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**The Discourses of Chivalry and Courtly Love  
in Chaucer and Malory:  
with particular reference to  
“The Knight’s Tale” and “The Book of Tristram”**

Although both Chaucer and Malory were translators, they were above all authors, what today would be called “creative”, with distinctly personal ideas about their material which made them see the same narrative incident or thematic motif from widely differing angles. Whereas Chaucer might be thought as courtier and fourteenth century writer to be closer in time and mood to the tenets of chivalry and courtly love as elaborated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries,<sup>1</sup> his stance appears more critical than Malory’s who, writing, in the fifteenth century, is recalling an ideology already on the wane, and restoring it to a good measure of its former vitality. Without going any further for the moment into any possible unique source for the two authors,<sup>2</sup> we will see how strikingly similar scenes of chivalric and courtly rivalry are treated in very different ways by Chaucer and Malory, with Malory’s characters showing themselves as models of behaviour in both chivalry and courtly love terms and Chaucer’s as satirical anti-models.

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<sup>1</sup> As, for instance in the anonymous prose *Lancelot* of c. 1225. *Lancelot: Roman du XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 2 vol, ed. Alexandre Micha, Collection 10/18, Paris: Union Générale d’Editions, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Whether Malory’s French sources such as the *Lancelot* or Chrétien de Troyes or other works, or Chaucer’s Latin, Old French or Italian sources: Virgil, Statius and the *Roman de Thèbes*, and Boccaccio’s *Teseida*.

The passages to be compared, taken from Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" and Malory's "Book of Tristram",<sup>1</sup> are both scenes of rivalry between two men in love with one woman, in which one overhears the other proclaiming his feelings openly, is roused to jealous fury, but then refrains from murder by recalling chivalric codes, and finally agrees with the other on single combat. Thus to apply terms of bakhtinian dialogism to our analysis, we can say that while the passages diverge in their "sjuzet" (or treatment), they share one "fabula" (basic set of events or story-line)<sup>2</sup> and therefore involve readers in the same debate, i.e.: how far do the protagonists enact the ideals of chivalry and courtly love or, on the contrary, fail them? By choosing the key words *remembrance*, *restraint*, *shame* and *promise*, which figure explicitly or implicitly in both passages and structure their overall significance, we will examine how Chaucer and Malory make use of the same words for different purposes. It is useful, therefore to begin by defining these four words and seeing how they relate to the traditional discourse of the chivalric and courtly love codes and the ethical principles which underlie them.

An initial assumption about these principles is important to bear in mind: the fact that they arise from and relate to the active rather than to the contemplative life, and are therefore themselves thought to depend on real, spontaneous, experienced admiration for others or for oneself, generated by witnessing and approving action and by

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<sup>1</sup> Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugene Vinaver, (1978) 1983, Oxford : Oxford University Press, pp. 474-75 ; and *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry E. Benson, (1987) 1990, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 45-47.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Holquist, 1990, *Dialogism, Bakhtin and his World*, London & New York, Routledge, p. 113. On Bakhtin, see also *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, 1981, 1992, Austin, University Press; Mikhail Bakhtine, *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, trans. Olivier Darrida, préface Michel Aucouturier, 1978, Paris: Gallimard ; David Lodge, 1990, *After Bakhtin. Essays on Fiction and Criticism*, London & New York, Routledge; Lynne Pearce, 1994, *Reading Dialogics*, London et al., Edward Arnold; Tzvetan Todorov, 1981, *Mikhail Bakhtine; le principe dialogique*, Paris, Seuil; Susan Vice, 1997, *Introducing Bakhtin*, Manchester & New York, Manchester University Press.

assessing motivation and merit. Because of this ethically existential basis, the chivalric and courtly love discourses imbue the four key words with meanings emotionally charged and morally loaded, denoting the deep involvement of the agent, i.e. the person doing the remembering, restraining, shaming and promising. Applying to value systems which, on the individual level, need to be regulated by acts of will, the four words reveal the agents' profound motivation and degree of responsibility. *Remembrance* can thus mean more than simple recall but evoke loyalty — the realignment of past values with present impulses; *restraint* can mean more than a simple check on excess but imply a freely chosen discipline of self-control; *shame* can imply not mere social discomfort at loss of face, but voluntary self-sanctioning for failure to adhere to the codes; *promises* can mean not just utilitarian arrangements for / of the future, but a responsible sharing of power with others that makes for fair play, i.e. equality and justice. So remembrance, restraint, shame and promises can connote the qualities of loyalty, discipline, self-sanctioning, and fair play, or on the contrary, their absence or negation. Furthermore, the four words articulate distinct notions of time and space (bakhtinian chronotopes), with remembrance ordering the past and distant brought up to the present and actual; restraint and shame operating essentially in the present time-space of the physical body; promises constituting a future mentally and bodily acceptable to the parties concerned.

The two scenes under study can be divided into three stages in which the accent falls with varying intensity on one of the four key words (cited or understood) and these stages will be referred to in both texts as: Part I, The chance meeting and the overhearing of the love-complaint (which deals with remembrance and restraint); Part II, The challenge and charge of treason (which deals with restraint and shame); Part III, Agreeing to fight (which deals with promises).

### The Malory scene

The passage in Malory, which can be summarised as relating how Sir Palomides, after two months of love-longing for La Beale Isode,

has gone into the woods alone and without armour and, moved by self-reflection,<sup>1</sup> has expressed his feelings in a plaintive love song. He is overheard by chance by Sir Tristram de Lyones, the lady's chosen knight. Tristram's first impulse is to kill his rival, but remembering the knights' reputations, he restrains himself and accosts his rival openly with a charge of treason. Palomides in defense denies treason by affirming that the worthiness of his love justifies its free expression, but at the same time admits the hopelessness of his love and his willingness to die at Tristram's hand. Tristram accepts Palomides as adversary in single combat, demurs at any delay, but then agrees to deferring the date to let Palomides recover his strength, and finally both promise to meet in a fortnight.

### Remembrance in the Malory scene

In the Malory scene, the rivals "remember" their lady, La Beale Isode, as the focus of their attention from first to last. This focus is startlingly explicit on the part of Palomides, who relieves his feelings as her hitherto secret lover by his *loud* singing and actual mention of the lady's name, implicit on the part of Tristram, whose prudence as fighter (moving through the wood *softly*) and self-possession as lover (hearing the love-song to the end before reacting violently), can be attributed to his securely mutual loving union with La Beale Isode. Palamon's mention of a third knight who died of love for this lady underlines both her extreme desirability (she is the most beautiful of women) and utter inaccessibility (she loves exclusively her chosen knight, Tristram). Palomides's love-song for Isode forces Tristram's admiration at the same time as arousing his anger since he realizes its excellence as effective courtship in traditional, courtly love terms.

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<sup>1</sup> Literal as well as metaphorical, for Palomides looks down a well and notices that his appearance is sadly altered by his painful love-longing in a kind of inversion of the Narcissus story. See *Le Lai de Narcisse in Pyrame et Thisbé, Narcisse, Philomena: Trois contes du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle français imités d'Ovide*, traduits et édités par Emmanuelle Baumgartner, 2000, Paris, Folio classique, Gallimard.

Palmides's defense to Tristram's charge of treason insists on the way his devotion to Isode confirms courtly love ideals, for he is inspired to surpass himself in knightly prowess whenever he remembers his lady. The lady is thus the clear focus of their contradictory but legitimate desires, and while Palomides challenges Tristram's supremacy in her affections, he acknowledges that he does so hopelessly, simply seizing the chance of proving the intensity of his love by being ready to die for her.

The lady here is accorded the ideal courtly love role of the free and superior arbiter of excellence who necessarily prefers the better and worthier of the two knights. Since in the case of Tristram and Palomides, the lady's choice has already been made and it is Tristram's duty to protect her from the undesired attentions of another, this particular situation poignantly modifies the traditional principle. If Palomides were to win the joust against Tristram, Isode would have the choice of preferring the winner as the better man and knight, yet readers as well as the characters themselves know that this outcome is impossible, since Isode and Tristram are united by an indissoluble love that not even death can alter (Isode loves Tristram *evir* and *as her life*),<sup>1</sup> so that Palomides's fight with Tristram appears as effectively suicidal.

Yet this kind of noble self-sacrifice for the sake of pure feeling is characteristic of ideal Arthurian knights, i.e. fighting only in a just cause, respecting and even admiring worthy adversaries, and conscientious about fair terms. What Tristram remembers when he stops himself from killing an unarmed enemy lying on the ground, is his own *noble name* i.e. his reputation and that of his rival which makes such an instinctive unchivalric act almost unthinkable shameful. Just after the passage under study, when the tensions of high feeling have been resolved in the accord to meet in single combat, Tristram remembers, in a way that is less emotionally and morally fraught but touched with rueful humour, how a previously arranged fight with Palomides had failed through unforeseen

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<sup>1</sup> Malory, *Works*, pp. 474-75.

circumstance. These two uses of the word *remembrance* in Malory bring out the contrasting degrees of moral intensity that the word can convey: the first highly serious, the second almost humorous.

### Restraint in Malory

Remembrance-as-inner-taking-stock enables the protagonists in Malory to restrain reactions of violence, jealousy or fear. So when Tristram uses restraint to approach his rival in a physically controlled manner (*softly*), and asks for his explanations (*acquit ye*), his attitude of calm issues from an iron self-control which contrasts (not unironically) with his initial moving *softly*, i.e. confidently, through the wood. Tristram's restraint is seen to be part of a practised discipline<sup>1</sup> but is particularly meritorious and difficult to perform in the actual situation that confronts him, since his jealousy has never been effectively aroused *out of measure* before. Tristram's is clearly the self-imposed restraint of his own sensitive conscience and not the forced checking imposed by another or by another's unassimilated rules.

In contrast to Tristram, Palomides shows moral stature not by holding back but by releasing his true emotions about Isode in his song and defending them in his speech. His provoking Tristram's anger is not deliberate, but he does not deny that his complaint justifies it and he defends himself with an admirable dose of moral courage in insisting on his (existentially inevitable) inner freedom. Having proved himself by his outspokenness the moral equal of his rival, Palomides can actually restrain Tristram later by his fair and reasonable demand for delay. Then when Tristram cries 'Shame' to restrain Palomides's desire for delay by imputing cowardice, Palomides's fair-play demand to regain his strength restrains Tristram's impetuosity, so that in the end a reasonable agreement is reached, honourable to both sides by its equity of negotiation.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout *The Book of Tristram* we witness Tristram, almost alone among his peers, thinking before acting.

Restraint in both cases has been shown to operate in the inner consciousness of the two characters (with reason restraining passion in classical fashion) before becoming a process to be directed at another in a way that is acceptable and hence not an infringement of individual freedom.

### **Shame in Malory**

Although mentioned only once in the Malory passage (Tristram's remonstrance against delay mentioned above), it is understood that a sense of shame is part of the knights' make-up and that it confirms their adherence to the chivalric and courtly love codes. But by inhibiting behaviour at a more primitive level than rational restraint, shame fuses with instinct and can be rendered inoperative by a clash of commitments. For instance Palomides's self-image as a lover overcomes his self-image as a fighter so that he goes unarmed into the woods and forgets his duty as a knight i.e. his pursuit for the Questing Beast. But his inner conflict between the pride / shame alternatives of the contradictory duties of knight and courtly lover is such that readers responsive to the intensity of his love can find this minor dereliction of duty endearing rather than foolish. Moreover, Palomides's love for Isode is in itself not shameful but inspiring, its hopelessness does not arouse his resentment or revolt and his endurance of his sufferings prove the strength of his love.

A positive sense of shame stops Tristram from acting unchivalrously towards his rival (killing by stealth) but not from feeling the instinctive jealousy of the loyal courtly lover. Nor does Tristram cry shame to Palomides for daring to love but only for (apparently) stalling to fight. For outraged as he is, Tristram keeps his head as a chivalrous knight, is not shamed by his challenger and, by allowing him to defend himself, recognizes the other's knightly merits. Indeed Palomides's bold pointing out of Tristram's superior position as lover-possessor of the lady and of his own sufferings moves Tristram (and readers) to a certain degree of sympathy and even admiration for Palomides whose love for Isode is shameful



neither to himself nor to Tristram in any profound sense, but is simply inadmissible within the chivalric and courtly love codes and indeed medieval civilisation as a whole.

### Promises in Malory

At the start of the passage in Malory the situation of conflict precludes promises, and the protagonists think what they will do in the privacy of their own minds i.e. a monologic situation, before entering, through the mediation of remembrance and restraint, the dialogic situation of announcing their intentions, even if these take the form of condemnation, provocation and threats. Thus Tristram challenges Palomides openly, “*ye shall dye*”, but then allows his rival to defend himself with equal openness : “*acqyte the*”. By his provoking rejoinder, “*acqyte me thus*”, Palomides proclaims his intentions freely for the future: “*I shall love her to the uttermost*”. Tristram ripostes with an equally provoking announcement of his intentions: “*I will fyght with you to the utteryste*”. This utterance / speech-act is, for all its negative import (“I mean to try my hardest to kill you”), already a promise as well as a threat, since it recognizes the right of the other to understand fully the intentions of the speaker and thus gives him full dialogic status. With Palomides’s responding to this enhancement of his own self-image by a compliment to his adversary: “*In a bettir quarrell kepe I never to fyght [...] of a bettir knyghtes hondys myght I nevir be slain*”, these exchanges end in an escalation not of violence but of courtesy: Tristram’s tersely polite invitation to his rival to *sette a day*. The ground has thus been laid for exchanging promises that are viable. To insist on the deep engagement of the two protagonists, Malory at the end of the passage uses *faithfully* as an apparently conventional qualifier to *promise* but one which, in the context, generates its full meaning of the profound moral commitment that ensures equality and mutual accountability between the parties involved.

### The scene in Chaucer

The similar episode in *The Knight's Tale* can be summarised as follows. Two Theban knights, Palamon and Arcite, both in love with the lady Emily (glimpsed from afar when they were both in the prison of their enemy, the Athenian ruler, Theseus), come together by chance in a wood. Palamon, hiding there as escaped prisoner, overhears Arcite, who has ridden that way for the purposes of Maying, suddenly change from jolly Maysong to formal rhetorical complaint of his woes as a conquered Theban secretly in the service of Theseus and also as the tormented lover of Emily, the ruler's sister-in-law. Palamon, who is without arms, hears out his rival's complaint and then bursts from hiding to challenge him as a traitor. Arcite denies the challenge by arguing the worthlessness of promises given not as a loyal knight but as a jealous courtly love rival and calls Palamon a fool for not admitting this fact. From thus initially rejecting Palamon as an adversary, Arcite then suggests that a fight between them might be worth holding as a knightly exercise, and undertakes to see to technical arrangements himself. They therefore set a time for the combat the following day.

The passage in Chaucer is twice as long and more than twice as complicated as that in Malory. This complexity is created mainly by the intrusive narrator (the Knight) whose comments apparently underline moral points but which, by being obscure and unnecessary, clog the action and destabilise readers. By careful analysis one can glimpse an entire sub-text in the passage revealing the author's hidden satirical intentions. The more glaringly when compared with Malory, Chaucer demonstrates, by paradoxical juxtapositions, both of deed and of word, of narrative and of discourse, making use of what in bakhtinian terms is called "polyphony" and "heteroglossia", how frequently and typically the chivalric and courtly love codes are departed from, set aside and ignored, or simply made use of for the promotion of the protagonists' personal self-interest and hidden agendas.

### Remembrance in the Chaucer passage

The Chaucer passage is controlled by the meaning given to the word *remembrance* in the lines which precede it, where we learn that Arcite *remembering on the poynt of his desire* (KT, l. 1501) is motivated to go Maying. Here the protagonist becomes aware not of the fullness of love for his lady (as does Palomides in Malory), nor of his duty as a knight (as does Tristram) but of the fullness of his desire, i.e. of the strength of his sexual urges. So from the start of the passage, the questing Arcite's restlessness and lack of focus contrasts with the hiding Palamon's rigidity and blind concentration, to suggest protagonists whose motivation contradicts rather than accords with chivalric and courtly love codes. Despite his professed devotion to his absent lady Emily, Arcite goes galloping off to the woods with a *lustly heart* in the opposite direction to where he could actually meet her in the garden. Despite his professed intention of mustering a Theban army to come back to Athens and kidnap Emily (like Helen of Troy), Palamon in hiding is not thinking of her either but immersed in fear of capture: *sore afered of his deeth was he* (KT, l. 1518). Far from being in the forefront of her suitors' minds, the lady Emily plays a decidedly diminished role in their quarrel, is mentioned only twice in the entire passage, and then only after the rivals' more pressing preoccupations: firstly their relations with their political enemy Theseus, and secondly their relations with each other as closest kin and bitterest enemies. Rather than receiving praise for inspiring love, prowess or excellence (as does Isode), Emily is reproached for her cruelty (as person) or desirability (as object): Arcite invoking her as *killing* him and Palamon speaking of her as something only he can possess or use. Neither knight remembers the lady in any positively motivating way.

Nor do they seem to cherish their reputations as chivalric knights and courtly lovers and, when on their own, indulge impulses that would, if known, bring their names into disrepute. Arcite plunges into the wood in search of what one can suspect to be a more accessible sexual encounter than his distant lady to pacify his urgently *lustly* (KT, l. 1513) heart, and his precipitous *roaming up and down* (KT, l. 1515) suggests less the Courtly lover than the sexual predator, even the

potential rapist. His *loud* singing (KT, l. 1509) may alert any girls hiding in the bushes that he is there and available but it neglects the basic soldierly caution towards possible enemies and is not excusable, like Malory's Palomides's singing, in being addressed to his one and only lady. As lover or as fighter supposedly mindful of the codes, Arcite's crashing around, in the Chaucer, contrasts both with Tristram's soldierly caution and with Palomides's amorous single-mindedness in the Malory passage. Palamon similarly contrasts with Malory's knights by abandoning himself to fear while hiding, rather than planning his movements with strategic foresight like Tristram or drawing on thoughts of his lady to give himself courage like Palomides.

Yet although both Arcite and Palamon fall short of the chivalric and courtly love codes, their failings do not appear clearly in the text but are actually covered up by two devices, firstly by the narrator (the Knight) seeing nothing wrong with their behaviour and eschewing criticism,<sup>1</sup> and secondly by the use (by Arcite) of the traditional rhetoric of chivalric and courtly love discourse which suggests by its elevated eloquence that equally elevated feelings are being expressed. The narrator's interventions effectively prevent readers from recognizing how and when the characters deviate from the codes. Before Arcite for instance switches from his singing to his sighing, or Palamon from his rigid fear to his ill-timed outburst, the narrator intervenes to muddy still further the already turgid currents of the narrative action. Purporting to clarify the sense of his narrative, the narrator in fact diverts attention from the characters' observable behaviour by digressing into generalities and truisms about their inner dispositions (e.g. that Palamon would not have been happy to think the man approaching was Arcite). Thus, by switching from the Indicative to the Conditional, the narrator invites readers to easy

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<sup>1</sup> Since I see the Knight of the "General Prologue" as a rather unintelligent individual, his limited view point is clearly apparent in his tale. See M.K. Greenwood, "Pointlessness, Parody and Paradox in Chaucer's The Knight's Tale", in ed. Guy Bourquin, *Hier et aujourd'hui : points de vue sur le Moyen Age anglais*, Publications de l'A.M.A.E.S., 21 (1997), 45-55.

connivance with him and facile identification with the characters, manipulating readers to adopt attitudes as uncritical as his own.

With his commonplace wisdom couched in proverbial form, the narrator debases the issues at stake (in the scene of discovery when Arcite reveals his feelings and identity unintentionally to Palamon) by suggesting that all release of feeling is invariably incoherent, risky and guilty, all restraint cowardly, mean, suspicious, and a mask for secret viciousness. The narrator presents hostility to others, habits of spying, detraction, and concealment as normal, traditional and current when he states:

But sooth is seyð [...] sithen many yeres [...]  
That field haf eyen and the wode hath eres.  
It is ful fair a man to bere him even,  
For al day meeteth men at unset steven. (KT, l.1521-24)

With the folk-wisdom of minding one's manners because somebody is watching, the narrator debunks chivalric and courtly love codes by implying that in real life they do not apply.

Unawareness of what knightly identity means is compounded when the narrator then recounts Arcite's next action — his change of mood and sudden stillness. Although at this point the rivals become momentarily alike, the mirroring effect that in Malory revealed their virtues can, in Chaucer, be seen to reveal their failings. The narrator, moreover, creates a kind of smoke-screen to cover their double stillness by turning the whole subject of lovers' changes of moods into a secretly bawdy joke. Explaining that Arcite's sudden *studie* is typically inexplicable (l. 1531-39), choosing a low linguistic register with *geeres* = "ficklenesses", "infidelities" repeated thrice, using such apparently pure time-pointers as *Right* and *Now* so insistently (four times) that one ends by suspecting allusions to morality (Right versus Wrong which must be enacted Now or Never), twice mentioning *Friday* as the day of Venus and not, as is traditional for Christians, as the day of Christ, the narrator confuses readers as to the plain sense of his words, while building up (particularly through the coarse punning on *queynte*, l. 1531) an effect of sexual innuendo which shatters utterly the refined tone of courtly love discourse. Again, as in the

earlier case of caution, the narrator hints at the basest interpretation of change and of lovers' changing behaviour, by aligning it with sexual instability, insatiability and promiscuity, and thus shows himself incapable of the idealisation of woman which is central to chivalry and courtly love. For readers who respond to the innuendo, Arcite's change of mood is reduced to a case of basic sexual frustration which has nothing to do with deep feeling, while for readers who miss it (naïvely expecting the courtly lover to desire only one woman and not noticing him desiring many and any) the apparently pointless long-windedness of these explanations serves to mask the real nature of Arcite's subsequent sighing.

By the end of Part I of the Chaucer passage, since neither characters nor narrator are shown to remember the chivalric and courtly love codes, only those readers who do remember them from other texts (not only Malory, but Chaucer's own *Troilus and Criseyde* or "The Franklin's Tale") will spot the departure from the codes in what follows. For remembrance in the Chaucer passage will never mean more than a bodily sort of recall disengaged from emotional and moral commitment, as when Arcite recalls not so much the reasons for courtly complaint as its rhetoric and, later, the technical terms for knightly jousting which lure him into profoundly unnecessary combat.

Palamon like Arcite is so immersed in successive excesses of emotion that he does not remember what these are / were from one moment to the next. He accords no consistent meaning to the words *mortal foe* (he hears Arcite designating Theseus in that role [l. 1562] without reacting, although he could at this point have revealed himself to his cousin and made common cause against the common enemy) then applies the term to himself, to frighten Arcite into not loving his lady: *For I am Palamon, thy mortal foe* (l. 1590). However, since Arcite first responds aggressively, then insults him, and finally flatters him as *worthy knyght* (l. 1608) into doing what he wants, Palamon seems to forget his hostile stance and finally agrees to Arcite's terms as if unable to sustain emotional consistency.

### Restraint in the Chaucer passage

Part I of the Chaucer passage contrasts most strikingly with that of Malory by the characters' lack of restraint as regards their own actions, Parts II and III as regards their dealings with others. Unmindful of the codes, they have little use for restraint and the word does not figure in the Chaucer passage. Unlike Malory's Tristram, neither Arcite nor Palamon restrain anger, Arcite restrains neither his lust, nor frustration, nor self-pity. Palamon restrains none of his furious jealousy of Arcite nor of his folly in provoking him unarmed.

Arcite has the less need to restrain feelings, since he cannot be thought to experience deeply the reality of courtly love, as a comparison with Malory's Palomides brings out. In the Malory scene, Palomides releases pent-up feelings twice: firstly in his song to Isode, overheard by Tristram, secondly in his defense to Tristram against the charge of treason. Arcite also makes two significant utterances, one (just before the passage under study) is his song to May (that might or might not have been overheard), the second is the formal complaint to Juno overheard by his rival. Neither of Arcite's utterances are addressed to his lady, Emily, since although the complaint ends by invoking her, this tail-end mention has been preceded by five other formal invocations: to Juno (three), to Mars (one), and to Love (one).

The contrast between Arcite's two self-revelatory utterances is so great as to make them effectively contradictory: the garlanding May song couched in popular folk-song terms,<sup>1</sup> the formal complaint replete with courtly rhetorical hyperbole of religious and patriotic content and tragico-epic tone. The latter begins very grandly

Allas, [...] that day that I was bore!  
 How long Juno, through thy cruelty  
 Wiltow warryen Thebes, thy citee?  
 Allas, ybrought is to confusion  
 The blood royal of Cadme and Amphion [...] (l. 1542-1546)

<sup>1</sup> See Lauraine Kochanske Stock, "The Two Mayings in Chaucer's *Knights Tale*, Convention and Invention", *JEGP*, 85 (1986), 206-21, esp. 217.

In his May song, on the other hand, Arcite begged the merry month to send him some *green* (i.e. success in sexual encounters), and cheerfully abandoned correct Courtly Love discourse and its noble euphemisms of pleading for his distant lady's *pity*.

If we consider that the complaint springs not from any new turn in his supposed longing for Emily but is simply an amalgam of all his woes following the failure of his May-song, we understand that Arcite is not really thinking of what he is saying but merely venting his spleen against womankind in the person of the chief female divinity, the jealous goddess Juno herself, blaming her for blighting his life, race, status, and identity. Translating his demeaning frustration into noble-sounding terms masks its absurdly unsuitable nature as a basis for such grandiloquence and the fact that its focus is entirely self-regarding. Arcite wallowing in self-pity because, in his Maying, he has *roamed all his fille*, (l. 1527) but roamed only — is human, common, but tasteless, which readers can perceive by stopping themselves from identifying and sympathising with Arcite and considering other complaints (not only Palomides's, but those in Chaucer which arise from genuine emotional trauma, such as the lamenting of Troilus, of Dorigen or of Aurelius). Arcite's rhetoric, beautiful in itself, and close in its wording to classical models, at first impresses readers but on examination is seen to be but empty mouthings, its true meaning lost upon the speaker. One can end up suspecting that Arcite is no more than a poseur of a courtly lover and basically a shallow philanderer.

Arcite's recourse to self-pity is almost automatic since both he and Palamon are practised complainers (as readers have already discovered in the knights' speeches in prison). Suffering is not for them a proud ordeal as it is for the knights in Malory, but a source of bitterness and resentment. Arcite bewails his falling from the status of his ancestors (all the fault of Juno), his servitude and his disguise,

And now I am so caitif  
That he that is my mortal enemy  
I serve him as his squire povrely. (l.1552-1554)



Readers can recall, although Arcite himself forgets, that he had, earlier, deliberately chosen both servitude and disguise so as to see his lady Emily frequently, and had ingratiated himself with Theseus for that purpose. But in his next invocation to Juno, Arcite rejects his assumed name (Philostrate, previously cherished for procuring a life of *bliss*) as being, in vulgar parlance, worthless. In his third invocation to Juno, and also to Mars (who despite being his ostensible patron is here reproached along with Juno), Arcite bewails the misfortunes of his whole family, including Palamon, mentioning his cousin by name. When Arcite's complaint at last reaches its long delayed focus, his love, it is in clearly negative terms: Love and then Emily are killers.

And over al this, to sleen me outrelly  
 Love has his firy dart so brenningly  
 Y styked through my trewe, careful herte  
 That shapen was my death erst than my sherte. (l. 1563-1566)

The tenderness Arcite shows for his own sensibilities means that in his own mind he imagines himself to be an ideal courtly lover. However, his following incongruous mention of his *first shirt* (l. 1566) being predated by the terrible fate awaiting him, suggests he is unaware of the bathos of the allusion, and how it introduces themes of immaturity, infantilism, and inconstancy (themes developed later in the rivals' unchivalrous exchanges).

Finally (apparently a rhetorical climax, but more basically a "last straw"), Arcite calls on Emily in the terms of courtly love discourse at its most intense:

Ye sleen me with your eyen Emilie  
 Ye be the cause wherefore that I di. (1567-1568)

This is rhetoric only, since, as we learn later from Theseus, Emily knows nothing of the rivals' love or even existence at this point in the story. Symptomatic of Arcite's customary exaggeration of his feelings is his preferring tropes of courtly love discourse that are centred on death. Unable to exaggerate further as to how much he suffers, Arcite then nullifies his previous noble-sounding allusions to lineage by demeaning them in vulgar terms as of no account (*myn oother care / Ne sette I [...] a tare*, l. 1569-1570) before switching back to courtly

parlance in words that could not yet apply to his beloved as he has never actually spoken to her: *So that I kould doon aught to youre pleasaunce* (l. 1571). This routine Courtly Love compliment, (“Nothing is more important than your wishes my lady”) is shown to be but the aping of courtly love manners as is Arcite’s next action — traditionally expressive of the high feeling of the courtly lover — fainting:<sup>1</sup>

[...] he fil down in a traunce  
A longe tyme, and after he up sterte. (l. 1571)

Arcite’s energetic revival after *after* insinuates that the faint is nothing but pretence; and with Palamon’s reaction being described as immediate, Arcite’s *longe* trance cannot, realistically speaking, have lasted more than a few seconds.

If Arcite’s lack of restraint can be seen as compensation for emotional underfunding, Palamon’s can appear as the overload of obsessive passion. The blow to Palamon’s feelings that Arcite’s mention of Emily’s name produces is strikingly conveyed by the first of the lines describing his reactions:

[...] that thoughte that thurgh his herte  
He felte a coolde swerd sodenliche glide. (l.1575)

An impression of suffering is created so clearly that readers tend to forget that the text is not alluding to the pain of the rejected lover but to what follows:

For ire he quook  
No longer would he bide (l.1576),  
As he were wode, with face deed and pale  
He sterte hym up (l.1578-1579)

in other words to the fanatical susceptibility of the wildly jealous rival shaking this time not with fear but with fury, and losing every vestige

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<sup>1</sup> The eminent knights of 13th c. French romance faint repeatedly when their deep feelings are thwarted or overwhelm them (Lancelot’s for Guinevere, Galehot’s for Lancelot, Lionel’s for Lancelot etc.). See *Lancelot: Roman du XII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, vol. 1, p. 249, 296.

of restraint or self-control. If Arcite lacks imagination and sensitivity, Palamon clearly has too much of both. His mad anger, his body language on hearing Arcite's words, stem as much from his own thinking about his feelings as from the feelings themselves, and he rushes out to confront his cousin literally beside himself, with a rashness that deserves the drumming it invites and gets from Arcite.

Palamon's challenge is then couched in terms of childish tantrums:

Arcite! false traytour wikke  
 Now artow hent that lovest my lady so  
 For whom that I have al this peyne and wo  
 And art my blood and to my conseil sworn  
 As I ful ofte have tood ye heerbiforn, (l. 1580-1584)

a mixture of calling his cousin names and feeble scolding. The contrast between the tone adopted and the seriousness of the references to traitors, oaths and lineage, shows that Palamon can be as shallow about chivalry as Arcite, seeing his cousin's defection to their common enemy Theseus, as *bejaping* (l. 1584), like a childish trick, and only mentioning Emily by name later, like an afterthought. His threats are equally pettish and infantile:

Thou shalt not love my lady  
 But I wol love hire oonly and namo;  
 For I am Palamon, thy mortal foe (l. 1588-1590)

and his last words show how his obsessive love blinds him to the very idea of joining his cousin in resistance to a common enemy.

Arcite's reaction is not more reasonable since he defends himself instinctively with his incongruous sword<sup>1</sup> before realizing the emptiness of Palamon's threats and matching his tone in his defiance:

By God that sit above  
 Nere it that thou art sik and wood for love,

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<sup>1</sup> He should not be carrying one at all if he was a proper knight out Maying in the traditional courtly manner. See the episode in Malory of Queen Guinevere and the knights and ladies who go Maying unarmed and are then captured by the villainous Mellyagaunce (Malory, *Works*, p. 691).

And eek that thou no wepne hast in this place,  
 Thou shouldest nevere out of this grove pace  
 That thou ne shouldest dyen of myn hond. (l. 1599-1603)

### Shame in Chaucer

It is clear that for Chaucer's knights, with their unrestrained indulgence of impulse, shame is not a self-sanctioning mechanism but, like restraint, something inflicted on them and operating on a purely social level. Shame is "a" shame, the expressed malevolence of others: *And yet doth Juno me well moore shame* (l.1555) says Arcite thinking of his social demotion. However, neither rational restraint nor instinctive shame stop Arcite from admitting that if his rival wins the fight he will be quite happy giving up his lady, something a courtly lover should never even think.

### Promises in Chaucer

The final promises that the two knights exchange in Part III of the scene are arrived at quite differently in Chaucer than they are in Malory, since their quarrel begins by escalating violence and bullying rather than by increasing self-control and respect for the adversary. After rejecting Palamon's initial foolhardy challenge with scorn (*with ful dispiteous herte*, l. 1596), Arcite matches his opponent's aggressivity with his own verbal violence:

For I defy the suerte and the bond,  
 Which that thou seiest that I have maad to thee (l. 1600-1605)

and then insults him in gross terms:

What! Verray fool, think well that love is free,  
 And I will love her maugre al thy might! (l.1606- 1607)

where readers are alerted to the seriousness of the insult by the Biblical injunction: *He who shall call his brother a fool shall be in danger of hell fire* (Matt. 16:26). Arcite's cry of 'love is free' here sounds more like a call to sinful sexual licence than to the quasi-religious disciplines of courtly love, while his claim to defy his rival

rather than to defend his lady emphasizes how little love or lady really matter to him. However he does, like the notorious troubadour, Bertrand de Born,<sup>1</sup> enjoy fighting for its own sake, and at the idea that their squabble could turn into a joust, Arcite suddenly starts to use the rhetoric of chivalry.

Arcite begins judiciously enough by savouring the beautiful words of the chivalric challenge at its most elegant. No longer treated as a *verray fool*, Palamon becomes a *worthy knyght* (l. 1608), one who desires to joust for his lady in an honorable way: *darreyne hire by bataille*, (l. 1609) and who is offered such advantageous terms by Arcite (*And chese the best and leve the worst for me*, l. 1614) that he accepts the challenge without demur. But here Arcite begins to exaggerate and his pose of chivalric generosity or *freedom* means that serious negotiation for fair terms is foregone in favour of a kind of childish bribery. For although courtly terms make the quarrel sound knightly and noble:

Hav heer my trouthe; tomorwe I wol nat faille,  
Without witing of any other knyght  
That here I wil be founden as a knyght (l. 1610- 1613)

Arcite's promises of friendly purveyance of creature-comforts to his opponent lower the tension irredeemably. Arcite reaches bathos when, beyond the provision of arms for the fight, he promises to purvey not only necessities (food and drink) but even luxuries (bed-clothes) (l. 1615-1616) (this last absurdly unsuitable for the escaped prisoner wanting to preserve a low profile in the wood). All these blandishments end with the proviso that

And if so be that thou my lady win  
And sle me in this wode ther I am in  
Thou mayest wel have thy lady as for me (l. 1617-1618)

which sounds superficially similar to Palomides's poignant acceptance of death at the hand of Tristram, until the final words evoke such a glaring lack of emotional involvement on Arcite's part (the switch of pronouns, *my lady* to *thy lady*, is highly significant) that Arcite

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<sup>1</sup> Dante puts this troubadour into the third circle of Hell.

effectively disqualifies himself from the role of courtly lover. Palamon however, obsessed as he is by actually getting the girl by any means, accepts these terms eagerly, as if he were doing the other a favour: *I graunte it thee* l. 1620) and turns a blind eye to the demeaning processes of persuasion used.

The later episodes of “The Knight’s Tale” become clear as we start to understand that what the two knights in Chaucer really care about in battle are winning and winnings, status-boosting and possession of spoils (as they later pray to their respective divine patrons), but that the ostensible issues at stake, the honour and happiness of their lady, are never really close to their hearts. This fundamental lack of deep involvement is suggested by the description of their final agreement to fight: *each of hem had leid his faith to borwe* as the connotations of the term *to borwe* = “to pledge” suggest that their word is being not given but only “borrowed”, and is therefore viable and trustworthy in only a limited way.

Throughout the Chaucer passage, satirical intentions can be discerned. The author shows his protagonists going through the paces of chivalric and courtly love codes but in an inadequate, immature and foolish manner. It is suggested strongly that if Arcite is too violent, impatient and promiscuous to enact the courtly lover adequately, Palamon is too fanatically jealous and uncontrolled ever to be trusted to serve and protect his lady or even to win her in a fight. Later, Palamon does in fact lose the later formal joust by unfair outnumbering, but from our close analysis of this passage we may suspect that he would have lost in all events as his fighting skills are too undisciplined to be reliable. Both the rivals are in fact unsuitable material for courteous and chivalrous suitors, let alone satisfactory consorts. Thus the apparently happy ending of the Tale, when the more ardent lover, Palamon, finally marries his lady, can be read as heavily loaded with Chaucerian irony. The comparison of the two scenes brings out the contrast between Malory’s knights and Chaucer’s, the former realistically idealistic, admirable as role-models and heroes, the latter their bad imitators who enact the chivalric and

courtly love codes clumsily and, in their heart of hearts pay them lip-service only.

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