

Theseus – A Flawed Knight

by Phillip W. Weiss

Although in the “Knight’s Tale,” Theseus exhibits many exemplary virtues, such as forbearance, as when he permits Arcite and Palamon to live (“I yow foryeve al hoolly this trespas/At requeste of the queen that kneleth here” – 1818-19); compassion, as when he is troubled by the sight of crying women (“What folk ben ye, that at myn hoomcominge/Perturben so my feste with cryinge?” – 905-6); and reverence for the dead, as when he delivers the eulogy for Arcite (“Duk Theseus, with al his bisy cure,/Caste now wher that the sepulture/Of goode Arcite may best y-maked be,/And eek most hourable in his degree” – 2853-56), nonetheless he also has certain personal shortcomings which sully his otherwise sterling reputation and call into question whether he is truly a model knight as he is described in the text (“A knight ther was, and that a worthy man,/That fro the tyme that he first bigan/To ryden out, he loved chivalrye,/ Trough, and honour, freedom and curteisye.” – 43-46).

First, he is a hypocrite. A knight is supposed to hold women in high esteem, yet Theseus attacks and conquers a country inhabited by women, and takes not one but two females with him as booty, which makes him a plunderer and kidnapper too (865-871). Second, by invading Thebes and killing Creon, he commits regicide, which makes him a murderer. 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)**

Copyright © 2012 Phillip W. Weiss

Third, after he kills Creon and puts the people to flight (“... he putte the folk to flight ...” – 988), he permits his soldiers to loot the dead bodies, which is an act of desecration, making Theseus a vandal. Chaucer describes it as such:

To ransake in the tas of bodyes dede,
Hem for to strepe of harneys and the wede,
The pilours diden businesse 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 intolerable outrages being perpetrated by Creon (898-946), but that did not give him the right to behave in a similarly shameful manner.

Perhaps a less impulsive king would have exercised restraint before attacking. Did the complaints from a group of distraught women constitute sufficient cause to invade another kingdom, even one that was oppressive? The text provides no conclusive answer to this question. 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?”¹ The answer to both of these questions is an equivocal perhaps.

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

According to Derek Brewer Chaucer was not concerned with justice,² so in this case questions of right and wrong as it relates to the story may be moot. Still, Theseus's hands are dripping with the blood of a murdered king, a victim of a war Theseus started, thus adding aggressiveness to his list of faults. Commenting on the knights' ethos of honor, Brewer writes:

For knights, bravery, loyalty, truth, fair play,
disinterestedness ... – indeed as far as called
for – but not aggressiveness.³

Aggressiveness is not a knightly virtue. Thus, in this respect too, Theseus's actions are not those of a "trewe knight" (959).

Theseus also at times is a simpleton. At the behest of his close friend, Perotheus, he decides to banish Arcite while keeping Palamon in prison. Although his decision seems to be a magnanimous act that demonstrates the king's largesse, in reality it is an act of stupidity which puts his entire kingdom at risk (1187-1207). Instead of removing 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 been more prudent.

Further, Theseus can be insensitive. He incarcerates Arcite and Palamon in a facility that is located directly next to the palace where

² Brewer, *ibid.*, p. 67

³ Brewer, *ibid.*, p. 59

Emelye lives. Accordingly, from their cell the two men are forced to endure the sight of Emelye prancing up and down in front of them, causing them excruciating torment (1049-1054). Chaucer describes the scene:

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

Being a knight himself and a man, Theseus understood the ramifications and implications of such a sexually charged juxtaposition (“A man mot been a fool, or yong or old;/I woot it by myself ful yore agoon,/For in my tyme a servant was I oon,/And therefore, sin, I knowe of loves peyne,/And woot how sore it can a man distreyne” – 1812-16), and therefore knew better, yet he still arranged for the knights to be so crassly provoked. It was inevitable that both men would deteriorate mentally, and not surprisingly both experience a rapid and deep emotional decline, directly attributable to Theseus’s thoughtlessness in planning.

As a result, both Arcite and Palamon 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) and their pain, both physical and psychological, becomes so acute that they can no longer think rationally. While in prison they solemnly swear never to betray each other, even if it

meant to “dye in the payne,” 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). When they meet in the field Palamon tells Arcite: “Arcite, false traitour wikke” (1580) and declares that he is his “mortal fo” (1590). Thus, a knightly friendship dissolves, for which Theseus must bear responsibility as the sovereign who engineered the circumstances which led to this dismal outcome.

Even the tournament organized by Theseus, an act of statesmanship meant to settle the knights’ dispute over Emelye (“I speke as for my sister Emelye,/For whom ye have this stryfe and jalousie” – 1833-34), reflects a shallowness and narrowness of thought, especially regarding his attitude toward women. First, despite ordering that neither contestant shall die (2541), death occurs to Arcite (he 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.)⁴ 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:

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

⁴ Brewer, *ibid.*, p. 58

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 and for women in general. And after Arcite dies, she is left screaming ("Shrighte Emelye and howleth Palamon" – 2817), is "woeful" (2910) and collapses ("Ne how she swowned when men made the fyr" – 2943). A true knight would have never caused a woman to cry. Emelye is an emotional and physical wreck; she is a broken woman; her subsequent marriage to Palamon a contrivance. All of this occurs under Theseus's purview, making him responsible for her anguish and adding to his already long list of grievous miscalculations and unknighly acts which are the cause for so much distress and which prove that despite fancy titles, good intentions, and pompous fanfare, things can go awry.

However, just because Theseus has a predilection for violence does not necessarily mean that he is an aberrant knight. He was part of a tradition of plundering, looting, raping and marauding dating back to antiquity. Conflicts were settled not by words but with the sword, and knights were not above committing despicable acts and acts of wanton aggression. For instance, Moses, as prince of Egypt, killed an Egyptian and incurred the wrath of Pharaoh; Alexander, prince of Macedonia, embarked on a campaign of conquest that engulfed much of the known world; Julius Caesar, Pontifex Maximus and Praetor of Rome, attacked and subjugated Gaul; the Castilian nobleman, Rodolfo Diaz de Vivar, known as

El Cid, meaning “the chief” in Arabic, was a mercenary whose loyalties were suspect; and the Crusaders sacked Jerusalem.⁵

Further, as the head of state, Theseus had to make difficult decisions on a wide range of pressing matters, such as whether to go to war, the treatment of prisoners, settling disputes, dealing with complaints, organizing public events, and officiating at funerals, with no guarantee that whatever he decided would be correct choice. It could only be hoped that he would act in good-faith and not from selfish, self-serving motives, which would have constituted an abuse of authority. In the text there is no evidence that Theseus acts in bad faith.

There is also a question of how much control Theseus actually has over events. In the tale, Saturn tells Venus “that Palamon, that is thyn own knight,/Shal have his lady, as thou hast him hight.” (2471-72), and Theseus states, “What maketh this but Jupiter the king,/That is prince and cause of alle thing” (3035-36), suggesting that outcomes are preordained. Yet, despite these invocations and machinations, godly involvement seems to be more allegorical than invasive, leaving it to the humans to decide their own fates and ultimately be responsible for their actions.

Therefore, as a human being with agency, Theseus can be held responsible for his actions and be judged. But this presents another question: By what yardstick? Applying contemporary standards of conduct, Theseus can be considered a war criminal. His carrying off of

⁵ **Sources:** *Exodus* 2:5-15. Charles Freeman, 2004. *Egypt, Greece and Rome – Civilizations of the Ancient Mediterranean*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press: New York, pp. 314-332, 419-439; Edna Paris, 1995, *The End of Days – A Story of Tolerance, Tyranny, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*, Prometheus Books: Amherst, NY, pp. 55-60; Joseph Francois Michaud, 1852, *History of the Crusades*, Vol 1, tr. W. Robson, George Routledge & Co.: London, pp. 217-230.

women as booty and the psychological torment he inflicts on Arcite and Palamon during their incarceration alone would be enough to indict him. Yet, in the tale he is honored as a hero (“Of Athenes he was lord and governour,/And in his tyme swich a conquerour,/That gretter was ther noon under the sonne.” – 861-3). This, however, creates a quandary over how to categorize his behavior. Is he a hero or a villain? The text seems to suggest that he alternates between both, as for instance when he is at war with the Amazons but later comes to the aid of the weeping women from Thebes, or when he first decides to condemn Arcite and Palamon to death (“Youre owne mouth, by your confessioun,/ Hath dampned you, and I wol it recorde;/It nedeth nought to pyne yow with the corde. Ye shul be deed, by mighty Mars the rede.” – 1744-47) but then spares their lives. Hence, the picture of Theseus is mixed. Still, Theseus never shirks his responsibilities and never deliberately brings dishonor to his name, and for those reasons alone he cannot be deemed a reprobate and therefore deserves the honor and respect worthy of a knight.

This raises yet another question: Is Chaucer being honest in his depiction of knighthood as represented by the person of Theseus? The answer to this question is yes. Theseus is not a sham and his depiction by Chaucer is fair and balanced; for Chaucer to have sugarcoated Theseus would have been disingenuous and would have striped Theseus of his humanity and have significantly changed the story. Theseus performs his knightly duties with diligence, but while discharging his duties makes

mistakes, which are depicted in the story. Thus, the tale provides a candid glimpse into the nature of knighthood and of the vicissitudes associated with being a knight.

Work Cited

Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd ed. 2005,

V. V. Kolve and Glending Olson, ed.

W. W. Norton & Company: New York.

