The Role of Women in Chaucer's " The Knight's Tale "

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When we first consider the role of women in Chaucer's The Knight's Tale", a paradox is apparent; women seem to be central to the story, and yet they do absolutely nothing. At first this seems surprising, because Chaucer's women as developed elsewhere in The Canterbury Tales are wonderful characters, full of life and virtually leaping off the page. But we must remember several key points. First, The Knight's Tale" is a story told by the Knight, and therefore the viewpoints expressed -- and the characterizations depicted -- are his, not Chaucer's. Secondly, seen from this point of view, it is very clear that the Knight does not see women as women, but merely as symbols of his conception of femininity; and third, any action of women in this story actually occurs as the action of men reflected back to them through the mirror of womanhood.

The story opens with the marriage of the Athenian king, Theseus, to Hippolyta, the Amazon queen. Now, the Amazons were considered to be powerful, warlike women -- easily the martial and marital match for any man -- and yet Hippolyta is mentioned almost dismissively here; we are told she was "besieged", her country conquered, and together with her "yonge" sister Emeleye, was brought to Athens to marry Theseus. The Knight gives absolutely no consideration to how Hippolyta may have felt

about this; the implication is that she should be delighted to have found a man so much her equal. And yet the Knight ignores the fact that this woman was a queen, a ruler in her own right, and she is now expected to be happy in a role that renders her almost invisible.

Jessy Luani Wolf is fascinated with this topic. “Why does Chaucer use these particular women in his story? Why Amazons? Why does he make them so very passive, when we know they are warriors? They are warriors from a race with a reputation as strong, ferocious, even monstrous in their character. Historians wrote about the Amazons that they were the fiercest enemies Athens ever faced. Yet, Chaucer shows them as passive, subservient, feminine. Chaucer purposely made them Amazons just as he purposely made Theseus into a kindly, just king; and he did it for the same reason. Theseus is the proof of the rightness of patriarchal rule; he is the wise, male superior being. The Amazons are the proof of women's true role in the Patriarchy. That they are Amazons emphasizes this all the more because they are sinners who sin no more, they are the lost sheep who return to the fold, they are the forgiven harlot, the prodigal son, and the exception that proves the rule. They are every cliché ever spoken which illustrates the way a wrong can turn into a right” (Wolf, amazons.html).

But it is important to make a distinction here. It is not Chaucer who is telling the story this way; it is the Knight. Chaucer's “persona” in this story is simply that of scribe, taking down what the storytellers say. The stories they tell are completely their own, and therefore, what the Knight says about his own characters -- in fact, the way he chooses to structure his story -- does not necessarily reflect the opinions of Chaucer-the-management. And in fact, they do not reflect Chaucer's opinion of women

at all; he is much more generous with his female characters – such as the Wife of Bath or the Prioress -- who are not developed as a part of someone else's story.

But we do not have much time to worry about Hippolyta, for almost as soon as the Knight has introduced her, he bounds away from this topic, on to the next part of the story. Why isn't more made of Theseus' conquest of Hippolyta, and their subsequent marriage? The Knight's explanation is that "Al that thyng I moot as now forbere. / I have, God woot, a large field to ere, / And wake been the oxen in my plough. / The remenent of the tale is long enough" ("The Knight's Tale" , lines 885-888). In other words, the Knight has a lot of material to cover, and he does not give the marriage and Theseus and Hippolyta very high priority.

Why, then, does he begin his tale with it? Chaucer, as a writer, is fully conscious of what he is doing, and so we can be sure that this curious way of opening a story about Palamon and Arcite is no accident. What is he trying to establish? He means for the Knight to depict Theseus, the ruler and thus the central figure of the Kingdom, as being a great hero, a man's man, who can not only conquer a country but capture its queen's heart. Chaucer undoubtedly recognized, as we do, that simply conquering a woman is not capturing her heart, but the point is that the Knight does not recognize this at all. Women are mere prizes, commodities to him. It is also important to note here a very important characteristic of Hippolyta; she has nothing to do. Once conquered and brought back to Athens as a bride, her story is over as far as the Knight is concerned. But by opening the story this way, Chaucer exposes the Knight's blind spot right up front, so that we can bear it in mind as we read the rest of his tale.

The Knight continues. It is not enough for Theseus to go to the Land of Women (for this is what Femenye means) and conquer it; his dominance has to be reinforced by an exhibition of chivalrous behavior at home. And so, predictably, the Knight's story introduces Theseus to not one damsel in distress, but a whole company of them. The company of mourning women wish to enlist Theseus' help in obtaining the bodies of their dead husbands from the land of Thebes, which is ruled by Creon, a tyrant who has passed a law forbidding the burial of the bodies of his enemies. Theseus immediately takes up the challenge, and invades Thebes just as he invaded the Land of Women. In the process he captures two young men of Thebes, Palamon and Arcite, and condemns them to imprisonment in Athens for the remainder of their lives.

Palamon and Arcite are actually the central figures in this story, and all the other characters are merely supporting actors; the marriage of Theseus and the company of wailing women are therefore just background. But the wailing women also perform another important function here. They introduce the element of chance, of Fortune, which will become an important motif in the story later on.

During the Middle Ages, women were often identified with aspects of life which seemed to run contrary to logic, predictability, and reason. Women were held to be more intuitive than men, but at the same time, more fickle. This was true even in classical cultures; the Roman divinity considered to be responsible for the cyclical changes in people's lives was feminine -- the Goddess Fortuna, who is actually mentioned in “The Knight’s Tale” in regard to the inconstancy of Emelye: “For women, as to speaken in comune, / Thei folwen alle the favour of Fortune” (“The

Knight's Tale," lines 2680-81). Even today, we call upon Lady Luck to give our lives a boost in the right direction.

Women were also considered to have closer ties to the occult. This power is intensified when women are in large groups, and diluted when a woman is in male-dominated mixed company. Therefore the large group of women who enlist Theseus' help offer him not only an increased opportunity for heroism, but an increased risk of danger. The acceptance of this unexpected challenge posed by these women indicates that Theseus' life -- and indeed, the lives of all the men in this patriarchal tale -- is about to go off in an unpredictable direction. Theseus emerges from the experience all right, but Palamon and Arcite -- who are, as far as we can tell, completely innocent of any wrongdoing -- find themselves imprisoned for life. The company of women have tipped Fortune's Wheel, and now Palamon and Arcite are at the bottom.

For the first time in the story, women have gained an active role -- at least, their complaints elicited a response -- but it is a problematical role that produces somewhat inadvertent results. This phenomenon is repeated when Palamon and Arcite fall in love with Emelye after spying her from afar. Susan Crane remarks on the fact that the lovers seem to perceive Emelye's mere existence as an act of aggression upon themselves, citing as evidence their remark that "Ye sleen me with youre eyen, Emelye! / Ye been the cause wherfore that I dye"("The Knight's Tale" , lines 1096-97 and 1567-68). Like Hippolyta, Emelye has done absolutely nothing; the "Knight's Tale," at least up to this point, has given her absolutely nothing to do. When Palamon and Arcite first fall in love with her, she is not even aware that they exist; she is simply walking past the place where they are imprisoned.

In this respect, she would seem to be as much at the mercy of Fortune as these men are.

But women's connection with Fortune -- in the Knight's world, at least -- would seem to be much more collusive than it is with men. Susan Crane, in discussing the connection of Emelye with Fortune that was mentioned earlier in this paper, points out that “Linking Emelye to Fortune explains her reversals as inexplicable -- determined by mere accidents -- and at the same time integrates her inexplicability into the tale's broader concern with the place of accidents in the providential scheme. In this reading, Emelye presides over the circular tournament as Fortune over her Wheel, or at most as Venus over lovers and Diana over maidens -- apparently mistresses but finally handmaidens of destiny” (Crane, crane-kt.htm). Under the circumstances, the reader could take exception to the suggestion that Emelye actually “presides” over anything; she seems, rather, to be a sleepwalker through the entire tale.

Professor Sarah Stanbury concurs. “One of “The Knight’s Tale’s” most mesmerizing fictions is the fiction of Emelye's agency, the fiction that she has power and that the Theban knights live and die as her love slaves. When Arcite, sighing in the grove in the direction of Palamon as hidden auditor, remarks ‘Ye sleen me with your eyen, Emelye!' , the text continues as a seamless web, imperturbed by the fictions of its metaphor; for Emily, certainly absent, as far as we know has never cast her eyes in his direction. In the earlier description of her in the garden, in fact, the only graphic detail of her person curiously describes her hair -- seen from the back. . . . This detail, one could argue, both embodies and dismantles the text's own fantasies, its gendered fictions” (Stanbury, stanbury.html).

In her article, Stanbury observes that today as in Chaucer's time, women enjoy the fiction that they, as active agents, are the center of the male universe (and is this not the basic premise of all romance novels?), whereas most male "buddy flicks" disprove this, incorporating the idea of winning a female as part of the plot but really focus on defeating the bad guy. "The Knight's Tale" , essentially, is no exception. Despite the fact that the argument between Arcite and Palamon is over the dispensation of Emelye, Emelye plays no active part in the plot at all.

In fact, as Jane Zatta points out, "Emily's prayer to Diana is one of the very few times we actually see Emily expressing a desire. Her wish for chastity seems to go beyond convention. She wants no part of any aspect of love. She does not merely reject courtship; she rejects marriage and even motherhood" (Zatta, knight.html). As Emelye says, "wel wostow that I / Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,/ Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf" ("The Knight's Tale" , 2304-2306). Toward the end, she tends to favor Arcite, but when Palamon emerges the survivor, the Knight offers no indication that Emelye does not accept Palamon with good grace. Again, he does not offer her room for comment; Theseus, at the conclusion of his "First Mover" speech, simply points out that it is his "fulle assent" that she should marry Palamon, and we never hear from her again. It is a reprise of Theseus' own marriage to Hippolyta; the story has come full circle.

Thus, can it be said that women really have a central function in "The Knight's Tale" at all? Surprisingly, yes, it can. Although no woman in the story does anything on a personal and active basis to serve as an agent of change, Hippolyta, Emelye, and the company of mourning women of Athens move the plot along simply by existing. In other words, it is not

who they are, but what they represent to the men in the story and the man telling the story, that is important here. Emelye serves as an ideal around which Palamon and Arcite enact their natural competitive instincts; Hippolyta serves as the perfect “centerpiece” wife for a ego-driven king such as Theseus; and the company of mourning women serve as symbols of the fickle (feminine) nature of fate which, despite Theseus' assertions to the contrary, seems to control all our lives. However much we, as twenty-first century readers, may hate the Knight's short-sightedness, the conclusion is plain; the importance of the presence of women and the feminine principle in his Tale lies solely in their symbolic meaning to the male characters.

Geoffrey Chaucer presents a broad portrait of life in his Canterbury Tales both in the pilgrims themselves and in the characters in their stories. The women in these tales are neither better nor worse than they should be, and they are much more realistically portrayed than the idealized women of many other writers of the era. They can be hypocritical and they can be saintly. They are sensual women pursued by and often pursuing men, and they can also be as base as or as nobler than the men. Membership in the church is not assurance of nobility for either sex. The church women, like the church men, are very human. The Prioress is a woman of the church, while the Wife of Bath is a worldly woman, and they are very much alike in many ways. The Wife of Bath can be seen as a character exhibiting primordial behavior, or behavior that is both original and primitive for her time. Modern critics find much to discuss in Chaucer regarding the role of women, and feminist critics find evidence both of male and female assertiveness in the pages of this lengthy poem. The way

Chaucer treats women in his work and the views expressed in the poem regarding women and the marriage will be analyzed with a close reading of the Prologue to "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and "The Nun's Priest's Tale," with reference to some of the women in other tales as they relate to the ideas expressed in these chapters to the larger saga.

Karl Federn describes the views of women that prevailed in the Middle Ages and discusses their sources. He finds that with the beginning of the Middle Ages, there was a shift in the poetic representation of women. Chivalrous poetry became less sensual and more elevated, and religious and philosophic ideas were interwoven into the poetry. He finds that the essential feature, however, was the position of women and the new conception the poets had of love. This differed from the prevailing view in the ancient world, where love meant nothing but physical relations between the sexes, with women being simply seen as women, being considered neither high nor distinctly base. The women had a social inferiority considered natural because of their limitations - this was a time when physical strength and the ability for self-defense were essential conditions of power. Since women lacked these qualities, they were relegated to a definite secondary position behind the men. Federn says that in the Germanic mind, there was a certain referential regard for women that was deeply rooted and that had been foreign in antiquity. The social position of women rarely corresponded to this professed reverence, but in poetry the attitude is seen in the treatment of the female and in a warmer feeling about love and married life. On the other side is Christian doctrine, which in the early Middle Ages was entirely imbued with monkish ideas. Women were regarded as something bad and unclean, and sensual love

was condemned. This was all changed with the era of chivalry, at which time the cult of women was introduced. However, feigned and superficial it really was, this cult would become a leading feature of modern civilization (Federn 129-131).

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love. It generates his poetry. There is something ethereal about this kind of love, much as the lover sees his beloved as an ethereal creature living abut the rest of life. Chaucer's women are seen first as women and not as ethereal images. Love can be as entwining for Chaucer's characters as it is for the women in later chivalric poetry, but Chaucer stands back for this involvement and sees it as another aspect of life rather than the ultimate purpose of life. In "The Knights Tale" for instance, two knights are willing and ready to die as long as they can do so within sight of their beloved. Love is an affliction that radically alters behavior. Palamon and Arcite prepare to fight to the death for Emelye, stopped only by Theseus, who at first is willing to see them both die for their sins. As happens again and again in these stories, it is the women who understand love and who plead for mercy for lovers. The women do not want the lovers to die merely because they are in love, yet they also understand the impetus that drives these men to the brink of death in pursuit of their love. Theseus is willing to be convinced in this case, and he makes reference to the madness that love is or that love brings and on which the behavior of these two knights can be blamed. In this tale as in others, it is the women who first see the power of love, the cruelty of love, and who plead for understanding for lovers. They do that here by asking that Theseus reconsider his decision that the two men would die, and the reasoned and fair solution he offers comes from this pleading of the women. The image of women in this story, however, must be seen as a reflection of the view of the knight. In each of the stories, the different view of women derive from the society of the time and from the personality of the one telling the story. When the Miller insists on telling his coarse tale, Chaucer apologizes for having to relate

the language used by the Miller. As a poet, Chaucer is conveying the images of his characters and does not claim them all as his own. In this way, he gives an even more comprehensive image of women, deriving as it does from different points of view, different social strata, and different sources for the stories told. Yet, for many, Chaucer is not rigorous enough in his creation of real women and only affirms the prejudices of his day when he tries to be. Hope Phyllis Weissman sees Chaucer as the heir to a tradition of what she calls anti feminism in literacy tradition. She states that a strict definition of anti feminism would mean those writings which revenge themselves upon woman's failure to conform to male specifications by presenting the woman as a nagging bully or an avaricious whore. Weissman finds that Chaucer is guilty of this type of anti feminist presentation, but she also finds that the term can have a broader sense as including not simply satirical caricatures or women but any presentation of a woman's nature that is intended to conform her to male expectations of what she is or ought to be and not to her own views of the matter (Weissman 93-94). Weissman states the medieval culture by Chaucer's time recognized four images of women as primary, meaning that the alternative conception of women they defined provided the basic vocabulary of individual character creation. Two of the images were secular, two were religious, two were good and two were bad or unflattering. The good and bad religious images derived from the female characterizations of Scriptural narrative. The Old Testament Woman was represented by Eve, and like Adam she was bound by the laws of the flesh and the material universe. The New Testament Woman was represented by Mary, and she was freed by the law of grace to enjoy the pleasures of the spiritual realm

(Weissman 94). The secular counterparts were the courtly and bourgeois woman inherited from Eve a lust for material possessions. The fabliau woman gathers her possessions of sex and coin primarily from outside the marriage bond, not only because her husband is inadequate but because she has an inexhaustible supply of physical energy and mental agility. The courtly image of woman probably derived from the worship of the Great Mother goddesses in the cults of pagan antiquity (Weissman 96).

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