Homosociality and Creative Masculinity in the *Knight's Tale*

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Chaucer’s Knight tells a tale about death. Of course, and as the critical history of the tale shows, death and destruction are only one side of this story,¹ for the Knight finally rearranges the dirges of a warrior’s funeral into the harmony of wedding anthems. And despite Arcite’s gruesome exit from what Duke Théseus calls the “foul prison of this life,” Théseus’s famous final exhortation to “make a virtue of necessity” helps transform Arcite’s mourners into Palamon’s wedding guests. When the witnesses to the spectacle of gruesome knightly demise (after a period of years) turn their tears into songs of joy, the necessity of funeral pyres gradually mutates into a celebration of marriage, an event constituted, according to medieval sacramental theology, by the consent and choice of the willing participants.²


² Louise Fradenburg has examined the importance of consent for medieval culture in its understanding of the relationship among men and women as well as those between rulers and their subjects; more recently she links the subject’s desire for “the gift of death” with
The end of the *Knight’s Tale* joins death with consent, two elements not usually imagined together. The movement from death to marriage implies that, for Theseus, and perhaps for Chaucer’s Knight, necessity (or fate) can become beautifully desirable. It implies as well that the prospect of heterosexual union can compensate somehow for the inevitability of extinction. Necessity, and philosophical exhortations that we accept and even desire it, have a long history in western culture, a history which, as the *Knight’s Tale* can remind us, has pertinence for relations of gender. In these pages I will argue that the representations of masculinity in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* need to be read in relation to that text’s representation of necessity and its virtues. In the sections that follow I examine how Chaucer’s tale represents masculine suffering, that is, the relationship between the necessity of loss and the willingness and ability of men to bear loss stoically. In the first part of this paper I examine the masculinity of fallen warriors Palamon and Arcite, their homosocial rivalry and the power of their violence for Duke Theseus’s creative governance. In the second part I offer Theseus’s representations in Book I as a counterpoint to the victimizations of Palamon and Arcite, and as testimony to state rule as a masculine power. And in the third part I explore further how a ruler’s masculinity requires both the victimization of his soldiers and the excessive mourning of his women. As we shall see, Theseus’s stoic masculinity depends upon a series of losses suffered more directly by his subjects than they are by himself. Indeed, the suffering of others—both male and female—becomes the basis for Theseus’s ability to create, to move his populace from funerals to weddings, while himself remaining safely distant from the liabilities of suffering. I argue that Chaucer’s text imagines Theseus’s creative power, and perhaps creative power more generally, as a masculine attribute.

Victimized doubles: The masculinity of Arcite and Palamon

While we may be used to imagining masculinity as the embodiment of power and victory (a representation we will eventually witness in the representation of Theseus in Book I) the *Knight’s Tale* troubles the assumption that an unfettered and victorious power attends masculinity as such. Our first view of Palamon and Arcite, for example, provides a striking image of the masculine warrior as victim; the text introduces us to these two cousins just as their bodies are poised together, on the edge between life and death:

> And so bifie that in the taus they founde  
> Thurgh-girt with many a grevous blody wunde,  
> Two yonge knyghtes liggynge by and by,  
> Bothe in oon armes, wroght ful richely,  
> Of which two Arcite highte that con,  
> And that oother knyght highte Palamon.  
> Nat fully quyke, ne fully deede they were,  
> But by hir cote-armures and by hir gere  
> The heraudes knewe hem best in special  
> As they that weren of the blood roial  
> Of Thebes, and of susten two ybourn. (I 1009–19)

In this description these warriors embody complete powerlessness, their agency so compromised that they can move neither into life nor into death. The scene evokes a double effect: on one hand, it reminds us that conquerors like Creon and Theseus need male warrior bodies (as well as female Amazonian ones) willing to suffer grievous woundings; on the other, it implies the value, even beauty, of knighthood unions on the field of battle. Indeed, the poetic descriptions link the wounding of warrior bodies with a fellowship between soldiers. Arcite and Palamon’s intimacy with death is written here upon their intimacy with one another. Warrior homosociality (unions between fighting men) merges here with a knight’s body in pain.

Strikingly, the poem emphasizes the former more than it does the latter. We do not hear the precise nature of Palamon’s or Arcite’s woundings, but instead are privy to the details of their relation couched in a way that accentuates their affections for one another. Despite the horrifying image of these young men disguised in a heap of bloody corpses, the language of the description seems remarkably gentle. Two knights lie “by and by,” in a figure that evokes the intimacies of sleep as much as it does the sacrifices of the grave. And in contrast to the grisly enumeration of lesions, lacerations, and disembowelment we will later witness at the Temple of Mars in Book III (see 1195–2009), or the

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4 Eve Sedgwick describes unions between men, unions often mediated through their mutual desire for a particular woman, as “homosocial.” I both borrow her term and extend it: as we will see shortly, Palamon’s and Arcite’s homosociality will soon be mediated through their mutual desire for Emily; but I am suggesting as well that Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale* indicates that battlefield violence can also mediate homosocial desires “between men.” I have argued elsewhere that such chivalric bonds remain haunted by homoerotic desire pertinent to the character of knightly brotherhoods. See Ingham, “Masculine Military Unions: Brotherhood and Rivalry in the Avowing of King Arthur,” *Arthuriada* 6 (1996): 25–44, and Eve K. Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
gruesome biology of Arcite’s death in Book IV (see 2743–60), this description of Palamon and Arcite foregrounds the wartime homosociality of knighthood, the valuable unification of knights. Indeed the gentle tone marks the scene of knightly togetherness with a fond poignancy often reserved for lovers.

Scholarly accounts of chivalric culture also emphasize a unity of brotherly affections in battle, where images of male-to-male intimacy in war signify both masculine community and military virility. In his Memorials of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, for example, G. F. Beltz links the kind of intense identification between brothers-in-arms—so like Chaucer’s depiction of Palamon and Arcite together—with the strength and power of the ruler. Beltz writes

As if members of one family, [knights] wore similar apparel and armour, desirous that, in the heat of battle, the enemy might mistake one for the other, and that each might participate in the dangers by which the other was menaced. By brotherhoods of this character, the sovereigns, under whose banners they enlisted, were able to achieve the most daring warlike operations.

This account of knighthood marks knightly unions as both permanent (that is, comprising brotherhoods beyond the grave, despite the dead bodies war produces) and productive (that is, able to produce a superlative doting army). For Beltz, the substitution of knight for knight proves desirable because it can create a sovereign’s “most daring warlike operations.” These knights together display their ruler’s military potency and virility. Knightly relations produce the pleasures of violence not for their own sake, but for the sake of the sovereign, channeling the excitement of aggression through the potency of a warrior-king. But, as Louise Fradenburg has recently argued, the structure of this relationship, while conceived as generative and immutable, rests on the principal of mutability, on the soldier’s willingness to sacrifice. Knighthood manages a mutual participation in one another’s lives through a participation in the possibility of one another’s death, that is, through the apparently noble act of renouncing one’s life for the life of a brother knight.

The likelihood of wartime death and wounding, while not immediately emphasized in the description of Palamon and Arcite’s bodies together, continues to haunt the scene of battle carnage within which the vanquished cousins lie. In fact, the twining resemblance between the two, lying in a mass of wounded flesh, provides an eerie reminder of death, the great equalizer. Poised on death’s edge, these two knights seem uncannily alike, bereft of individuation, the particular differences and personal specificities that grant them separate identities. In fact, the confusions between Palamon and Arcite are so deeply woven here that this description has prompted a number of critics to wonder if these two characters are really different from each other at all. As doubles surrounded by their slain fellows, Palamon’s and Arcite’s war-apparelled bodies gesture at the terrifying loss of individuation a warrior risks in battle. Their doubling image amidst an assemblage of bodies cut through with many a grievous, bloody wound reminds us that as bloody corpses, warriors horrifically resemble one another.

In Palamon’s and Arcite’s union on the edge of death the possibility of sacrificial death haunts the masculine image of a soldier at the very moment that testimony to a homosocial brotherhood of brave knights offers its consolations. The connection between the pleasures of the homosociality of knighthood and the violent risks knighthood offers to particular soldiers continues to drive the plot of Chaucer’s tale. Rivalries between Arcite and Palamon provide a view of the exciting spectacles knightly relations can produce while simultaneously endangering the integrity of each of the knights themselves. Emily, for her part, apparently figures as the singular object of their desire. Her continual presence (frequently as a backdrop to their actions) has at least two implications: it identifies rivalry between knights as pertinent to categories of masculine sexuality, and it testifies that the exciting physical relations between these cousins have heterosexual limits.

Of course, the Knight’s Tale also suggests that heterosexual desire can have tragic consequences for the future of knights together. It may be, thus, no coincidence that the tale’s denouement displays state-sponsored heterosexual union as a compensation for the losses to chivalric fraternity. Still, if the ending of the Knight’s Tale ties things up rather neatly, earlier portions of the tale cause some readers to remain unconvinced by this final resolution. Chilling reminders of the risks and dangers that war offers to male bodies recur throughout, suggesting a preoccupation with the horrors of biological death—with the savage elements that threaten to overcome even the order and civilization offered in the end of the tale itself. To be sure, critics have long emphasized Theseus’s creative fortitude in attempting to cope with the uncontrollable destructions of violence. When, for example, Palamon’s and Arcite’s rivalry results in a brutal man-to-man affray in the wood, Theseus transforms the

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7 In “The Uncanny,” Sigmund Freud, following the work of Otto Rank, describes the “invention of doubling” as “preservation against extinction.” He links fantasies of doubling to “all those striving of the ego which adverse external circumstances have crushed and all our suppressed acts of violation which nourish in us the illusion of free will” (141–42). That is, Freud identifies the appearance of doubles with the desires for, and struggles to find, agency amid constraint. That struggle, I am arguing, is part of the Knight’s Tale and can help us understand the representations of masculinity therein. Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” is found in On Creativity and the Unconscious: Papers on the Psychology of Art, Literature, Love, Religion (New York: Harper, 1958), 122–61. On the relation between such fantasies and the apotropaic protection of gender see Elisabeth Bronfen, Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic (New York: Routledge, 1992), 59–75.
brutality of wild hand-to-hand combat into the apparent civility of chivalric
tournament. In an impressive (and impressively narrated) display of state
power, Theseus commands the creation of an amphitheater (a Chaucerian
addition to Boccaccio’s story) convening a magnificent state festival to settle
the dispute between the two soldiers.

While critics continue to debate whether the resolution of this text satisfies
our doubts or merely redirects them (and whether Chaucer, or his Knight,
criticizes Theseus or admires him) we can at least note how impressively
Theseus uses the violent rivalry of the Theban cousins to his own ends. The
rivalry between two enemies of Athens becomes, in Theseus’s capable hands,
a display of monumental Athenian wealth (read in the amazing building of the
amphitheater, in Arcite’s lavish funeral, in the final wedding feast) and power
(read in the efficacy of Theseus’s ability to civilize the private battle in the grove
into tournament game, and in his skill at transforming death into marriage,
sorrow into joy). In the process, Theseus lays claim to the energy, power, and
virility of both cousins. Their fighting becomes a testimony to his masculine
power, as conqueror and as governor. In harnessing the masculine violence of
rivalry to undergird his power as ruler, Theseus shows us that the violent risks
warriors suffer can be useful to a sovereign’s power and prestige. In fact,
Theseus’s power as ruler has, from the text’s inauguration, been linked with his
masculinity. We turn then to an examination of that masculinity and the various
victimizations upon which it depends.

Conquering masculinity: Theseus of Book I

Gendered identities and their relation to victimization and loss inaugurate
Chaucer’s Knight’s Tale. Our first introduction to Duke Theseus describes his
position as triumphant military leader and sovereign ruler in distinctly mascu-
line terms:

Whilom, as olde stories telien us,
Ther was a duc that highte Theseus;
Of Athenes he was lord and governour;
And in his tyme swich a conquerour,
That gretter was ther noon under the sonne.
Ful many a rich contree hadde he wonne;
What with his wysdom and his chivalrie,
He conquered al the regne of Femenye.

Theseus’s role as conqueror poetically parallels his position as “lورد and
governour” of Athens; both those roles, by the eighth line, sit parallel to the
“regne of Femenye,” a phrase which also denotes a kind of sovereign rule and
conquest. The parallel structure of these lines may suggest at first that the
Amazonian warriors with whom Theseus fights are enough like him to be
suitable adversaries; after all both Theseus and the Amazon queen count
militarism among their arts of rule.

Yet the next few lines circumscribe any comparison initially suggested here.
Indeed Chaucer decided to begin his story after Theseus’s battles with the
Amazones are over—scenes available to Chaucer by way of his source,
Boccaccio’s Teseide, which could have supplied images of valiant, brave,
and impressive fighting women. Chaucer’s elimination of these representations
of Hypolita as a soldier like Theseus implies that he is not as interested in
comparisons between Theseus and his Amazonian adversaries as he is in their
contrasts. Conqueror of a “regne of Femenye,” Theseus appears, by implication,
a virile and masculine ruler, utterly different from his female captives. For
one thing he is the conqueror, they the conquered. For another, he stands as the
male husband whose rule domesticates aggressive soldiers into respectable
Athenian wives. In fact, by the time we hear the Amazon queen’s name,
Theseus has already “wedde” her, figuring her position in a way that
emphasizes both Hypolita’s subjection to Theseus’s rule, and Theseus’s gen-
dered difference from her. We are not encouraged to dwell long upon Theseus’s
similarities (as warrior, as ruler) with “his” Amazonian Queen.

When Chaucer’s text begins by contrasting Theseus’s conquering power
with his new wife’s victimization it offers, as Susan Crane has put it, “a familiar
instance of defining gender by differentiation.” More precisely, the difference
of male to female in the opening of this text is solidified and crafted through
violent activity, albeit violence that takes place off stage. As fait accompli
produced by Theseus’s virile conquest, male and female literally begin this tale
violently opposed. More precisely, we feel the strength of their opposition
precisely because the violent encounter that produces such difference takes

9 Susan Crane, Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales (Princeton: Princeton
10 Teresa de Lauretis has argued compellingly that gender distinctions are always made
through violence. As she puts it, “The representation of violence is inseparable from the
notion of gender.” See “The Violence of Rhetoric: Considerations on the Representation
of Gender,” in The Violence of Representation, ed. Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennen-
place off stage. On one hand, the allusion to war inscribes the difference of duke to Amazon with the apparently absolute terms of military enmity; on the other hand, the elision of the scenes of battle from the text makes the images of brave, violent Amazonian women — images that stress not their differences from Theseus so much as their similarities with him — nearly illegible.11

This violent opposition of male to female, however, as a number of critics have noted, is soon qualified by another representation of the female. Theseus’s masculinity borrows “womanly” qualities from another subject female group, this time the Argive widows. Theseus’s victorious difference from his Amazonian captives merges with a similarity across gender; again as Susan Crane puts it, a “counterprocess” of gender representation “recuperates for [Theseus’s] masculinity some of the traits associated with women.”12 When the “companynge of ladyes, tweye and tweye” (897) beg that Theseus “lat oure sorwe synken in thyn herte” (950), the widows display a compassion here defined through women’s sorrow. The poignant (and extended) description of these “wrecched wommen” crying out in lamentation (mournful voices that, the narrator momentarily seems to worry, might be troublingly ceaseless) foregrounds the importance of female woe for the tale before us. It suggests, too, that Theseus needs wailing women to mediate his warrior masculinity. The Argive Widows who interrupt Theseus “in his mooste pride” (895) allow him to gain compassion, an attribute required of the virtuous king. The masculine heart of a conqueror needs access to the compassion that a woman’s woe can inspire; yet the earlier representation of Theseus as himself a conqueror of women may imply that he is not wholly unlike the tyrant Creon in his willingness to victimize females.13 There are, to be sure, important differences between the Amazonian warriors and the Argive widows. Indeed, the gender implications of the contrasts between the Amazons and the Widows suggest some crucial attributes of the version of femininity offered by the Knight’s Tale.

The victimization and domestication of the Amazons is, apparently, a legitimate victimization of aggressive femininity; the victimization of the Argive widows is not. Such contrasts suggest that the representations of femininity in this tale place women always outside the legitimate powers (and pleasures) of aggression.

From the beginning of the tale, then, Chaucer presents us with a representation of Theseus the masculine ruler marked both by his triumph over vanquished women and by his willingness to adopt the so-called “womanly” qualities of the vanquished. This image of medieval masculinity should not surprise us. Sovereign figures like Theseus — compassionate and conquering — are as common in medieval literature and medieval theology as are images of interceding ladies and queens who entreat those sovereigns on their suffering subjects’ behalf.14 Yet the combination of difference and similarity here (the image of a vanquished Hylpolita alongside the poignant figures of the mourning ladies) also reminds us that for all his willingness to remake his warrior heart with compassion and pity, Theseus is not himself “feminized” as a victim. His family’s dead bodies are not lying unburied, and he remains the conqueror throughout. Indeed, he will soon display himself as conqueror again, this time over Creon, the king whose tyranny the Argive widows lately lamented. For all his proximity to death and wounding, Theseus’s position throughout Book I of the Knight’s Tale — unlike the various positions of Hylpolita, Emily, the Argive widows, Palamon or Arcite, even Creon — remains that of the victor. His masculine presence invites feasting rather than mourning.

Of course, Book IV of the Knight’s Tale, despite its final (apparently happy) resolution in the marriage of Emily to Palamon, also registers the limits to Theseus’s sovereign agency. Arcite’s death springs up, unbidden, despite Theseus’s promise that the contest between cousins will end peaceably. The scene of brotherly affection and wounding we examined as a part of Book I recurs in Book IV as tragedy. Palamon bows; Arcite dies. With Arcite’s death the scenes of the rivalry and discord between the cousins are finally resolved in a display of remarkable singularity mediated by Theseus, who now appears less the conqueror than the “philosopher king.”15 In the denouement of the tale Palamon becomes a singular hero; with Palamon’s marriage to Emily, Theban and Athenian wartime enmity become reconciled into the nearly absolute unity of matrimony.16

Theseus’s ability to resist chaos — or perhaps, to put it more precisely, his willingness to reinterpret chaos in the service of an apparently more beautiful future — constitutes a power the text links with a masculine attitude toward loss.

11 On the extent to which this structure obscures what I call elsewhere the “military intimacies” of enemies, see Ingham, 27–29.
12 Crane, 20.
13 For an especially fine reading of the similarities between Theseus’s actions and Creon’s as an implied critique of Theseus’s activity in Book I, see H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., 221–382. While Theseus is contrasted with Creon here, in pursuing that tyrant, Theseus’s behavior is not unlike his adversary’s. Leicester notes, moreover, that Theseus’s identity as conqueror is troubled by the horrific representation of “Conquest” in the Iconography of the Temple of Mars in Book III.

14 Feminist scholars have analyzed the intercessory role of powerful women during the middle ages. The model for such figures is, of course, the Virgin Mary. See, for example, Marina Warner, Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary (New York: Warner, 1982).
15 The phrase is borrowed from Paul Olson who argues that Theseus becomes the image of the virtuous monarch who strives to reconcile divergent interests “in a community of interest.” See his “Chaucer’s Epic Statement and the Political Milieu of the Late Fourteenth Century,” Medievalia 5 (1979): 61–87. I argue that Theseus’s masculinity is a crucial, yet in Olson’s reading unanalyzed, attribute of this role. A “philosopher queen” seems here a cultural impossibility.
In the final sections of the poem, Theseus’s masculinity remains set apart from the victimized masculinities of Palamon and Arcite, masculinities upon which his governance nonetheless has depended. Theseus’s ability to recover from loss, to “make a virtue of necessity,” moreover, is here related to the poignant and apparently more excessive mourning of a female victim, Emily. We return by Book IV to an image of Theseus’s masculinity again wrought through the combination of his difference from a woman and his simultaneous relation to a woman’s sorrow. I turn now to the resolution of Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*, the final scenes of Arcite’s death and Palamon’s marriage.

**The masculine virtues of necessity**

Arcite’s death erupts chaotically into Theseus’s otherwise well-ordered state festivities, causing all the town to cry and weep at their unanticipated loss. The turn of events reminds the reader (as it must remind Theseus himself along with all the men and women ruled by him) that even the most prodigious of rulers and conquerors cannot control death. Yet in the midst of the disaster, Theseus remains apart from the rest. As Theseus compassionately copes with what the figures of Emily and Palamon register as the most monumental of losses, we see a ruler’s stoicism represented in contrast to the moans and swoons of women:

Shrighte Emelye, and howleth Palamon
And Theseus his suster took anon
Swownyng, and baer hire fro the corps away.
What helpeth it to tarien forth the day
To tellen how she weep bothe eve and morwe?
For in swich cas woomen have swich sorwe,
Whan that hir housbondes ben from hem ago,
That for the moore part they sorwen so,
Or ellis fallen in swich maladye
That at the laste certeinely they dye. (2817–26)

The description presents us with a spectrum of responses to the fact of death: from Emily who shrinks and weeps ceaselessly, “bothe eve and morwe,” to Palamon who howls and then falls silent, to Theseus who apparently subordinates his grief in the compassionate care of his excessively grieving “suster,” an Amazon woman he recently conquered. The narrator’s voice of Chaucer’s Knight, moreover, moves immediately to contextualize Emily’s hapless mourning as an attribute of gender: “Wommen have swich sorwe,” he tells us, and are “fallen in swiche maladye” that “at the laste certeinely they dye.” Women’s mourning is here identified as inevitably lethal. Female mourning, in its excesses, can apparently be dangerous to women themselves and useless to those who hear it second-hand. “What good does it do,” the Knight asks rhetorically, “to waste the day by telling of woman’s weeping?”

While Chaucer’s Knight avers that woman’s sorrow is to no avail, the gender relations in the tale belie that assertion. For when, at the moment of greatest tragedy, the Knight links ceaseless sorrowing with the tears and moans of women, he offers to men a different series of responses. At the level of our story, Theseus’s moderate mourning, in contrast to Emily’s woeful shrieks, comes to seem both productive and masculine. He comforts his grieving sister; he plays the compassionate, resilient, and wiser paterfamilias. We might well remember here Theseus’s relation to the sorrowing Argive widows at the beginning of Book I. Fresh from battle, Theseus then requires a compassion borrowed from a woman’s heart to sustain his difference from the tyrant Creon. Here, I would argue, he likewise requires access to Emily’s sorrowing. Without it, the stoical philosophizing that follows might appear hard-hearted. Emily’s uncontrollable mourning is useful to Theseus’s masculinity because he can again merge gender difference with gender similarity. He is thus marked as both sensitive and manly, neither overrun by the lethal excesses to which mourning women like Emily are subject, nor coldly immune to their pleas.

Emily’s weeping, moreover, serves other masculinities as well. Immediately before his narration of the piteous Emily, Chaucer’s Knight registers his own verbal inabilities when confronted by such senseless tragedy:

[Arcite’s] spirit chaunged hous and wente ther
As I cam nevere, I kan nat tellen wher.
Therfore I stynte, I nam no divinistre;
Of soules ynde I nat in this registre,
Ne me ne list flke opinions to telle
Of hem, though that they write ther they dwelle.
Arcite is coold, ther Mars his soule gye!
Now wole I speken forth of Emelye. (2810–16)

In his important aside Chaucer’s Knight records his own speechlessness before the fact of death. His story is halted. Indeed, he repeats a number of times his inability, or unwillingness, to tell his audience the meaning of Arcite’s fate. We find instead a litany of what the teller of this tale will not, or cannot, do: he cannot tell where Arcite has gone; he threatens to stop entirely; he does not desire to say any more about it. We hear instead only the bald facts: Arcite is cold.

The threat of muteness implied here registers the mutability of authorship. How can one (the Knight? Chaucer?) speak before death’s inexplicability, ineffability? Yet one can, or so the Knight’s next words imply, move forward by describing the pitiful shrieks of women. In what seems a remarkably sudden shift in tone and content the Knight moves quickly to a more comforting subject, describing a (female) subject in need of comforting. Perhaps not ironically, and
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Despite his assurances about the futility of its narration, the image of Emily's weeping has, in fact, helped the Knight a good deal. It has enabled him to get beyond his silence before the face of death, a silence that has the dangerous power to end his story prematurely.

The Knight's power to create, like Theseus's power of creative governance, is gained in part through its relation to the power of a woman's sorrow. The Knight, like Theseus, luxuriates in his description of sorrowing women while avoiding further mention of the problems death raises for his own art, the way death's baldness threatens the telling of this tale. Theseus, for his part, cannily moves Athens beyond Arcite's death and into a new alliance with his former enemy, and his statecraft comes to seem compassionate and wise because he has previously shown such care for female woe. And, of course, Theseus the compassionate philosopher is also Theseus the conquering hero. He uses the virile power and the contests between Palamon and Arcite to display his own powerful masculinity. Yet such uses, in this tale, never position the body of the Duke as victimized by the vicissitudes of battle. We do not much attend to threats to Theseus's body. And this quality of Theseus's masculinity is both a deeply admired attribute of power and one envied by Chaucer's Knight.

Chaucer's Knight's Tale thus provides us with a view of governance as dependent on both the power of the masculine knight and the woe of weeping women. A decidedly masculine ruler, Theseus harnesses the potentially destructive and violent energies of his male prisoners-of-war for the glory of his rule and his state. Yet the figures of Hypolita and Emily point to Theseus's own interest in militarism and its destructions. Indeed, the masculinities in this tale could offer consolation to a tarnished veteran like Chaucer's Knight, providing him with a vision of a "mature" male ruling potency and agency that can outlive the humiliations and victimizations (as well as the adventures) of battle. Chaucer thus provides us with a view of how chivalric culture clings to images of an ordered masculine agency amid the destruction and chaos of war; along the way he points to creativity itself (and perhaps to the poet) as a power in masculine terms.

"Convictions about gender," writes Susan Crane, "underlie choices in every social context, from the public and private behavior of a young knight to the ground plan of a nunnery, to law of primogeniture, and the sacrament of marriage." 17 Crane's list of medieval examples reminds us that understandings of gender, of masculinity and femininity, affect the way a society wages its wars, builds its edifices, passes its wealth on to future generations, and structures its sexual relations. Gender relations have material consequences. Representations of gender, thus, are not only descriptive but prescriptive: that is, they tell us not only what men or women do, but what they ought, or ought not, to do. And those prescriptions and prohibitions pertain to questions of necessity — to how, when, where, and what must be suffered, and to which particular people must do the suffering.

Such consequences (more tragic for some bodies than they are for others) remind us that our efforts at analyzing masculine gender must do more than merely set out the variety of forms masculinity can, or does, take. As feminist scholarship has long since taught us, an appreciation of the implications of gender requires attention to the material consequences of one representation or another. In Chaucer's Knight's Tale, diverse masculinities have very different (yet ultimately related) consequences: the victimization of Palamon and (especially) Arcite sponsors the conquering virility of Theseus. When it does so the Knight's Tale allows us to read the dependence of one kind of male virility upon the victimizations of another.

If Chaucer's Knight seems well aware, perhaps even critical, of the victimizations Theseus's masculinity requires of soldiers like Arcite, he seems less analytical toward the image of weeping women to which Theseus's compassionate male rule is also indebted. We return finally, then, to the persistent presence of weeping women throughout Chaucer's Knight's Tale. Representations of Emily's shrieking and of the woe of the Argive widows as dangerously excessive inscribe in women a victimization beyond escape while laying the blame for such victimizations at the feet of the women themselves. The image of an inevitably lethal mourning of women, 18 moreover, disciplines the rest of us: we, like Theseus, order our responses to loss more moderately. Yet even acceptance of, even gratitude for, loss — an ability, as Ralph Waldo Emerson once put it, to "build altars to the beautiful necessity" — endangers our abilities to resist injustices, especially those perpetrated by the philosopher King. 19 These representations of Emily and the Argive widows, moreover, imagine women (even former Amazons) as finally unable or forbidden to defend themselves, or to return violence for violence; inscribe in women the necessity of their victimization; and render female suffering as pathetic and unheroic. To make a virtue of such putative necessity would be tragic indeed.

17 Crane, 6.


19 See Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Fate," in Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 352.