

# The Comic Side of the Noble Life:

## An Analysis of Satire in "The Knight's Tale"

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Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" is far too self-serious to be taken seriously. Certainly it is a beautiful romantic poem, but when pasted into the *Canterbury Tales* it must be regarded with a smile. In order to better understand this satire, it is important to understand just how chivalry worked in Chaucer's society, and how Arcite and Palamon measure up to the chivalric code. From this it can be seen that the Tale's ludicrous and manipulated ending is both unjust and uncalled for. "The Knight's Tale" ultimately becomes Chaucer's satirical poke at chivalry.

However, before the difficult subject of chivalry is tackled, there is an important (though somewhat minor) element of satire tied up with Emelye. Emelye is the standard beautiful, pure, and perfect woman that litters medieval literature. At first this may not seem like a large issue, but once "The Wife of Bath's Tale" and "The Clerk's Tale" show up, there is a very different light cast on Emelye, and that is the aspect of passivity.

This passivity defines many medieval female characters, but Chaucer is not afraid to give his audience a realistic and complimentary view of women. The obvious example is the Wife of Bath and her self-supporting, strong character, but the more appropriate (as applied to Emelye) is that of Criseyde. In Criseyde Chaucer gives us a rational, self preserving, compassionate woman who strives (and succeeds) to exist with love-stricken males in a male-dominated society. However, none of Criseyde's strategizing and choice making is mirrored in Emelye. In fact she does not even speak until her prayer to Diana (2297). Where Criseyde weighs the pros and cons of love, Emelye is content to give it to the gods, essentially asking for whichever man likes her more: "As sende me hym that moost desireth me" (2325). With this statement her role becomes

more like that of Grisilde in "The Clerk's Tale": falling into despicable passivity that even the Clerk condemns. William F. Woods argues that Emelye functions as a mediator between Arcite and Palamon, and that her prayer makes a "final judgment between Palamon and Arcite, bringing their desires and their fates into symmetry" (279). Woods has some bases for his argument but he is glazing over the fact that Emelye would rather stay a virgin: "Chaste goddesse, wel wostow that I / Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf, / Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf" (2304-06). This request is refused and Emelye is relegated to a victim. Her marriage to Palamon is ultimately a command from Theseus and parliament:

"Suster," quod he, "this is my fulle assent,  
With al th'avys heere of my parlement,  
That gentil Palamon, youre owene knight,  
That serveth yow with wille, herte, and might,  
And ever hath doon syn ye first hym knewe,  
That ye shul of youre grace upon hym rewe,  
And taken hym for housbonde and for lord."  
(3075-81)

Chaucer asks his audience to see this treatment of women, and Emelye's passivity, as a bad thing and an aspect of society that needs to be ironed out.

But the main target of his satire is chivalry. The word "chivalry" should conjure up images of knights in shining armor, dragons, dangers, and damsels in distress. It causes young boys to run into the yard with wooden swords to lop the limbs off of evil trees and offending shrubs. A nostalgia should creep into hearts as we remember, as Edmund Burke did, "the age of chivalry is gone: that of sophisters, economists and calculators has succeeded: and the glory of Europe is extinguished" (qtd. in Keen 1). Of course, the greatest pastime of humanity is the past, because that is where all of its accomplishments are. The temptation is to

glorify the last decade before it is even over. The truth is that chivalry sanctioned actions such as the murder of Nicholas Radford, who was awakened as his house was being raided by retainers to the Duke of Devonshire. When they had finished with the house, they ordered the aged Radford to accompany them to Devonshire on foot despite his pleas for a horse. When he collapsed on the road, Devonshire's men beat him and cut his throat. Though this particular event took place after Chaucer's death, it is not unlike the society that Chaucer is writing about. In fact, Michel Stroud argues that knights "rarely (if ever) fulfilled their ideals" (324). Chaucer, being a member of the aristocracy, would have had a first-hand view of this type of behavior and was in a good position to criticize it.

Maurice Keen points out that the word "chivalry" (derived from the French *chevalier*) refers more specifically to the physicality of the knight, his horse, armor, and weapons. The ideals behind the word are much harder to define. Keen also admits that even during the medieval time period the term was loosely used. Depending on the text, chivalry could refer to a collection of armed soldiers on horseback, the order of chivalry, or even social status (Keen 1-2).

The code, or order of chivalry, is the aspect that is most essential in understanding "The Knight's Tale." Of course, what must be juggled in understanding the chivalric code is that, like the church, it did not always function as it was supposed to. Leon Gautier reduces chivalry to ten commandments that basically espouse loyalty to the church and country, love, courage, and all-around basic moral character (9-10). Richard Barber, on the other hand, has twelve rules that come from a book called *On the Art of Loving Honesty* by Andreas the Chaplain. These rules function in generally the same way as those

of Gautier; however, there is no mention of the church, and there seems to be more emphasis on romantic love (Barber 125-127). Here it should be noted that Sidney Painter, who conducted an authoritative study of chivalry, thought that chivalry referred to a period of time when knights acted nobly: protecting the church and civilians, and refraining from rape and casual manslaughter. He also added: "I can find no evidence that there ever was such a period" (qtd. in Stroud 324).

Despite the fact that the chivalric system is flawed, "The Knight's Tale" operates on the premise that it is working. Therefore, it is still important to discover just how Arcite and Palamon measure up to these standards. A major factor that should be considered when analyzing these characters is their selfishness. This selfishness causes Arcite to overtly transgress the chivalric code. Since Palamon confesses his affection for Emelye first (1104), Arcite's own confession (1118) is a violation of Andreas' third rule: "Thou shalt not knowingly strive to break up another's love affair" (qtd. in Barber 127).

Palamon immediately informs Arcite (and the reader) that he is also breaking the oath between them:

That nevere, for to dyen in the peyne,  
Til that the deeth departe shal us tweyne,  
Neither of us in love to hynre oother,  
Ne in noon oother cas, my leeve brother,  
But that though sholdest trewely forthen me  
In every cas, as I shal forthen thee –  
This was thyn ooth, and myn also certeyn.  
(1129-39)

It is important to consider the role of such an oath in the chivalric code and medieval society in general. According to Catherine A. Rock, a man's given word was generally expected to be kept and was legally binding: "False swearing

and breaking one's oath were serious offenses [...] people who broke their oaths could be fined for doing so" (418). Arcite is also violating Gautier's eighth rule: "thou shalt never lie, and shalt remain faithful to thy pledged word" (Gautier 10).

Depending on how seriously we take Arcite's pitiful excuses, "The Knight's Tale" becomes a classic romance with a lot of coincidence, heroism, and *Deus ex machina* in which the honorable knight wins the human trophy, the two friends make up, and no gods have to betray their respective mortals. All of this is coming from perhaps the greatest writer of satire in history. This conclusion is, of course, insufficient.

The knight himself (that is, the pilgrim who tells the tale of Arcite and Palamon) is certainly exempt from Chaucer's satire. He is a "worthy man" (43) and is every inch the ideal knight. However, he is still locked within the chivalric system: sworn to uphold its honor and therefore blind to its faults--the faults which Chaucer makes abundantly clear.

The initial compassion that the reader feels for these honorable men as they appear bloody, bashed, and side by side is soon shattered. These two knights are far from honorable or even likeable. Not only is their love for Emelye based on a "first-see-first-served" mentality, but their falling out is a result not of disrupted love, but of fighting over window space. It is important to understand that these two are not free to love Emelye. They simply must admire her from afar. There is nothing noble about the knights' love; in fact it "lowers them to the level of squabbling like spoiled children, each determined to hurt the other in order to possess not the desired object itself, but simply the right to admire that object" (Rock 419). Arcite and Palamon are not engaging in romantic love. They are simply running with their emotions and possibly feeling a bit

of self-pity. Therefore, their "love" is not edifying; it is destructive.

Palamon is not free from blame. Certainly he saw Emelye first (for whatever that is worth), but, if the bond between Arcite and Palamon is as strong as the text implies, then it seems that he should be willing to forgo his claim for the sake of their friendship. Amis (*Amis and Amiloun*) is willing to kill his own beloved children in order to cure Amiloun (his sworn brother) from leprosy. Even within "The Knight's Tale" the reader is told that Theseus goes to hell to retrieve his friend Perotheus after he dies (Rock 419-429). Surely, if Arcite and Palamon are as close as sworn brothers are expected to be, then laying aside their affection for recently spied eye-candy is not too much to ask.

Rock proposes that, were the situation reversed and Arcite had been the first to spot Emelye, Palamon would have simply deferred to Arcite and allowed him the role of loving her (419). However, considering Palamon's behavior it seems unlikely that he would have simply stood aside. If Palamon truly believes that Arcite can simply choose not to love (as Rock suggests), and if the bonds of their friendship are supposedly stronger than love, then it seems that Palamon should be willing to forego his right of first sight in order to preserve their friendship. Instead he says:

I wol be deed, or elles thou shalt dye.  
Thou shalt nat love my lady Emelye  
But I wol love hire oonly and namo;  
For I am Palamon, thy mortal foo. (1587-90)

This response offers little hope of reconciliation between the two knights.

Arcite, however, continues to wrong Palamon, and his next betrayals are much more egregious. After being set free from prison he swears to Theseus to never return to his country

(1209-15), which he promptly does, "presumably arguing to himself that this is another case where natural law should prevail over the positive law of an oath" (Rock 420). However, there is a much deeper betrayal going on here. Rock points out that Arcite's obligation to Palamon transcends their personal oath and stretches to courtly obligation, because Palamon is part of the royal family (421). Therefore, when Arcite is free and he makes no effort to rescue Palamon or even inform his countrymen of where he is being held, it is a betrayal of a much more serious kind. He is essentially leaving Palamon to die in prison while he pines for Emelye and works as a laborer in Thebes (1418-21).

Apart from Arcite and Palamon's shortcomings, there are also several specific parts of the text that seem to be very critical of the entire set of ideals behind the chivalric code. One particular instance is the battle in the grove. Here, as the two knights happen upon each other and vow to kill one another, they pause. Arcite (whose conscience was not troubled by stealing his friend's girl, betraying his country, and leaving his sworn brother and cousin in prison to rot) decides to go get armor, weapons, food, and bedding for Palamon so that they can have an even and honorable duel instead of killing Palamon immediately (1613-19). They even go as far as dressing one another in their armor "as freendly as he were his owene brother" (1652). This is, of course, ludicrous. Chaucer cannot, and does not expect, his audience to believe that these two knights--who are willing to forsake oaths, loyalty, country, chivalry, and each other simply for a woman they have never met--could act this nobly. Nothing in the text supports this kind of high moral character in these two knights. Between them there has been only enmity, betrayals, and backstabbing, and there is no reason to

believe that would change. Even the fact that the two are found “up to the ancle foghte they in hir blood” (1660) suggests some sort of satire. If this particular passage is to be read seriously then the reader would “have to question the poet’s command over the most elementary techniques of storytelling” (Muscatine 913). Of course, this type of exaggeration could easily be seen as a characteristic of the genre, but it does raise questions as to how seriously Chaucer is taking this combat.

If Chaucer did intend to cast Arcite as the flawed knight who should be beaten by the more honorable Palamon, then Palamon would have defeated Arcite in battle. Instead Arcite wins the battle and is thrown from his horse while he makes his victory lap. The chivalric code is unable to provide the just results that this particular interpretation (that is the supremacy of Palamon to Arcite in moral character) demands. Leicester sees the “fatal injury stripped of chivalric glamorizing, stripped almost of any meaning beyond the process itself, the insignificant horror of a senseless accident,” further highlighting Arcite’s meaningless and arbitrary death (qtd. in Rock 427).

It is also possible that Chaucer is not casting one knight as bad and the other as good, but rather that they are intended to be different types of human men: Muscatine sees “Palamon as the contemplative, idealistic man and Arcite as the more practical, earth-oriented one” (911). In fact it seems that there is a heavy irony implied when Chaucer sends the reader on an exhausting trip to try and find the worthy knight (Muscatine 913). William Frost points out that neither knight is allowed to “take the centre of the stage or the initiative in setting the plot in motion without the other at once having an equal opportunity” (292). This seesaw in narration keeps

the reader from becoming too closely attached to one particular knight.

This particular read causes serious problems with the tale’s ending. If Arcite is not the evil dishonorable knight, then his death is a horrid injustice. It proves that not only does the chivalric system fail to parcel out justice, but that the gods themselves are unable to discern right from wrong, for it is they who cause the earthquake that throws Arcite from his horse and kills him (2686-92). Indeed, if this tale is to be taken as a lesson in how matters are settled between two opposing characters, then there must at least be some distinction between those characters. It is impossible to side with a side that is indistinguishable from the other side. It is even difficult to explain. There must also be some sort of explanation or reason behind the success or failure of a particular character, and there seems to be no such justification here.

This conclusion leaves the reader with an amoral tale that, if he is able to muscle past the beautiful language and honest face of the pilgrim knight, shatters any faith in the chivalric code. Chaucer uses the pilgrim knight as a shield from the upper class, and as a sword against them: simultaneously portraying the strength, beauty, and honor of the ideal while exposing to his audience (especially his contemporaries) just how asinine those silly nobles could be.

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