

## Criticism of Degeneration in The Knight's Tale

Geoffrey Chaucer's The Knight's Tale offers an example of knightly culture through the story of Palamon and Arcite, two knights of ancient Greece. Throughout the tale, Chaucer places emphasis on the fighting scenes, critiquing the knightly ideal through explicitly brutal depictions of violence. His use of satire comments on the degeneration of the knightly ideal into a baser set of values, to which the dueling knights no longer stay faithful. The criticism in Chaucer's tale prompts the question of what has caused the degeneration, and forces the reader to look past the ambiguity in the text for clues. With The Knight's Tale, Chaucer implies two possibilities; the collapse of chivalric ethos occurs because its ideals could not match the knights' irrepressible desires for self gain or because knightly culture has itself become obsolete.

When Chaucer the pilgrim first introduces the Knight in the General Prologue, he associates the noblest pilgrim with certain values of knightly culture. He writes, "He loved chivalrie,/ Trowth and honour, fredom and curteisie" (45-46). According to Chaucer, a knight upholds these values of prowess, fidelity, honor, generosity and refined manners throughout all of his ventures because they set him apart as a worthy and admirable individual. The collection of these values forms a chivalric code, to which the knight vows he will live his life, motivated solely by its ideals. In his chapter, Chaucer and the Subject of History, Lee Patterson clarifies the definition of knightly culture and comments on the inadequacy behind chivalric identity. With his assertion that "the medieval soldier is either a knight within the Order of Chivalry or he is 'discordant' and no knight at all," Patterson highlights the importance of strict devotion to the knightly ideal (Patterson 178). It is using this measure, that Chaucer is able to criticize the men

in The Knight's Tale who do not consistently adhere to the ideals of chivalry. Also offered in the General Prologue, is a lengthy description of the valiant, far-off battles the Knight has fought. Chaucer brings attention to the significance of fighting for the Knight; it is during his violent interactions with others, that his loyalty to the knightly code should be most apparent.

The Knight's Tale recounts the story of two knights from Thebes, Palamon and Arcite, who are being held prisoner in a tower in Athens. The men, both dedicated to the knightly code and condemned to lifelong imprisonment together, are like brothers. They are "yesworn ful depe, and ech of us til oother,/ That nevere, for to dyen in the peyne,/ Til that the deeth departe shal us tweyne, Neither of us in love to hyndre oother" (1132-1135). Their friendship is so strong that they have vowed to help each other in all exploits, including love, for as long as they live. When a conflict arises in the tale, and both men fall in love with the same woman, they reject their ties of kinship and behave outside of knightly conduct. Chaucer satirizes how easily the men abandon their commitment to the knightly ideals over a woman who neither of them has had any interaction with. Upon hearing Arcite's declaration of his immeasurable love for Emelye, Palamon asserts his right to claim her and says, "Arcite, false traytour wikke,/ Now artow hent, that lovest my lady so,/ For whom that I have al this peyne and wo" (1580-1582). The hostile language the men use, including words like "traytour," and "mortal foo," shows how the knights quickly react in an aggressive manner. Each knight feels that the other has breached the code in relation to love; Chaucer shows how the men, now disconnected from their commitment, similarly disregard the code when it comes to fighting for Emelye.

After many years apart, during which each man pines for Emelye, the men meet again and decide to fight, according to knightly conduct, for the love of their lady. Chaucer's criticism comes across through his depiction of the initial fighting scene between Palamon and Arcite. The

ritualized mode of fighting in which each knight helps the other with his armor, and the initial adherence to the code to encourage regulated fighting where neither man has any advantage over the other, would seem to agree with knightly ethos. Arcite says, “Have heer my trouthe; tomorwe I wol nat faille,/ Withoute wityng of any oother wight, / That heere I wol e founden as a knyght/ And bryngen harneys right ynough for thee; / and ches the beste, and leef the worste for me” (1610-1614). This chivalric behavior, however, only covers the hatred and violence between the men; as soon as the fighting begins, all sense of propriety disappears. Chaucer employs animal imagery to represent the knights, comparing Palamon to a “wood leon,” or crazy lion, and Arcite to a “cruel tigre” (1656-1657). Both men are also compared to wild boars, which crazily foam at the mouth and desire for blood. This bestial representation signifies a loss of control and reason, and undermines the knightly ideal through its portrayal of the men as primitive fighters. Chaucer’s unfavorable depiction highlights the abandonment of the chivalrous approach to fighting that both men were so committed to uphold.

Theseus, the duke of Athens, happens upon their duel and is so aghast at both the presence of his two enemies and their un-knightly behavior, that he condemns both men to death. When he reconsiders his decision, he rules instead, that the men may resolve their conflict over Emelye, but only in true knightly fashion. He says, “And this day fifty wykes, fer ne ner, / Everich of you shal brynge an hundred knyghtes/ Armed for lystes up at alle rightes” (1850-1852). The men are to return after one year’s preparation, each with one hundred men, and they will have a battle which corresponds with the chivalric ideal of fighting. Theseus’s terms of the battle, however, are absurd; Chaucer satirizes the fighting when he has Theseus condemn the duel only to propose a more bloody and dishonorable battle. Reflecting upon the scene when Theseus finds them by chance, it would seem that the one-on-one fight between Palamon and

Arcite would probably be the most rational; there would be little bloodshed, an equal fight and a fair winner. Patterson understands the glorification of violence associated with knightly culture to be a result of “chivalry’s fascination with aestheticized and theatricalized self-representations” (Patterson 178). Chivalry, with its ornamental images and hyperbolic language used to represent fighting, aims to cover up the true nature of its ethos. In all the fighting scenes in the tale, the choreographed dueling serves to conceal the true brutality of battle. Chaucer’s criticism hones in on the moments when this brutality cracks through.

In the year leading up to the battle, Theseus commands the construction of an arena in which the battle will take place. The main focuses of the arena are the three temples dedicated to the gods Venus, Diana and Mars, honoring those higher powers that provide guidance and inspiration for the knights. Chaucer’s description of the temple of Mars serves to critique the knightly ethos which upholds the idea that honor and fighting are glorious. The temple, lacking the refinement typically associated with the knightly ideals of battle, represents the true nature of fighting as base and violent. The temple is a menacing structure, constructed of steel and enclosed in a vacant forest of gnarled trees and stumps. On the temple walls are paintings of villainous creatures, like murderers, slayers and traitors who have been evilly influenced by Mars. Included in the temple paintings are also the personified qualities of “Mischance,” “Madness,” “Conquest,” “Outcry” and “Outrage” who provoke violence, death and wickedness. In addition to these grand examples of personified villains, the temple walls include uncourtly depictions of violence associated with the lower class. In these portraits Chaucer includes a cook being scalded despite his long-handled spoon and a cart-driver being run over by the wheel of his cart. These random inclusions of violence serve to further suggest the unglamorous nature of the aggressive behavior that the knights aim to uphold. Chaucer completes his description of the

temple and writes, “The statue of Mars upon a carte stood/ Armed, and looked grym as he were wood” (2041-2042). He continues, “A wolf ther stood biforn hym at his feet/ with eyen rede, and of a man he eet;/ With soutil pencil was depeynted this storie/ In redoutynge of Mars and of his glorie” (2047-2050). The statue of Mars, meant to embody the godly attributes of war, instead reflects terrible anger and malice and represents nothing that the knights should aspire to be in war. Chaucer also reflects back to the animal imagery used to describe the initial duel between Palamon and Arcite with his inclusion of Mars’s wolf. Mars, like the feral, man-eating wolf beside him, represents a barbaric sense of fighting that is far from the honorable and chivalric ideal that the knights believe in.

Chaucer’s critique of knightly ideals in the final battle scene is conveyed through Arcite’s death. After an equally matched fight, Arcite emerges victorious. According to knightly ethos, he has earned distinction for his both his triumph and his honorable representation of the chivalric ideal. In his moment of glory, however, Arcite’s horse throws him, causing him a fatally injury. Chaucer conveys his criticism in that Arcite does not experience a glorified death when he falls. Instead, his death is represented by the horrific effect that takes place inside of his body. Chaucer writes, “The pipes of his longes gonne to swelle,/ And every lacerate in his brest adoun/ Is shent with venym and corrupcion./ Hym gayneth neither, for to gete his lif,/ Vomyt upward, ne dounward laxative” (2752-2756). With this description, Chaucer provides the opposite of the glamorized, aesthetic picture of noble life. Arcite’s commitment to represent knightly ethos has no importance in his last moments as he dies an uncourtly death. After Chaucer’s portrayal of Arcite’s undignified death, the subsequent description of his funeral, filled with pageantry, seems incongruous with the rest of the tale. The return to chivalric ideals comes across as an unsuccessful attempt to cover up Arcite’s unsavory death.

In its representation of violence and Palamon and Arcite's disloyalty to knightly ideals, The Knight's Tale conveys the degeneration of chivalric ethos. Though the corruption and disregard for the code is apparent through Chaucer's use of satire, the cause of the degeneration is not as clear. One possible implication of Chaucer's criticism is that the knightly ideal has degenerated into being solely about self gain. The Knight's Tale is mainly driven by the selfish desires of the knights and by the actions they take to ensure they get what they want. In his article, which supports Chaucer's critical portrayal of the knightly ideal, Patterson writes that chivalry's "deepest ambition was to produce not a better world but a perfect knight. It was committed to codes of behavior not as programs of action but techniques of self-fashioning: the chivalric life was its own goal" (Patterson 175). Chivalry, then, focuses very little on the knights' heroic deeds and adherence to the code, but exists instead as a means of self-service. Patterson also comments critically on how chivalric discourse supports the compatibility of the contradictory knightly desires for honor and wealth. Although the knightly ideal upholds selflessness, the vision of a true knight often ignores the rewards that knights receive or those that they actively seek to gain. In The Knight's Tale, both Palamon and Arcite are motivated by their desire for self gain, namely to win possession of Emelye. When they reject their vows of loyalty to one other, the knights have only their own profit in mind. Chaucer's writing condemns those knights who benefit selfishly from their exploits, finding it completely conflicting with true knightly ideals.

The idea of self gain is also represented with the character of Theseus, whose actions throughout the tale can be seen as strategies for political gain. When Theseus is first introduced in the tale, he is characterized by his political position and his reputation as a great conqueror. The respect and authority he gains as a leader derive from his successful politics, providing an

incentive for Theseus to consider the political implications of his interactions with other knights.

When Theseus finds Palamon and Arcite fighting in the forest, he says,

I yow foryeve al hoolly this trespaas,  
At requeste of the queene that kneleth heere,  
And eek of Emelye, my suster deere.  
And ye shul bothe anon unto me swere  
That nevere mo ye shal my contree dere,  
Ne make were upon me, nyght ne day,  
But been my freendes in al that ye may,  
I yow foryeve this prespas, every deel. (1818-1825)

Theseus's forgiveness not only paints him as a benevolent leader, but also serves to benefit him. By sparing their lives, Theseus is shrewdly securing himself a future political ally in whichever man marries Emelye. Theseus's elaborate construction of the arena for the tournament also has self-serving political implications as it symbolizes his power. When he sets the new terms of the battle and builds the colossal arena, Theseus creates an event which draws in the community and publically recognizes the outcome of the fighting. The knight left standing will be immediately recognized as the symbol of a new political alignment, since the winner has already been promised Emelye's hand. Additionally, at the end of the battle, Theseus will have killed off many of his enemy's strongest men.

Chaucer's criticism may also suggest his belief that the knightly ideal is outdated and that it represents only a nostalgic sentiment. The Knight's description in the General Prologue shows him clad in rusting armor and fighting in far-off lands. Chaucer writes, "But for to tellen yow of his array,/ His hors were goode, but he was nat gay./ Of fustian he wered a gypon/ Al bismotered with his habergeon" (73-76). The Knight is described favorably compared to Chaucer's portrayals of the other pilgrims in the General Prologue, which is perhaps because the Knight fits into a separate category. He belongs to a different time, when men of the upper-class were

worthy and admired for their commitment to superior moral values. Patterson writes, “The portrait of the Knight in the *General Prologue* presents a man who seems wholly unconnected to the public life of late fourteenth-century England” (Patterson 179). Patterson’s interpretation of the Knight centers on the idea of obsolescence; he proposes that the Knight no longer has a place in the changing world because his actions and ideals are no longer valued. Patterson continues, “The tale’s “celebration of the ostentatious inessential of the chivalric life-style seems dramatically at odds with what the *General Prologue* has suggested of the Knight’s personal austerity” (Patterson 179). It is possible that Chaucer identifies with this view of the Knight as modest, and uses his criticism to regretfully point out the movement away from the knightly ideal. Chaucer’s ambiguity concerning the cause of the degeneration of chivalric ethos is significant because it reflects on the overlaying reasons for collapse. By suggesting multiple possibilities, the poet maintains a sense of the complexity of the existence of the chivalric ideal when those who pledge to honor it fail to embody its values.



## Works Cited

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