

# **Theseus – A Flawed Knight**

**By Phillip W. Weiss**

**In the “Knight’s Tale,” Theseus not only fails to preserve order, he is a failure as a knight. His conduct stands in stark contrast to the virtues of chivalry, truth, honor, freedom and courtesy associated with knighthood (43); and far from being a model sovereign, Christian, conqueror, and courtly lover, he is in fact an unmitigated dolt whose nefarious acts leave in its wake a path of destruction.**

**In order to properly assess Theseus’s behavior, the actions of the other two principal male characters in the story, Arcite and Palamon, must also be discussed. The roles of all three characters are inextricably intertwined, with Theseus being the perpetrator and the other two his hapless victims. Indeed, Theseus’s culpability cannot be fully comprehended without describing how the other two fare in the story.**

**What are Theseus’s shortcomings? First of all, he is a marauder, a plunderer, and a murderer. For reasons not specified in the text, he attacks and conquers a country inhabited by women, taking not one but two females with him as booty, an act of plunder which alone is evidence of his wantonness (865-871). Yet, this level of depravity pales in comparison to what is a far more egregious act - his decision to invade Thebes and commit regicide. It is one thing to invade a country inhabited by women; it is far more serious matter altogether to attack a king, a head of state, and one’s social equal. Here, Theseus’s wantonness is unrestrained. Regarding the invasion of Thebes, Chaucer writes:**

**But shortly for to speken of this thing,  
With Creon, which that was of Thebes' king,  
He faught, and slough him manly as a knight  
In peyn bataille, and putte the folk to flight;  
(985-988)**

**Theseus kills the king and puts the people to flight. But for Theseus that is not enough. After the battle he permits his soldiers to loot the dead bodies, which is an act of willful desecration. Chaucer describes the debauchery:**

**To ransake in the tas of bodyes dede,  
Hem for to strepe of harneys and the wede,  
The pilours diden businessse and cure  
After the bataille and the discomfiture.  
(1005-1008)**

**The ransacking of dead bodies bears no resemblance to anything that even remotely resembles knightly valor. It is true that Theseus had responded to the pleas of “a companye of ladies” to intervene after they had complained of similar outrages being perpetrated by Creon, “that lord is now of Thebes the cite” (898-946). Yet Theseus’s aggression raises questions regarding his justification for acting. Did he have a moral or legal right to launch an unprovoked attack against another king? Or was his decision to invade Thebes capricious and impulsive act? Were the “pleas” of the women merely a convenient pretext for initiating a war of plunder and conquest? (“Theseus ... dide with al the countree as he leste.” – 1001-04). Did their complaints constitute sufficient cause to invade another kingdom, even one that was oppressive? Would not a knight have perhaps first tried to communicate with the alleged**

transgressor, in this case another king, before starting a war? Was it not his duty to refrain from killing the king, such as “when Prince Edward insisted on serving King John of France and treating him with great honour (*sic*) when John had been captured at the Battle of Poitiers in 1356?”<sup>1</sup> The text of the tale provides no conclusive answers to these questions, and while Theseus may claim to have been motivated by good intentions, there is no reason for giving him the benefit of the doubt: His hands are dripping with the blood of a murdered king; he is an aggressor, and aggressiveness is not a knightly virtue. Commenting on the knights’ ethos of honor, Derek Brewer writes:

For knights, bravery, loyalty, truth, fair play, disinterestedness ... – indeed as far as called for – but not aggressiveness.<sup>2</sup>

Further, for a man who had conquered the “regne of Femenye” to now claim the moral high ground on behalf of a group of women seems disingenuous. In light of his propensity for conquest, it seems that by invading Thebes, Theseus is guided not by a belief in justice but by avarice. His are not the actions of a “trewe knight” (959).

Besides being wanton, Theseus is also naive. At the behest of his close friend, Perotheus, he decides to banish Arcite while keeping Palamon in prison. Although his decision may seem to be a magnanimous act, one that demonstrates the king’s compassion, in reality it is an act of sheer stupidity which puts his entire kingdom at risk (1187-1207). Instead of removing

---

<sup>1</sup> Brewer, Derek. Ch. 4. “Social Structures,” in *A Companion to Chaucer*. Ed. Peter Brown. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. p. 63

<sup>2</sup> Brewer, *ibid.*, p. 59

a threat, the opposite occurs. The knights plot to attack Athens. Palamon appeals to Arcite to return to Athens with an army with which to free his knightly comrade, telling him to “Assemblen alle the folk of our kinrede,/ And make a were so sharp on this cite ... Sith thou art at thy large of prison free” (1286-92). Luckily for Theseus, they do not implement their plan. Nevertheless, a competent and wiser king would have anticipated such a possibility.

Equally shortsighted is the manner in which Theseus subjects Arcite and Palamon to psychological torture. Not only does he have them imprisoned, he houses them in a facility that is located directly next to the palace where Emelye lives. Chaucer describes the scene:

The grete tour, that was so thikke and strong,  
Which of the castel was the chief dongeoun ...  
Was evene joyant to the gardin wal  
There as this Emelye hadde hir pleyinge.  
(1056-1061)

As a result, from their cell the two men are forced to endure the sight of a woman prancing up and down in front of them, causing unbearable torment (1049-1054). Being a knight himself, and given his own predilection for women, there is no question that Theseus would have understood the ramifications and implications of such a juxtaposition. It was inevitable, therefore, that both men would deteriorate mentally, and not surprisingly that is exactly what occurs, directly due to Theseus’s thoughtless cruelty.

What happens to the two knights? After gazing at Emelye, both become insane. Neither can contain powerful and deep seeded passions which overwhelm their psyches. When Palamon sees Emelye “he bleynte and cryde “A!” as though he stongen were unto the herte” (1078-9) and when Arcite sees her, “hir beautee hurte him so” and declares, “The fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly of hire that rometh in the yonder place” (1114-9). Arcite becomes so distraught that he even wants to kill himself (1221-2). Their physical pain becomes so acute and their resulting psychological deterioration so complete that they can no longer function as knights. While in prison they solemnly swear never to betray each other, even if it meant to “dyen in the peyne,” that is, under the pain of torture (1134). Yet their professions of loyalty prove to be an empty gesture. After his release from prison, Arcite abandons his comrade, ingratiates himself into Theseus’s court, and becomes a traitor (1399-1450). In the field Palamon tells Arcite: “Arcite, false traitour wikke” (1580) and declares that he is his “mortal fo” (1590). Thus, a knightly friendship is destroyed, replaced by enmity, entirely due to Theseus’s misguided judgements.

Even the tournament organized by Theseus is ill-conceived. First, despite ordering that neither contestant shall die (2541), Arcite is killed – by a horse! (2689). Second, he orders that both knights fight on the ground, which is humiliating. (For a knight, riding on horseback was a sign of prestige and power.)<sup>3</sup> Third, the object of the contest, Emelye, does not want to get married; in fact, she wants to remain a maiden. On this point, she is emphatic. Appealing to the goddess Diane she prays:

---

<sup>3</sup> Brewer, *ibid.*, p. 58

Chase goddesse, wel wostow that I  
Desire to be a mayden al my lyf,  
Ne never woll I be no love ne wyf.  
(2304-6)

All she wants is that the two knights stop fighting (2316-17). Yet Theseus ignores Emelye's plea and awards her to Arcite ("Arcite of Thebes shal have Emelye" – 2658) revealing his contempt for her, her religious beliefs, and for women in general. A true knight would have never offered an unwilling woman, especially a virgin, to another knight. (A knight was expected to have "a high esteem for ladies" and certainly not treat them like trophies.)<sup>4</sup> And after Arcite dies, she is left screaming ("Shrighte Emelye and howleth Palamon" – 2817), becomes "woeful" (2910), and collapses ("Ne how she swowned whan men made the fyr" – 2943). A true knight would have never caused a woman to scream and would have done everything in his power to shield her from harm and preserve her composure. Theseus fails to do all of that. Instead, Emelye is an emotional and physical wreck; she is a broken woman; her subsequent marriage to Palamon an empty shell devoid of passion. Chaucer describes their relationship:

For now is Palamon in alle wele,  
Linge in blisse, in richesse, and in hele,  
And Emelye him loveth so tenderly  
And he hir serveth so gentilly  
That nevere was ther no word hem bitwene  
Of jalousye or any other tene.  
(3101-04)

Although there is peace between them, there is still underlying tension.

---

<sup>4</sup> Brewer, *ibid.*, p. 61

Both have been traumatized and now must live with the memory of their torment and suffering, once again because of Theseus, who, as the monarch, is ultimately responsible for their anguish, and for so much of the distress that is part of this story.<sup>5</sup>

Work Cited

V. V. Kolve and Glending Olson, ed., 2005. *The Canterbury Tales*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.  
W. W. Norton & Company: New York.

---

<sup>5</sup> On February 11, 1946 Lt. General Masaharu Homma was convicted and later executed for ordering the Bataan Death March and condoning other atrocities in the Philippines during World War Two. General Homma denied having any knowledge of atrocities, but admitted responsibility for his subordinates. *The New York Times*, April 3, 1946, "Homma Executed by Firing Squad as Punishment for 'Death March'"

