynge;
 His voice was as a trompe thonderynge.
 Upon his heed he wered of laurer grene
 A garland fresh and lusty for to sene.
 Upon his hand he bare for his deduit,
 An egle tame as any lily whyt;" (KT, ll. 2165-2178, my emphases)

The wreath is referred to as a *garland*, and with the stressing of its greenness, freshness and lustiness sounds more evocative of Venus than of Mars, a garland of seduction rather than of valour. The tame white eagle on Emetrius's hand also recalls the white doves of the goddess of love rather than the rapacious ravens of the god of war. But the cleverest way to undermine the first impressions of a magnificently heroic Emetrius lies in the detailing of the minutiae of

the young man's face, the blond hair in curls, the lips rounded, the freckles both yellow and black, the beard just beginning to sprout. These suggestions of a scrutiny more fleshly than military intimate that, seen up close, some people could find him attractive if immature (beards usually sprout, or are remarked on as sprouting, in youths much younger), and provide no clues whatever as to how well he can fight. Furthermore, he gives an impression of blandness and not of soldierly fierceness, despite attempts at looking like a lion. The word "tame" is used twice in the description, both for the eagle on his hand and the lions and leopards that surround him.

Thus the accent on Emetrius's physique and on the tameness of his attendant pets combine to suggest that the rightful symbolism of his garland of laurel is love rather than glory and, as with Lygurge, certainly not power. This ties up with the nature of Arcite's Maying,¹ so that his soldierly qualities begin to appear, like Arcite's professed love for his lady, to be something of a sham. For the laurel wreath is normally worn after a contest rather than before, so the fact that Emetrius is arrayed as if the tournament were finished can suggest that everything has in fact been decided beforehand. His followers, although fully armed, wear nothing on their heads – a curious detail which can indicate that neither they nor their leader expect to meet serious danger. Possibly the taking of Palamon has already been prearranged, since Theseus would secretly continue to favour Arcite as his squire, whose very name-in-disguise of 'Philostrate' suggested the official favourite. Duke Theseus would want Arcite to win the tournament rather than Palamon, and so to favour Emetrius over Lygurge. The flagrant unfairness of the taking of Palamon by Emetrius's ambush is later smoothed over by Theseus (*Riverside*, ll. 2715-2739), through some diplomatically soothing words explaining that it is not shameful to lose to greater numbers, while making his audience forget that the rules of chivalry actually prohibit ambushing a man engaged in single combat.

¹ See M. K. Greenwood (2000), p. 34.

Emily

After the real warfare of Theseus and his subsequent laurels of victory and before the pretense warfare of the tournament, Emily's garland of oak (part of the correct ritual at Diana's altar) can strike readers / listeners by its seeming seriousness.

Her bright hair was kembd, untressed al;
A coroune of green oak cerial
 Upon her head was set ful fair and meete.
 Two fyres on the auter gan she beete,
And did her thynges, as men may biholde
 In Stace of Thebes and these bookes olde. (*KT*, l. 2289, 2292, my emphases)

Poetically speaking, and compared with the earlier scene of Emily in the garden, this description of Emily in the temple is less alluring, as if the Knight-narrator, at a loss to visualise the scene, preferred to refer back to his sources: Statius and other old books. Yet several important points are established, such as, firstly, that Emily is no longer in the process of fashioning but now actually wears her garland, or crown; secondly, the word 'crown' in itself signifies the garland of power, as is confirmed by the material out of which the wreath is made – evergreen oak, the initial Greek reward for military heroism, and which continued to be awarded for the exceptional heroism of those who saved a fellow soldier at risk to their own lives.¹ Thirdly, thus crowned, Emily proceeds to deliberate actions (lighting the two fires) and so puts her symbolic empowerment into effect. The oak garland here denotes Emily assuming her right to be 'subject,' speaking for herself, stating her own wishes, freely choosing her own destiny.² The detail of her hair confirms this self-assertion: arranged neatly, but not plaited as before, its looseness can indicate the girl's own preference rather than conformity to rules, fashions or complicated dress codes imposed by others. Here Emily seems for once purposeful, clear-headed and actively in charge.

Yet the power her garland gives her is severely limited. She can refuse neither the imposed marriage nor the imposed husband, nor choose happiness but only avoid unhappiness in her choice of

¹ Part of the Apollo legend depends on this evolution of the highest honour for the highest courage to include the highest sublimation of power, i.e. art. See Ovid trans. Melville (1986), p. 14, ll. 447-456, and note 560, p. 381.

² For a discussion of subjectivity, see Belsey (1985).

husbands. Her authority over her own destiny is so restricted that, by the end of her prayers to Diana, we realize how in fact the symbolism of her forceful-seeming oak garland is derided by her pathetic powerlessness.

Arcite's funeral garlands – the garlands of death

The last two references to garlands in “The Knight’s Tale” occur in connection with the funeral of Arcite. Only after much deliberation does Duke Theseus decide on the fit place for the cremation pyre as the very grove where Palamon and Arcite fought their private battle over Emily and in which, earlier, Arcite went a-Maying. Theseus’s reasons for this choice, though described at length, are not entirely clear and the lines describing the grove ambiguous: “Ther as he (Arcite) hadde his amoureuse desires / His complaynte, and for love his hotte fyres,” (ll. 2861-2862), given that Arcite’s complaint was for the absent Emily, while his “hotte fyres” must have been, as we remarked in the previous article,¹ for some unspecified partner whom he failed to find. But no more is said of Theseus’s motives once his decision is taken, and his orders to raze and burn the oak grove are promptly obeyed by his officers. As the Knight-narrator, with the stylistic clumsiness of “And after this” (pointed by the initial “After” of the following line), then insists that he is not one to think through causality, he hurries on to extol Theseus’s lavish expense on Arcite’s funeral and the honours of the fresh wreath placed on the dead head.

*And after this, Theseus hath ysent
 After a beere, and it al overspradde
 With cloth of gold, the richeste that he hadde.
 And of the same suyte he clad Arcite;
 Upon his hondes had he gloves white,
 Eek on his heed a coroune of laurer greene,
 And in his hand a sword ful bright and keene. (KT, ll. 2870-2876, my
 emphases)*

The riches of Arcite’s bier and dead body recall the accoutrements of Emetrius, cloth of gold and fresh green laurel wreath, or ‘crown’ as the text here has it. If Arcite now wears the garland-reward that suggests a composite symbolism of power and glory and love

¹ Greenwood (2002), p. 34.

conjoined, this signifies rather the nature of the feelings that Theseus may have for him (perhaps genuine or perhaps simulated for strategic propaganda purposes), but hardly his own deserts. For Arcite did not die heroically in any way, but by an unfortunate accident. Nor did he win Emily heroically, and as we remarked earlier, his victory over Palamon was patently unfair and against the rules of chivalry.¹ Therefore while the crown of laurel appears to honour the young knight of apparently spotless reputation (as his white gloves are no doubt meant to remind us), in reality his posthumous crown takes on the tonality of irony and derision. However much the Athenian populace can be persuaded by the spectacular funeral that Arcite was a hero, readers / listeners can, by close reading, recognize in Arcite the basic ordinariness of the man of straw nonentity.

In the final mention of garlands in "The Knight's Tale", the irony and derision inevitably and sadly attendant on the garlands of death intensify by being steeped in elegiac pathos on the one hand, and on the other, by becoming part of the most elaborate joke in the whole tale: the absurdly long *occupatio*, i.e. the passage of forty-five lines of verse (ll. 2919-2966), in which the Knight-narrator tells his audience the details of what he intends to leave out. Thus the line "But how the fire was maked [...]" begins piling up excluded items and continues with "Ne how [...]" until the ultimate goal of the main verb is reached: "I wol nat tellen [...]". The passage about the garlands occurs in the middle of the list:

Ne how the fyr was couched first with *stree*,
 And thanne with dry *stikes* cloven a thre,
 And thanne with grene *wode* and spicerye
 And than with *cloth of gold* and with perrye,
 And *gerlandes*, *hangynge with ful many a flour*;
 The *mirre*, th'*encens*, with al so greet *odour*, (KT ll. 2933-2938, my emphases)

The effects of euphony, alliteration, and the associations of the word "hanging" makes this mention of garlands as poetically effective as

¹ One only needs to compare the joust in Chaucer to a joust in Malory, e.g. the tournament at Castle Lonazep in Book X of Caxton's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, to realize how fair play in fighting is of central importance in Malory, but is passed over without discussion by Chaucer's Knight. See Sir Thomas Malory (1985).

the line describing Emily's Maying.¹ Having become symbol of mourning, the garland loses its status as symbol of living values, and this loss is evoked here by the word "hanging", suggesting flowers that droop, heads hung down, shame, dishonour, death. This grandiose poetic line is preceded by a vision of riches, cloth of gold and jewels, and followed by an evocation of religious rites, clouds of incense blending with the perfume of dying flowers, so that the three lines together evoke a moment of profound reflection on the passing of earthly power and magnificence, and the fading of all that the garlands of power, love and glory stood for.

Yet the lines preceding this lofty vision begin bathetically, with the trivial and irrelevant technical details of how the fire was actually kindled with straw and sticks, before passing smoothly to the resonantly sacred "mirrh" and "encens." And since these lines are in the middle of the passage purportedly not describing the funeral, they do not evoke, in fact, the hush of great cathedrals, but merely some of the listed items which among others are about to perish in the flames. Arcite and Emily are mentioned for the last time together, the negation of their match confirmed, and the unfathomable mystery of their true thoughts underlined, so that the personal meaning they give to the funeral garlands will never be revealed.

Garlands of Power in Chaucer

Considered in succession, the five mentions of garlands in "The Knight's Tale" provide a fine meditation on the symbolism of garlands which signal decreasing power and increasing powerlessness, but at the same time diminishing derision and growing pathos and seriousness. Theseus's laurel crown signals power which he has not visibly deserved but which he assuredly possesses, the two champions signal the same sort of power but even further lacking in convincing merit: Emily's power is severely curtailed by the substitution of the illusory power of religious ritual for effective free choice, so that the derision attendant on her seemingly powerful garland and practical powerlessness is strongly tinged with pathos. Next, the dead Arcite's wreath underlines his powerlessness, as one dead, to alleviate if not

¹ "To make a subtiler gerlande for her head", *Riverside*, line 1054.

entirely eliminate the traces of any derision his wreath may suggest, and finally, the last mention of the funeral garlands that adorn his bier extends derision to such depths of pathos that it is changed into a profound irony which concerns the totality of mortal men, and signals the powerlessness of power itself.

2. Shakespeare's Theseus

As mentioned at the outset, Shakespeare's Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is even less noticeably satirized than the Theseus of Chaucer, and indeed it is only after long reflection, that critics find they can formulate reserves and criticisms about him. On a first comparison with Chaucer's however, Shakespeare's Theseus does give the impression of a merited popularity, chiefly because he exercises power at a time of peace and more in the manner of a master of ceremonies than of a conqueror (his main role in "The Knight's Tale"). In the play, where the power-holder's chief concern seems to be the provision of fine entertainment for his bride-to-be, the only real power-struggle to be explicitly enacted is the apparently frivolous one of the fairies, Titania and Oberon and (as noted in the first article), all the other conflicts are smoothed over and resolved by the situations of comedy and romantic love. Whereas in Chaucer's poem Theseus's laurel wreath proclaims his victory over his enemies, the Theseus of Shakespeare's play seems to enjoy his reputation sufficiently for his laurels to remain unmentioned. Indeed, Theseus in the Shakespeare wears a laurel crown that is so unassailable that it becomes invisible. Deliberately distanced from the arrogant heroics of the epic tradition, more amiable and gracious than Chaucer's and closer to his literary ancestor in Boccaccio's *Teseida*, Shakespeare's Theseus is presented as the humane Renaissance ruler who renounces tyrannical rule and appears to allow his consort and subjects some say in their own projects as also in their own mistakes, some liberty or semblance of liberty of speech and action. In his opening address to his bride-to-be, Hippolyta, Shakespeare's Theseus apologises for winning her "by the sword", and promises her a courtship and a wedding "in another

key”.¹ His first words to Hermia, the young girl who threatens to disobey her father over the choice of marriage partner, are not peremptory punishment, but an invitation to speak for herself: “What say you Hermia?” (line 46). At the end of the play he overrides Hermia’s father’s (Egeus’s) wishes, and agrees to Hermia’s own choice of partner.

Since Shakespeare’s Theseus appears so ready to negotiate and to be indulgent one could ask if his assumed laurels are clear of derisive or critical overtones, and his popularity as ideal ruler genuinely credited by the author, Shakespeare. The answer would be finally no, for the distance between Theseus’s words and his actions proves that his amiability, if polished, is nonetheless a veneer. He manages his subjects in a benevolent, but manipulative way, and while being more subtle than the Theseus of Chaucer, attempts to influence minds even further, by appeals to a reason that can appear paradoxically impoverishing and pernicious. As Richard Wilson recently claimed, Shakespeare’s secret resistance to both sides in Queen Elizabeth I’s conflict with her Catholic recusant subjects profoundly fires the totality of Shakespeare’s *oeuvre*, so it is possible to think that his gracious Theseus is both model for and warning about his reigning sovereign. For Shakespeare’s Theseus is seeking less to dominate by force, than by feeling, by emotional rather than physical obeisance, and to do so under cover of an unanswerable rationality.

Ostensibly Theseus upholds the laws of the land, and indeed his words to Hermia about his inability to change the law² prompted Howard F. Brooks in his preface to the Arden Shakespeare to admire him as a constitutional ruler.³ Yet while claiming to uphold the rights of the father, Egeus, of disposing of his daughter Hermia’s hand, Theseus then distorts his vaunted attachment to the laws and, incidentally, his classical, traditional reputation as not just the power-

¹ “Hyppolyta I wooed thee with my sword / And won thy love doing thee injuries / But I will wed thee in another key, / With pomp, with triumph, and with revelling (ll. 16-19), William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. R. A. Foakes (1984), p. 48. All further references to this edition.

² “[...] the law of Athens / (Which by no means we may extenuate)” Act I, sc. 1, ll. 120.

³ Howard F. Brooks (1979), p. ciii.

holder and ruler, but, more importantly, as law-giver of Athens. He deliberately allows the young man Lysander, whom Hermia favours, to conspire to elope with her by actively encouraging the removal of the irate father (Egeus) and the favoured suitor (Demetrius) from the presence of the self-chosen lovers (Hermia and Lysander).

But Demetrius, come,
 And come Egeus. You shall go with me;
 I have some private schooling for you both. [...] (AMND ll. 114-116)
 [...] Demetrius and Egeus, go along;
 I must employ you in some business
 Against our nuptial, and confer with you
 Of something nearly that concerns yourselves. (AMND ll. 123-126)

Perspicaciously or cunningly, Shakespeare's Theseus sees the father's and suitor's concern over Hermia for what it is in terms of power: thwarted self-interest rather than outraged love, and by secretly encouraging the young against the old, he plays on feelings of gratitude which will later be forged into devoted loyalty.

Likewise, his courtesy to Hippolyta does not extend beyond freedom of speech to actual freedom of choice. Proclaiming that their marriage will be solemnized with great ceremony, he then himself chooses the worst actors for the entertainment, claiming that the simple sincerity of the amateurs will make him as indulgent towards their clumsy efforts as a kind father to his children. Nevertheless, his unkind criticism of the bungling of *Pyramus and Thisbe* moves Hippolyta to protest. The mechanicals being too simple to recognize critique, Theseus mocks them to their faces, as do his young companions in emulation. The mechanicals imagine their atrocious play-acting is taken seriously, while Demetrius and Lysander, believing that Theseus assesses the play by sophisticated derision, are so impressed they turn sycophants. By such means, Shakespeare's Theseus confirms his power over the young men and wins them over to his opinions as surely as Chaucer's Theseus submits them to his will. Yet his desire to control is so well masked, that the possible resentment, criticism, or derision of his subjects is deflected from his own firm crown of power onto the antics of the mechanicals (Bottom etc.) and of the fairies (Titania, Oberon, Puck and the rest).

Both figures of Theseus, in Chaucer and in Shakespeare, are interested in extending and maintaining their own power, but

Shakespeare's Theseus, more convincingly setting himself up as the supporter of "cool reason", draws on the admiring trust of his subjects, as long as they ignore what spectators / readers of the play might perceive: his basic aim as power-holder is to suit himself, and to do so as much through misrule as through rule, through bending the laws, rather than through upholding them, since as power-holder he is above the law. Indeed a very recent translator of the play into French, F. Morvan, suggests in the preface that it is not order, law and legitimate success that characterize the court of Theseus, but disorder and failure.¹ Only when compared with the other authority figures in the play: Oberon (the erring fairy king), Egeus (the outraged father), Bottom (the upstart actor and involuntary lover), does Shakespeare's Theseus appear as the ruler successful in worldly-wise terms, who governs through apparent reason and secret imaginative plotting, knowing, (like Plato in *Republic*), that only the unbridled freedom of imagination of poets can threaten his supremacy.

Conclusion

The symbolism of garlands in both Chaucer and Shakespeare is satirical in complex ways which need much elucidation, yet certain conclusions can be drawn for both. Types of narrow subjectivity and self-love are mocked in tale and in play, and characters' behaviour shown as commanded by whims, passions, poses, but rarely by virtuous and never by the ideally altruistic principles which are publicly proclaimed. Seen objectively, no character is heroic, admirable or even satisfactory, but seen subjectively, all the characters invite the same indulgence we accord to ourselves and to our private feelings and failings. By addressing problems of mutuality in love and of exclusivity in power, Shakespeare produces an aura of hope and romance that Chaucer deliberately eschews. Chaucer's tale, slow-moving, unwieldy and sad, steeps his poetry of garlands in pathos, absurdity and black humour rather than in wit, mischief and laughter. Yet when we consider both tale and play with reference to the workings of human power, "The Knight's Tale" and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* both reveal themselves as more seriously and

¹ F. Morvan (2004), « la thématique de l'échec », p. 19 ; « garant de l'ordre faisant régner le désordre », p. 35.

profoundly concerned with political dominance and social coercion than with love, with individual self-interest rather than the common good, with power for its own sake rather than for its benefits to communities. While Chaucer masks his message by placid if disenchanting realism, Shakespeare masks his by glamorous enchantments, but both deride human pretensions to becoming worthy possessors of the garlands of ultimate power.

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