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**Theseus and his “manly fight”
in Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale”**

To pursue the analysis of the word *manly*¹ as used by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales*, I intend to examine its meaning in “The Knight’s Tale” as applied to Theseus, who *slew Creon manly as a knight*.² David Wright translates this line of text by “as befits a valiant knight”,³ thus giving a clearly approbatory meaning to *manly*, and goes on to translate Chaucer’s *In playn bataille* as *In fair combat*, so making Theseus into an admirably just wielder of power, worthy of imitation and respect.⁴ If *manly* means “valiant” and *playn* means “fair”, Chaucer’s duke Theseus becomes a fitting descendent of the hero of classical legend in his most estimable achievement of founder and upholder of Athenian law and pan-Greek custom. David Wright’s translation is complied with and recommended by the majority of

¹ With reference to the meaning of “manly” in the General Prologue description of the Monk, in the paper by Stephen Morrison in the present volume.

² *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, (1988) 1990, I. 987. All following references to this edition.

³ The lines read: “But, not to make too long a tale of this / He fought with Creon, who was King of Thebes / And killed him as befits a valiant knight, / In fair combat, and put his men to flight.” Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, translation, introduction and notes by David Wright, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, (1985) 1986, p. 26.

⁴ See also Nevill Coghill’s version: “slew him manfully as became a knight, / In open battle” Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. & intro. by Nevill Coghill, Harmondsworth, Penguin, (1951) 1955, p. 52; Theodore Morrison’s version: “slew him bravely, as a knight, / In headlong battle”, *The Portable Chaucer*, transl. & intro. by Theodore Morrison, New York: The Viking Press, (1949) 1975, p. 79.

present-day critics for whom Theseus is so unquestionably a “good” fighter, ruler and statesman, “bringing order out of chaos” (my wording) that he can be reverently assumed of a correctness precluding all critical comment.¹ In the following paper, however, I would like to argue that this reading of Chaucer’s Theseus will not stand up to close attention to the text, and that a translation such as David Wright’s by which *manly* means “virtuously”, “courageously”, “fairly” and “rightly”, is fundamentally misconceived.

Before going further, I will summarise the points that even on a first reading of “The Knight’s Tale”, can be seen as detrimental to the figure of an admirably virtuous Theseus.² These are, firstly, his ruthlessness in razing the city of Thebes; secondly, his refusal to ransom the two Theban knights, Palamon and Arcite, and his sentencing them to life-imprisonment in a grim prison tower; thirdly, his favouritism to one only of the prisoners, Arcite, released as a favour to a friend; fourthly, his imposition of political marriage on his sister-in-law, Emily; and finally (not because this point is the last to arise in the narrative but because it may strike readers only at a second reading), his omitting to consult his bride, or his military advisors, before hastening to attack Creon of Thebes in answer to the Argive widows’ demand for their husbands’ corpses for burial. All these actions seem to be lacking in the very quality that Chaucer (in contrast to his sources in Statius and Boccaccio)³ otherwise brings out as typical of duke Theseus, namely his sensitive feelings of *pitié*. Chaucer’s Knight-narrator of the Tale avers that pity is what Theseus

¹ Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning*, Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press (1957), 1966, p. 190.

² See Henry J. Webb, “A Re-Interpretation of Chaucer’s Theseus”, *Review of English Studies*, vol. 23 n° 92 (1947), 290-96; and M. K. Greenwood, “Pointlessness, Parody and Paradox in Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale*”, *Huer et Aujourd’hui: Points de vue sur le Moyen Age anglais*, ed. Guy Bourquin, Publications de l’AMAES, 21 (1997), 45-55.

³ Statius’s *Thebaid*, and Boccaccio’s *Teseida*.

genuinely feels, but does not seem to notice¹ that this feeling is contradictory with what Theseus actually does. In the previous article,² I argued that Theseus's pity for the widows' plea is more plausibly interpreted as pretense, a mere excuse for the conqueror to go off to the wars again without even stopping to install his bride in his own country, a carefully staged political manoeuvre to provide himself with an apparently good cause to fight for. In this article I therefore start by examining further the episode of the pleading widows which gives Theseus his statesman-like motive for war as well as examining his peace-time role as arbiter in the knights' joust for the lady Emily. By clarifying the sense of Theseus' actions rather than simply taking on faith the Knight-narrator's words about him, a more convincing reading can be made of Chaucer's version of the Theseus story.

To probe more deeply into Theseus's true motivation and test the genuineness of his apparently altruistic commitment to the widows' cause, I will compare Chaucer's Theseus with that of Euripides as presented in the drama of the *Suppliant Women*.³ It is of course impossible to say how far Chaucer knew the original text by Euripides, but equally it is undeniable that the play, from the time it came into existence between 424 and 419 B.C, contributed greatly to the Theseus legend and to his reputation as the responsible ruler. It endowed the figure of Theseus with a truly adult political stature rather than the basically childish impressiveness of the strong-man hero, Hercules, making of the supreme power-holder a figure not only to be feared but also to be respected. In Euripides' play, Theseus discusses and negotiates his decisions before taking action, thus demonstrating his sense of responsibility as war-leader, his real

¹ For a discussion of the Knight-narrator's apparently unconscious irony, see Edmond E. Forster, "Humour in *The Knight's Tale*", *Chaucer Review*, 3 (1968), 88-94; and Thomas A. Van, "Second Meanings in *The Knight's Tale*", *Chaucer Review*, 3 (1968), 69-76.

² *Op. cit.* Greenwood (1997).

³ Euripides, *Suppliant Women*, trans. into English by Rosanna Warren & Stephen Scully, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

attachment to the principles of Greek democracy, his adult capacity to use reason and foresight before engaging in war.

Motives for war are at the very centre of Euripides's play and the public political issues are discussed in direct relation to the private dilemmas of men and women. Theseus and Creon become emblematic figures of their respective political systems, Theseus arguing for democracy, Creon, through his herald, for autocracy. Athens and Thebes are shown to be evenly matched, materially, intellectually and even, to a certain extent, morally. Both sides make reasonable points and bring out the main issues at stake. Finally it is made clear that Theseus goes to war only after negotiations have failed and for no other motive than the just cause of upholding the pan-Hellenic law of respecting the rights of the vanquished, in this case allowing them to give honourable burial to the bodies of their soldiers recuperated from battle-grounds. The rights of the vanquished, of the dead, exist only in civilisations which honour fundamentally humane and democratic principles, such as that of the Greeks, since under tyrannic governments the vanquished can be eliminated entirely and lose all human status.¹ It is finally this principle of upholding the clearly rational law of "fair-play" (admitted by independent males among themselves) rather than the emotionally driven impulse of "pity" (pleaded by dependent females) which infuses Euripides' Theseus's arguments and persuades listeners that he is acting in a way that is "manly" in its most admirable sense.

It is worth comparing the Theseus of Euripides with Chaucer's point by point:

1) he is begged to redress their wrong by the mothers and sons of the dead warriors not, as in Chaucer, by their widows;

2) he resists the Argive mothers' pleas as well as the arguments of the only surviving male Argive (Adraste) out of concern for the lives of his own soldiers, and does not, as in Chaucer, yield to the widows immediately;

¹ It is interesting at this point to reflect on Nazi ideology in the Second World War which destined some peoples for defeat and subsequent control and others for utter elimination.

3) he is finally persuaded to take up the coercive action against Creon by his own mother (Aethra) who feels enough pity for the widows to risk losing her own son and who appeals to Theseus's sense of honour as upholder of the customary laws and not, as in Chaucer, by the sentiment of pity alone;

4) he insists on consulting his men and trying negotiations with the enemy before taking action and does not, as in Chaucer, eschew all consultation or negotiation and present the killing of Creon as the only solution to the problem of the recuperation of the Argive women's dead;

5) he insists that the bodies lying outside the walls of Thebes where they fell should be treated with respect by his own soldiers and does not, as in Chaucer, allow dead bodies of any side to be stripped and pillaged and piled up in heaps;

6) he prohibits any siege of the city of Thebes, insisting he is fighting for justice and not loot, while Chaucer's Theseus, on the contrary, razes the city of Thebes and lays waste the whole country which he then uses at his pleasure;

7) he tends to the dead bodies himself and having brought them back to the Argive mothers gives them honourable burial. Chaucer's Theseus, on the contrary, allows the widows to take charge of the burial rites and then, before dismissing them, honours the widows, but never the bodies;

8) he allows the young sons of the Argive dead to take up the remains of their fathers' armour after the cremation, thus leaving Theban-Argive relations in the hands of their own future generations while releasing Athens from responsibility and involvement in further conflict. This wise policy is not even suggested in the case of Chaucer's Theseus, who on the contrary, seems undisturbed in the remainder of the narrative by his standing with either Argives or Thebans and only interested in gaining power over both.

9) Euripides's Theseus is shown to be genuinely concerned in finding a just cause for a just war and in conducting it as justly as possible. Reason and reasoned discussion precede his decisions. Chaucer's Theseus, on the contrary, is shown taking decisions on the

spur of the moment and acting in an arbitrary and unpredictable manner.

10) Finally and most importantly, Euripides's play questions as well as justifies Theseus's decision to engage in war. However heroic and public-spirited Theseus's stand and actions (and the fighting itself is described with eye-witness thoroughness), warfare is shown to be both terrible and tragic and its necessity deplored rather than celebrated. Chaucer's Theseus allows pillaging and looting and celebrates victory by exercising control over the entire country, and only celebrates victory publicly by donning laurels for his return home.¹

Far from showing any interest in analysing the justice of the war or the fairness with which the vanquished are treated, the Knight-narrator comments naïvely at its culmination that victor and vanquished have settled their destiny once and for all in unending happiness and unhappiness. Instead of persuading us that even the most necessary and legitimate war should not be entered into lightly, as does the play, the Knight-narrator of "The Knight's Tale" seems to be approving of any war of conquest as long as its leader gains personally thereby.² This simplistic assessment is limited to the Knight-narrator since Chaucer in his text presents a Theseus who is praised in so many *words* for being successful, popular and apparently compassionate, but whose recounted *deeds* reveal (on reflection) to be nothing so much as those of a power-hungry manipulator. We will

¹ For comment on the exact timing of Theseus donning the laurels see M. K. Greenwood, "Garlands of Derision, Part Two: The Garlands of Power and Powerlessness: with reference to Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", forthcoming. For the first part of the article, see M. K. Greenwood, "Garlands of Derision: the thematic imagery of garlands in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*", *Tudor Theatre: "For Laughs (?)"*, Collection Theta vol. 6, ed. André Lascombes, Centre d'Etudes Supérieures de la Renaissance, Tours, 2002, 21-39.

² One can understand the Knight's annoyance later in the *The Canterbury Tales* at the Monk's stories of the downfall of conquerors. See R. E. Kaske, "The Knight's Interruption of the Monk's Tale", *ELH*, 23 (1956), 249-68.

examine further some of these points of comparison between the Theseus of Euripides and that of Chaucer with more detailed attention to the precise wording and poetic resonance of Chaucer's text.

Widows not mothers

By the fact that they are widows not mothers, the Argive women appear less motivated in Chaucer than in Euripides, since marital bonds are seen / thought / felt to be less powerful than parental ties, and the stock figure of comedy, the Widow of Ephesus, inevitably looms at the back of the mind of writers / readers (particularly of masculine gender) when the figure of the widow appears in texts.¹ Most civilisations (not only the Indian), assume or fantasise an attachment of wife to spouse as strong as that of mother to child, a willingness on the widow's part to sacrifice herself for her husband's sake, and in the Euripides play, one of the bereaved is precisely such a figure, the widow of Capaneus, an Argive whose death by lightning suggested that his warring was condemned by the gods and that honourable burial in his case would not be allowed. This widow (Evadne) is unique among the suppliant women, who are otherwise grand-mothers, in being certainly young, presumably beautiful and committing suicide (offstage during the action) rather than outlive her husband. Her speeches are moving and convey true human passion. In Chaucer however, this same figure of Capaneus's widow, far from dying for love or being young and attractive, is the eldest of the widows and spokeswoman for the others, and her pleas for help focus not on the fallen but on the living, on herself and her companions, her grief concerned less with bereavement than with loss of rank and worldly interests. Her speech to Theseus reads:

She seyde "Lord, to whom Fortune hath given
Victorie, and as a conqueror to lyven,

¹ Carlson and Weisl state: « The re-emergence of the Widow of Ephesus paradigm in later literature [...] also served to call the virtues of widowhood (as well as of widows) into question." *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages*, eds. Cindy L. Carlson and Angela Jane Weisl, New-York: St Martin's Press, 1999, p. 5.

Nat greveth us youre glorie and youre honour,
 But we biseken mercy and socour.
 Have mercy on our woe and on oure distresse!
 Som drope of pitee, through thy gentillesse,
 Upon us wretched wommen lat though falle,
 For, certes, lord, ther is noon of us alle
 That she ne hath been a duchesse or a queene
 Now we be caytyves, as it is well seene,
 Thanked be Fortune and hire false wheel,
 That noon estaat assureth to be weel." (l. 915-926)

In the first ten lines of her speech, Capaneus's widow never mentions the dead, although she later describes Creon's outrage on the bodies piled in heaps and given over to the dogs. Theseus's initial concern is equally self-regarding in that he taxes the widows with disturbing his triumph even before enquiring what is their wrong. The emphasis in both cases is on the living and not on the dead, and Fortune is evoked as "false" or untrustworthy towards the living, rather than "true" or predictable towards the dead in that their souls will suffer if their bodies remain unburied. At Theseus's first encounter with the widows (l. 902), and at his last (at the cremation of the restored bones, l. 995), the word used for the widows' loud lamentations *waymentynge* suggests by its cacophony that Chaucer's Theseus is moved by the widows' grief initially and ultimately to irritation rather than to tears.

Normal human reverence and grief for the departed thus appear lacking in the case of Chaucer's widows, who do not seem to be overcome by any passionate grief or religious scruple as to the welfare of the dead persons' souls or their posthumous honour. Deploring their own *caytive* state rather than the pitiful restlessness of the souls of the dead, the widows arouse little compassion either on the human or the spiritual or religious levels. When we learn that immediately after the taking of Thebes the bones of their friends¹ (and not, significantly, the bodies of their husbands) have been given back to them, and notice that they are no longer referred to as widows but as ladies, the wording, *ladies* and *friends*, insinuates parodically that the widows may actually be cremating the remains not of their husbands

¹ *Riverside*, p. 39, l. 992.

but of their lovers.¹ Then the confusing “flash-forward” of the cremation (impossible to place in the subsequent chronological sequence) eliminates both the widows and their cause from the story altogether. They depart with “honours” done to them by Theseus, (interestingly translated as “Gifts” by Dryden)² and which in our present interpretation could be thought of as the monetary rewards or “pay-offs” for the previously arranged scene of their public pleading.

Pity, not reason or honour

In Chaucer, readers / listeners are not themselves moved to pity (as they are, strongly, in Euripides), but are invited to marvel at the spectacular pity of Theseus, which they both see (in Theseus’s gesture of getting down from his horse and raising up the widows kneeling in front of him) and hear (in the sense that the Knight-narrator tells them about Theseus’s pity at length and with suitable hyperbole, eg. *his herte wolde breke*, l. 954). Unlike the Theseus of Euripides, Chaucer’s Theseus does not reasonably resist the widows’ demands or argue about their validity as his, and not another man’s, duty. His swift decision to succour them in Chaucer is presented in (parodically) chivalric, legendary terms of heartfelt feelings spurring action without any necessary forethought, and with no questions asked about the justice or even feasibility of the cause. (How are the bones to be recognized if the dogs have already eaten half the heaps away?). Later, Duke Theseus himself shows no pity for the city of Thebes, for the dead, wounded and half-dead survivors.

¹ The lover is invariably addressed as “friend” in the 13th century prose *Lancelot*. See (in modern French), *Lancelot, roman du treizième siècle*, traduit et annoté par Alexandre Micha, Collection 10/18, Paris: Gallimard, 2000.

² “Palamon and Arcite or the Knight’s Tale” in *The Poems of John Dryden*, ed., intro. & notes, John Sargeant, London, New York, Toronto: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, (1910) 1952, p. 284, l. 134. The present author treats the whole problem of Dryden’s “paraphrase” of Chaucer in her forthcoming article, “What Dryden did to Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, or Translation as Ideological Input”, to appear in *The Medieval Translator* 8, Brepols, 2003.

Autocratic decisions not democratic dialogue

Chaucer's Theseus not only omits any discussions about undertaking the war against Creon, he has no use for interlocutors at any time. He does not envisage negotiations for the recovery of the bones nor does he appear to declare war at any point.¹ According to correct chivalric standards, his conduct of war is strangely unorthodox in this point as in others: swift and sudden, it focuses entirely on the slaying of Creon and the flight of his people; we hear nothing of how well the two armies fought, how equally they were matched or even if they were matched at all. Creon's followers are referred to in the text as *folk* not *knights* or *men* (l. 988)² and the subsequent razing of the town sounds so easy that one wonders what could have happened to the Theban defences.

Not honouring but despoiling the dead, no mercy for survivors

Chaucer's Theseus does not honour the dead — neither those of the formerly fallen Argives, nor those of the recently killed Thebans. The dead Thebans have been piled in heaps under the eye of Theseus, just as the dead Argives were piled in heaps under the eye of Creon. Once he has won the battle and the city, Theseus behaves with the same ruthlessness as had Creon. He allows the pillagers to do what they want to the bodies, reducing all accoutrements and even the bodies themselves to money values. Paradoxically, the pillagers who tear the still living Palamon and Arcite from the heap of dead are more merciful than the duke in at least carrying the wounded men *softly* to Theseus's tent and sparing them mutilation or despoilment.

¹ See Howard Schless, "The Knight's Tale, 975-980 and 1462-75, Theseus's Banner, Palamon's Mickey", *Chaucer Review*, 25 (1990), 80-83.

² A choice of terms which suggests the flight of civilians as well as of the soldiers of Creon's city, in line with the medieval social patterns of fighting knights and non-fighting burghers.

Unfair outnumbering — heaps of bodies

As there is no clear narrative link between the Argive widows and the Theban survivors (the Argive widows having left the story before the entry onto the scene of the two wounded knights), readers / listeners who reflect on the completed tale are forced to find a thematic link for themselves. This link appears as the heaps or *taas* of dead bodies or simply the bones which remain once the flesh has departed. Indeed these heaps are the main issue of the widows' outrage, of the essential injury and dishonour done to the dead deliberately by Creon, of the wrong that Theseus promises to redress. Yet heaps of bodies are again present after Theseus's own victory over Thebes, since instead of allowing the vanquished to reclaim their dead where they fell, Theseus has attacked and razed the city of Thebes so entirely that few survivors remain. The heaps of dead in Chaucer contrast starkly with the bodies in Euripides, which are guarded where they fell by the Thebans, recovered with utmost respect by the Athenians, and throughout treated honourably. Chaucer's thematic link between the two apparently separate stories of, firstly, the widows' plea and Theseus's war and, secondly, of the two Theban prisoners' rivalry, is in fact, emblematic of the base, chaotic, despicable and ignoble nature of what, in Christian terms could be called the "World and all its pomps" or the earthly society of sinners as against the heavenly communion of saints, the sordid reality of living and dying as against the idealized visions of religion or chivalry.

For the heaps of bodies redound satirically in other ways: Apart from being a repetition of the very wrongs which Duke Theseus is supposed to be redressing, the heaps prove that the wounded and dead Thebans are lying on the field of battle in far greater numbers than their attackers — there are enough Athenians surviving actually to make these heaps and to make them indiscriminately, so that the pillagers who follow the soldiers can do with them what they will. If the dead are only or mainly Thebans, the two armies can hardly have been evenly matched: heaps of bodies on the one side and an army strong enough to besiege a city and lay waste the surrounding country

on the other suggest wholly unequal forces, in fact they suggest not a battle but a massacre.

The fact that Palamon and Arcite are drawn out of a heap of bodies undermines their heroic status. Chivalric codes demand that knights support their leader to the death, save him, or if not, die fighting. Chaucer's memorable line: *Not wholly quick nor wholly dead were they* (l. 1015) is convincing in realistic terms, true to the real world of war, but parodic of the chivalric ethos and the idealized world of the mythical imagination and the heroic epic tradition. Palamon and Arcite, the original anti-heroes of English Literature, are never really in charge of their destiny and their half-deadness is a comment on their commonplace psychological make-up. The heaps of bodies thus symbolise their moral status which is normative rather than exemplary, and prepare us for the dramatic reversals of fortune that ensue. From being the despised vanquished, the two knights become through luck the most privileged of allies, although this happens in parodic contradiction to "normal" traditional, didactic story-lines in that the knights are rewarded not for their own merits but purely for their usefulness to the ruler, Theseus. Thus a state funeral is awarded on an epic scale to Arcite for an illusory heroism which he never actually achieved,¹ but which gives the duke Theseus a chance to revel in his own pomp and glory as munificent ruler and "god on throne".² Similarly it is Theseus and not the other suitor, Palamon himself, who decides that it will be Palamon, the loser of the tournament, who will, after many years have passed, wed the lady Emily for the unashamedly political reasons of alliance with Thebes.

The counterfeit fairness of Theseus

Although all the Tale's characters, as well as the Knight-narrator of the frame story, seem to believe so strongly in Theseus' goodness

¹ Nominal winner of the tournament, Arcite dies from the consequences of a fall from his horse who shies at an invisible fury sent by the tutelary gods. The provenance of the cause of the accident makes witnesses forget about Arcite's inadequate control of the animal and lack of riding skills.

² *Riverside*, p. 59, l. 2529.

and justice that all his actions and speeches pass without critical comment or stated opposition, readers and listeners are not bound to follow so meekly.¹ Close reading and comparison with the *Suppliant Women* suggests, indeed reveals, not only that Chaucer's Theseus is a wily politician in stage-managing the widows' pleas, but that he is equally self-seeking and even more manipulative as regards the tournament which is ostensibly an acceptable means of settling the rivalry over the lady by a "fair" fight. The passage describing the defeat of Palamon can be quoted in full:

Som **tyme** an ende ther is of every dede.
 For er the **sonne** unto the rest wente,
 The strong kyng Emetreus **gan hente**
 This Palamon, as he **faught with Arcite**,
 And made his **swerd depe** in his flesh to byte,
 And by **the force of twenty** is he take
 Unyolden, and ydrawen to the stake.
 And in the recus of this Palamoun
 This strong kyng Lygurge is born adoun,
 And kyng Emetreus, for al his strengthe,
 Is **born out of his saddle** a swerdes lengthe,
 So hitte him Palamon er he were take.
 But **al for noght**; he was brought to the stake.
 His **hardy herte** myght hym helpe naught:
 He most abyde, when that he was caught,
By force and eek by composicioun (l. 2636-2651) (my emphases).

This passage is particularly interesting by its notable lack of a sense of climax as regards the even odds of a real fight, and its absence of excitement as to who will win and who will lose.² By suggesting in the initial sibylline commonplace (with echoes of Ecclesiastes) that the end in sight is as predictable as the sunset, the text hints strongly that the outcome of the joust was never in suspense or even in doubt,

¹ Since Dryden's rewriting of *The Knight's Tale* as *Palamon and Arcite* (1700), most critics have taken precisely this non-critical attitude to Theseus: he is the holder of power and his power passes unquestioned.

² Emerson Brown points out that it is impossible to work out from Chaucer's text who draws blood from whom at this point — Palamon, Arcite or Emetrius. See Emerson Brown, "The Knight's Tale, 2639: Guilt by Punctuation", *Chaucer Review*, 27 (1986), 133-41.

but had been timed and arranged in advance. The sunset can then be thought to serve as a signal to the two champions, Emetrius and Lygurge (invited to the joust by Theseus to make up the two opposed sides, with Lygurge fighting for Palamon and Emetrius for Arcite), to proceed to act in a way so contrary to the rules of chivalry or even of basic fighting skills, that one can hardly believe their actions at this point to be unpremeditated. On the contrary, a more plausible scenario is that the tournament has been rigged and that the champions are obeying orders. Thus Emetrius attacks Palamon just when the latter is occupied with fighting Arcite, taking advantage of two against one, and wounds him with his sword deeply and easily in a flesh-wound we had previously heard Theseus expressly forbidding. The unfair advantage of outnumbering is then scandalously compounded by the twenty followers of Emetreus dragging the struggling Palamon to the stake in sign of defeat. Palamon's champion, Lygurge, is no help to the knight whose side he should never have left and has already been put out of action elsewhere. As for young Emetrius (the actual winner instead of Arcite) he, like the older Lygurge, is shown as not much of a fighter, for the wounded Palamon's blow unhorses him with ease.

The last sentence of the passage, which insists on the inevitability of this ending, can be read with close attention to its use of double meaning: a) however valiant his "hardy heart" and however ready to continue the struggle, Palamon must admit that he is beaten; or b) however outraged his "hardy heart" and however furious at the injustice of his defeat, Palamon must know that he is powerless to protest. For he has been overcome *By force and eek by composicioun* which means either: a) by greater strength and agreement to the rules that had been made and consented freely¹ or: b) by the violence of a power-holder who imposes subjection to his will by stratagems and conspiracy. Reading between the lines we can imagine that Theseus had earlier decided which of the two knights was going to be the winner and had bribed the champions to play suitable parts.

Having suggested that Theseus can be strongly suspected of being a dishonest as well as a manipulative ruler (Chaucer's realistic

¹ This is the version given in *Riverside*, p. 60, note 1. 2651.

version of Euripides' immensely more idealised figure), we can now follow our enquiry into the true meaning of the word *manly* in the actual account of Theseus's slaying of Creon. The whole passage merits close attention, and can be usefully examined in five parts; 1) Theseus's swift movement to engage the war, 2) his spectacular arrival on the field of battle, 3) his combat against Creon and taking of the city of Thebes, 4) the tie-up with the ostensible cause of war — the return of the bones to the widows and the "obsequies" that follow, 5) his night of rest after the conquest — before the return to Athens (logically before the previous episode which we earlier called a "flash-forward").

1) And **right anoon**, withouten moore abood,
 His **baner** he desplayeth, and forth rood
 To Thebes-ward, and al **his host beside**.
 No neer Athenes wolde he go nor ride
 Ne take his ese fully half a day,
 But **onward** on his wey **that nyght** he lay,
 And sente **anon** Ypolita, the queene,
 And Emilye, hir yonger sustre sheene,
 Unto the toun of Athenes to dwelle,
 And **forth he rit**, ther is **no more to telle** (l. 965-74)

2) The red statue of Mars with spere and targe,
 So shyneth in his white **baner** large
 That **alle the feeldes glitteren** up and down;
 And by his baner born is his **penoun**
 Of **gold ful riche**, in which ther was ybete
 The Minotour, which that he won in Crete,
Thus rit this duke, **thus rit** this **conqueror**,
 And in his host **of chivalrie the flour**,
 Til that he cam to Thebes and **alighte**
Fair in a feeld, ther as he thought to fighte.

3) **But shortly** for to speken of this thyng
 With Creon, which that was of Thebes kyng,
 He faught, and **slough hym manly as a knyght**
In pleyn bataille, and putte **the folk** to flyghte.
 And by **assaut he won** the citee after,
 And **rente adoun** bothe wall and spare and rafter; (l. 985-90)

4) And to the **ladyes** he restored agayn
 The **bones** of hir **freends** that were slayn,

To do obsequies as was tho the gyse.
But it were al to long for to devyse
 The grete clamour **and** the waymentynge
 That the **ladyes** made at the brennyng
 Of the **bodies, and** the great honour
 That Theseus, the **noble conquerour**
 Dooth to the ladies when they from hym wente;
But shortly for to telle is myn entente. (l. 991-1000)

5) Whan that **this** worthy duc, **this** Theseus
 Hath Creon slayn and wonne Thebes **thus**,
 Stille in **that** feelde he took **al nyght his reste**
And dide with al the contree **as hym leste**. (l. 1001-04) (my
 emphases)

Episode 1) takes ten lines to convey one narrative fact only — that Theseus hurried to the attack, but ends surprisingly, after this verbal prolixity, with the Knight-narrator assuring his audience that he is being brief. Episode 2) is again prolix (ten lines) and insists in detail on the visual impressiveness of Theseus's army in battle array, with banners, pennons and terrifying- symbols of power and victory displayed in full, and narrates one fact only — that Theseus got off his horse at the place he had decided would be the field of battle. After the two prolix passages, episode 3) is the more surprisingly brief; the Knight-narrator assumes that his audience wants to hear no more about the attack, the opposing army, their relative positions and strengths, the first engagement, who fought well or poorly, what deeds of prowess were done, how the climactic moment of the attack on the actual person of Creon was arrived at, how the presumably single combat of Theseus and Creon worked itself out (all the points of information that involve the audience fully in Euripides's drama) and simply omits these points of the action with the disclaimer *But shortly for to speken of this thyng* so that within six lines Theseus has killed Creon, put his bodyguard / army / people to flight, attacked, taken and razed the city of Thebes down to the last roof. In mid-sentence the Knight-narrator then finishes the war-story off by assuring us in episode 4) (ten lines) that the ladies were given the bodies that they claimed by Theseus on his return. He then elaborates on the funeral rites and again ends by saying that he is being brief. Finally, in what is effectively a "flashback", 5), Theseus enjoys his conquest, in the very

same field that he had chosen as the site of battle, by envisaging or actually doing what he wanted to do with the whole country although we are not told what exactly that might have been.

Although it is clear that Theseus has won the battle and the whole war and that he himself is gloating over victory, we have no means of judging how far he really deserves admiration for outstanding skill or exemplary fair-play. There is no indication in the narration that the adjectives *noble* and *worthy* applied to Theseus by the Knight-narrator are anything but the conventional epithets added to the label of "conqueror" (i.e. "winner for your own side"). On the contrary the text admits of a very different reading of Theseus's war and of his *manly* fight. If all five episodes can be read as expressing the approval of the Knight-narrator, they can equally be read in a critical way and suggest the disapproval of the author who is subtly hinting at a series of actions which would not redound to the credit of the main character in his role as conqueror. In the same way as the double reading of the later scene of the tournament, the episode of the killing of Creon can be read for its contrasted double meanings. The haste of episode 1) can be approved of as showing knightly eagerness to redress a wrong; or it can be disapproved of as a secret attack which will take the unprepared Thebans by surprise. The mention of the army's movement at night and the final mention in episode 5 of the night of victory (with Creon killed and the whole country under Theseus's control) confirms the impression either of justified violence or, on the contrary, suggests that duke Theseus's methods of warfare are not those of honourable chivalry but of a robber's raid.

Little more need be said about episode 4 and the so-called widows or ladies, wailing loudly over their funeral rites, which we have already suggested is but play-acting. Episodes 2 and 3 can now be looked at in detail and the approving reading set beside the disapproving interpretation: either Theseus's army is impressive and his killing of Creon is honourable and admirable, truly "valiant" as in Wright's translation, or it is the opposite. For after the forced marches at night of episode 1, episode 2 simply states, at one moment, the appearance of the Athenian army outside the city of Thebes and then,

at the next moment, that Creon has been killed. More plausible to my mind than the noble is what could be called the ignoble scenario of what happened in between these two narrative moments (and which the Knight-narrator refuses to tell us). This could be that on arrival in full view of the walls of the city of Thebes, *Faire in a feild*,¹ Theseus could be seen / admired dismounting by the watching Thebans and was thus presumed to be arriving not for war but on a diplomatic mission. Heralds would then be sent to Creon with assurances of a peaceful diplomatic exchange between the two leaders, to meet man to man, on foot and unarmed, followers, bodyguards, and armies as well as Creon's *folk* or unarmed civilians some way behind, to confirm their sworn peace agreements and mutual neutrality. Then, when Creon actually appeared without taking special precautions since he trusted Theseus's word, Theseus broke his word, pulled out his sword and killed Creon before anyone could react, while his cavalry thundered up and decimated Creon's *folk* indiscriminately, routing those who fled and massacring those who stayed to fight. After that it was easy to pile the wounded into heaps, scale the walls, raze the town, and do what one liked with the entire country.

Read in this way *manly as a knight* loses any connotation of approval and morality and acquires instead the connotations of baseness and evil that one could apply to twentieth-century conquerors like Hitler or Pol Pot. *Manly* thus comes to mean not "like a man at his best" but "like a man at his worst", and *knight* becomes the equivalent of "the killer who is stronger than you are". The suggestion for this blackest of scenarios (others, less black, are of course possible) comes to mind from an analogy which was readily available to Chaucer and his contemporary audience — the historical incident of the fourteen-year-old King Richard II's meeting with the rebels during the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, when the promise that nobody would be harmed was broken by the murder of the leader, Wat Tyler, cut down by the sword of the Mayor of London in full view of

¹ *Riverside*, p. 38, l. 984.

the assembled King, nobles and people.¹ This shameful incident could well have served Chaucer and his audience for filling in imaginatively the meaning of *manly as a knight*.

In conclusion, I would say that the “The Knight’s Tale” is a genuine revelation of the naked truth about the world of power which creates more or less acceptable ideological smoke-screens to give the appearance of civilised values and desirable order to its lyingly manipulative abuses perpetrated frequently for the private self-gratification of conscienceless leaders. In this interpretation no admirable connotations can be brought to bear on *manly as a knight* and Chaucer is revealed as admitting of interpretations that make him equally condemnatory of war in his own way of black comedy as is Euripides in his tragic drama. Unlike Euripides, however, Chaucer does not take on the criticism of power openly, he simply demonstrates, tongue in cheek, its linguistic machinations, distortions and abuses.² Twentieth century history gives present-day readers plentiful examples of recent political rulers who lied, cheated and tyrannised to stay in power through cunning use of “Doublespeak” or *langue de bois*, and who were only revealed in their true colours when it was too late to prevent their crimes. From such a point of view, a subversively critical reading of Theseus is not only more entertaining than the established one of reverential admiration, but a necessary pragmatic step in acquiring the critical attitude to power-holders that constitutes political wisdom.

¹ For succinct accounts eloquent of diverging political opinions, see G. M. Trevelyan’s *English Social History. A survey of six centuries from Chaucer to Queen Victoria*, New York: Longman (1944) 1978, p. 15; M. H. Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages: A Political History*, 1st part London: Methuen, 1973, 4th part Bury St. Edmunds: The Folio Society, 1999, pp. 243-47. For a contemporary account see: *Froissart: Chronicles*, selec. trans. & ed. Geoffrey Brereton, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968, pp. 211-30.

² Of his nearly contemporary predecessors whose writings Chaucer cannot have ignored: Mamilio of Padua (1280-1342), William of Ockham (1300-1347) and John Wycliffe (1328-1384), Michaela Pasche-Grudin writes: “In their attack on official discourse, on its tendency to conceal and confuse, [...] [they] open up [...] the issue of language and authority.” Michaela Pasche-Grudin, “Credulity and the Rhetoric of Heterodoxy”, *Chaucer Review*, 35 (2000), 204-219.