

## STRUCTURE AND PATTERN IN CHAUCER'S *KNIGHT'S TALE*

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The *Knight's Tale* has often been cited as an example of Chaucer's use of "conventional" or formal style, in contrast to the naturalism of the *General Prologue*. As Charles Muscatine observes, "When Chaucer writes at either end of the scale of values, indeed, his style becomes correspondingly extreme. When he writes at the Knight's end of the scale 'Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse, / And eek moralitee and hoolynesse,' he leans heavily on conventional forms."<sup>1</sup> This formalism is characterized not only by the use of rhetoric and a "high style" of writing but also by the use of a classical setting and the patterns and correspondences found in such Latin epics as the *Aeneid* and the *Thebaid*. Chaucer's development of the idea of correspondence between gods and men, for example, yields an ordered, symmetrical set of characters. When this ordering of form is considered alongside the prominent presentation in Theseus' sermon of the order of Nature, it is not much of a leap of interpretation to assume that the *Knight's Tale* is in some way "about" order. However, when more closely examined, the poem seems to be more "about" disorder than order. Merle Fifiield interprets Theseus' sermon in the following way: it counsels "the acceptance of eternal disorder as one of God's works (3057)" and it forbids "the expression of an ethical order in the narrative action of the romance."<sup>2</sup> In fact, layers of disorder and order alternate. The emotional chaos and fruitless conflicts of Arcite and Palamon lead them to be compared to animals (1655-59, 2626-33), but above them is Theseus, who attempts to order the lives of his subjects

rationality and whose symmetrical battle arena symbolizes his world view.<sup>3</sup> Above Theseus is the disorder of Olympus, where the gods quarrel and scheme, and above them, if we may believe Theseus (2987 ff.), is the First Mover, stable and eternal.

The correspondences and patterned relationships between the characters of the *Knight's Tale*, which have been gone into in great detail elsewhere,<sup>4</sup> are so interesting and explicit that they seem to have obscured the other structures of the poem. Fifield actually goes so far as to say, "At the level of structure as artistic technique the work is most frequently unified in both its parts and its whole by a cause-to-result relationship, each result becoming a new cause, rather than by a repeated pattern of alternating incident or by a single principle of order."<sup>5</sup> In this paper I wish to show that the narrative structure of the *Knight's Tale* is ordered not only by one but also by several patterns of repeated and interwoven incidents. These sequential or "horizontal" structures balance the "vertical" structures of the correspondences between the characters and the alternation of order and disorder mentioned above. In addition, I wish to discuss a few related problems that arise from this analysis of the text.

So far there is no critical consensus as to the structure of the basic plot of the *Knight's Tale*. Patricia Kean seems to think that the sections of the plot correspond with the four parts set up by the narrator. "Part i, then, sets the scene and establishes the basic themes and patterns. Part ii carries on the story and develops the contrast between the lovers and Theseus. . . . Part iii is largely taken up by the development of the theme of the gods [and] Part iv is dedicated to the 'grete effect' towards which the whole work is designed."<sup>6</sup> H.S. Wilson, on the other hand, admits that the narrative is divided into four parts but analyses it in terms of the five-fold Aristotelian sequence of protasis, epitasis, catastrophe, peripeteia, and anagnorisis.<sup>7</sup> Fifield in general agrees with Wilson, and attempts an analysis grounded in an actual five-fold division of the narrative. This division is based on the directions which the narrator gives at various points throughout the poem, according to the following line numbers: 1354 (the end of Fifield's Part I), 1881-83 (the opening of her Part III), 2479 (the end of her Part III) and 2965-66 (the end of her Part IV).<sup>8</sup> I also divide the *Knight's Tale* into five sections, but my divisions are based on the pattern of events rather than on the asides of the narrator, although the breaks between the sections may well occur at some of these places.

The problem which Fifield and I (and to some extent Wilson) find with accepting the four *partes* of *The Knight's Tale* as the four "parts" of the narrative lies in the fact that they do not correspond very closely to the episodes (or groups of connected episodes) which make up the narrative. They are both too general and too arbitrary to provide a useful analysis of its structure. For example, the *prima pars* includes the episodes of the conquering of the Amazons, the complaint of the Theban widows, the conquering of Thebes, the discovery and imprisonment of Palamon and Arcite, their falling in love with Emelye a year later, and Arcite's release from prison. But while Theseus' decision to build the lists is included in the *secunda pars*, the construction is found in the *tercia pars*. The problem with using the directions of the Knight (such as "And in this blisse lete I now Arcite, / And speke I wole of Palamon a lite" (1449-50) as a basis for analyzing narrative structure is that he divides the story (at 1334, 1449, 1488, 1661, 2093, 2479, and 2741) into a prologue and seven sections which are more indicative of selected scene changes than of narrative units. For example, the section which begins with the narrator's fourth shift (at 1661) covers the episodes of Theseus' hunt, his discovery of Palamon and Arcite, the decree of the tournament, the description of the building, and the decoration of the lists, while the section that follows (beginning at 2093) includes the descriptions of Lycurgus and Emetreus, the prayers of Palamon, Emelye, and Arcite, and the quarrel between Mars and Venus. Neither of these sections seems a logical grouping of events. Since the Knight is also the one who divides the poem into four parts in the first place, it seems more advisable to make an analysis without reference to any of his divisions.

My position is as follows: Section I (so called in order to avoid confusion with the narratorial *partes*) is a prologue, setting up the situation and the characters (1-1032). Section II (1033-1880) begins the conflict between Palamon and Arcite and encompasses all of their attempts to resolve it, ending with the battle which is interrupted by Theseus. Section III (1881-2437), the description of the lists and the temples of Mars, Venus, and Diana, is the centre of the *Tale*, both literally and figuratively. Critics have had difficulty discovering the meaning of the long descriptions which bring the action of the poem to a virtual standstill, and the problem is one to which I shall shortly return. Section IV (2438-2815) depicts the end of the conflict between Palamon and Arcite, which is engineered by the gods according to Saturn's plan. Like Section II, Section IV ends with a battle, the normal results of which are interrupted this time by Saturn

rather than by Theseus. Section V (2816-3108) is an epilogue which returns the story to its thematic beginning with the restoration of order. A possible model for the five-part epic may have been the version of Statius' *Achilleid* (an unfinished epic in five books) which was well-known in Europe from the tenth century on.<sup>9</sup>

This analysis of the action of the *Knight's Tale* may seem rather elementary, but when the complicated pattern of repeating episodes that overlies the plot is removed, the story that remains is a simple permutation of the eternal triangle. The overlying pattern which I perceive is composed of a circular frame enclosing the Prologue and Epilogue of the *Knight's Tale*, a two-fold series of alternating and interlocking episodes which link Sections I-II and IV-V, and a significant alternation of settings which occurs throughout the entire poem.

The recurring elements of the Prologue (Section I) and the Epilogue (Section V) are the easiest to discern, as none of them is found elsewhere in the *Tale*. These elements are a pair of marriages, a pair of matched speeches, and a pair of funeral pyres. The first marriage is that of Theseus and Ypolita (868) and the second that of Palamon and Emelye (3094-98). The first speech, that of the oldest Theban widow, is in several ways the inverse of Theseus' sermon, its mate in the Epilogue. Where Theseus talks of the First Mover, "stable" and "eterne" (3004), the Theban lady talks of fickle "Fortune and hire false wheel" (925). Where Theseus speaks of Jupiter, the wise, benevolent "prince and cause of alle thyng" (3036), the Theban lady speaks of the tyrant Creon, "fulfild of ire and of iniquitee" (941). And where Theseus mentions honour and asks what cause there is for complaint, the Theban widow describes the "vileynye" (942) of the unburned bodies being eaten by dogs. This image is taken up again in the third pair of elements, the pyre of the slain Thebans (996) and the pyre of Arcite (2919 ff.). Although there are additional episodes which occur in both the Prologue and the Epilogue, they are part of another pattern and will be treated later. I would like to draw attention to the balanced nature of the three elements which make up the framing sequence of the *Knight's Tale*: the "physical" burning of the bodies, the "emotional" weddings, and the "intellectual" speeches.

A larger pattern of repeated events is that which extends horizontally, as it were, from the Prologue to the Epilogue. It consists of two sets of elements which alternate and interlock (see Figure 1). The first group ("Group A"), which repeats three times, contains a battle, a plea for

mercy, and a scene where Theseus takes action to restore political order. The second group ("Group B"), which also repeats three times, is concerned only with Palamon and Arcite. Its three elements are the reuniting (or original unity) of the two, a fight between them, and their subsequent separation.

The first occurrence of Group A is in the Prologue. The battle is that of the Seven against Thebes, which pits the twin brothers Polynices and Eteocles against one another. This battle is the starting point of the story of Palamon and Arcite, for if Theseus had not been called in to revenge the Argive Capaneus, Palamon and Arcite would never have been discovered and taken to Athens. Yet, in true Theban fashion, the "starting point" is not beginning at all but merely a repetition of history, looking back to the original crime of Thebes and forward to the conflict of the sworn brothers Palamon and Arcite, as well as forward to many other stories. The widows of the noblemen killed in this battle travel to Athens, where they ask Theseus for mercy (891) before asking him to take vengeance on Creon. Theseus does indeed defeat Creon, tear down Thebes, and ride home a conqueror, having restored political order (the last element of Group A), but not before the discovery of Arcite and Palamon "bothe in oon armes" (1012) on the heap of bodies. This is the first of the Group B events, and it contrasts with the last episode of the last occurrence of Group B, which is the separation of Arcite and Palamon by death. Here, when they are discovered together, they are "nat fully quyke, ne fully dede" (1015). At their final separation, however, Arcite is completely dead and Palamon, by virtue of his impending marriage to Emelye, is about to become completely alive. After the restoration of political order brought about by Theseus' conquest of Thebes, which ends the first sequence of Group A events, Group B continues into Section II, where the sight of Emelye provokes the first quarrel of Palamon and Arcite. Almost a hundred lines later, Perotheus has Arcite freed, thus causing the first separation of the two cousins and also ending the first sequence of Group B events.

The second sequence of Group B episodes begins seven years later with the reuniting of Palamon and Arcite in a grove outside of Athens. Now mortal foes rather than sworn brothers, they decide to resolve their conflict by means of combat. Arcite fetches weapons from Athens and returns to the grove for the battle which is both the second of the elements of Group B and the first episode of the new Group A. Theseus and his retinue interrupt the fight, and the sequence of Group A events continues when the women

accompanying Theseus, presumably frightened by his rage, weep and ask for mercy (1756). The second Group A sequence ends with Theseus' attempt to ensure the continued political power of Athens by making Arcite and Palamon swear never to raise an army against him (1825). The second Group B sequence ends with the separation of Palamon and Arcite after Theseus sets up the terms of the tournament and sends them off to raise forces against each other.

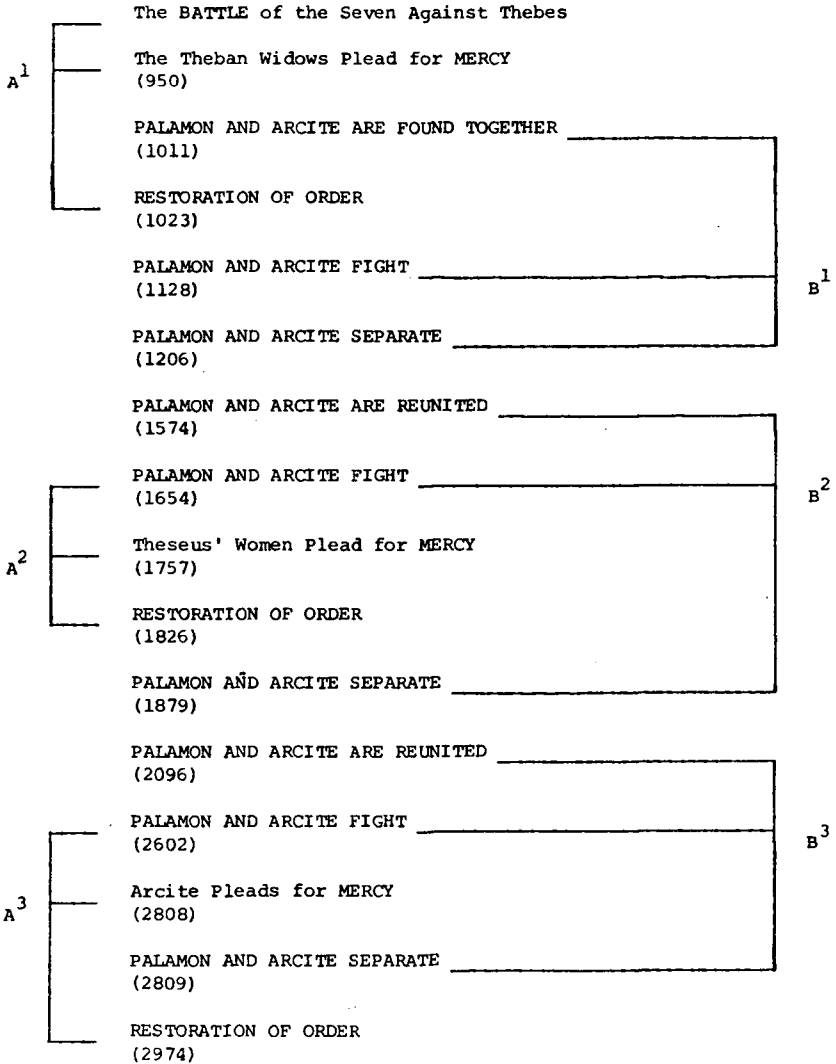
The third occurrence of Group B events begins with the reuniting of Arcite and Palamon a year later for the tournament. As before, the battle is both the second element of Group B and the first element of the new Group A. Palamon is captured and Arcite, apparently the winner of both the tournament and Emelye, is at the height of his glory when Saturn causes him to be fatally wounded. The third Group A sequence continues when the dying Arcite asks Emelye for mercy (2808). Group B ends with the separation of the newly reconciled Palamon and Arcite by death, and Group A ends with the marriage of Palamon and Emelye, which Theseus has arranged with the Athenian parliament in the hopes of obtaining Theban submission to Athens.

This sequence of events is diagrammed in Figure 1, which reveals Chaucer's pattern quite clearly. The diagram shows that Group A and Group B do not alternate in a simple manner, but instead overlap in such a way that  $A^1$  begins before  $B^1$ ,  $A^2$  is completely contained within  $B^2$ , and  $A^3$  ends after  $B^3$  (the reverse of  $A^1$  and  $B^1$ ).

Still other patterns are visible, some of which serve to link the entire poem and others of which serve to link Sections II and IV, as the A-B sequences do. In the first category is the alternation of the settings in the *Knight's Tale* between Athens and Thebes in the first half and between Athens and Olympus in the second half. This alternation resembles the alternation between Thebes and Argos which some scholars have seen in the *Thebaid*.<sup>10</sup> The first scene of the *Knight's Tale* is set outside Athens, where the Theban ladies stop Theseus' procession. The second scene is set in Thebes, where Palamon and Arcite are discovered. The third scene is in their Athenian prison, while the fourth is in Thebes, where Mercury appears to the lovesick Arcite. The fifth scene, in many ways a repetition of the third, is set in and around Athens. The setting remains unchanged throughout the first battle between Arcite and Palamon and the description of the temples of the gods, but after Arcite's prayer to Mars the scene changes to Mount Olympus, the discordant home of the gods. The next scene is set at the lists in Athens, but after the tournament, when Theseus awards Emelye

Figure 1

The Chain of Events in the *Knight's Tale*



to Arcite, the scene returns to Olympus as Venus weeps and Saturn comforts her. This brief scene is not paralleled in the *Teseida*, and I suspect that Chaucer added it as much to continue the Athens-Olympus alternation as to confirm the correspondence between Egeus and Saturn and to reveal the fundamental similarity between the machinations of Venus and Mars. Afterwards, the scene of the action returns to Athens, where it ends very probably in the same woods in which it began.<sup>11</sup> This alternation of settings is another way of representing the alternation between order and disorder, with Athens symbolizing the former and Thebes and Olympus the latter. As such, it is the "horizontal" counterpart to the "vertical" alternation of order and disorder in the characters.

The disorderly nature of the jangling Olympian gods needs little comment, but that of the two "heroes" is more unusual, and is revealed in some stylistic peculiarities in their description. In contrast to the *Aeneid*, where no two epic similes are alike, the similes in the *Knight's Tale* describing Palamon and Arcite are repeated each time they fight one another. During the battle in the grove outside of Athens, Arcite is described as "a crueel tygre" (1657) and Palamon as a "wood leon" (1656). In the tournament a year later, Arcite is again described as being as cruel as a "tygre in the vale of Galgopheye, / Whan that hir whelp is stole whan it is lite" (2626-27), and Palamon is so fierce that "ne in Belmarye ther nys so fel leon, / That hunted is, or for his hunger wood, / Ne of his praye desireth so the blood, / As Palamon to sleen his foo Arcite" (2630-33). We should not take this to mean that Chaucer was at a loss for similes, but rather that he wished to emphasize the fact that Arcite and Palamon are to be considered on some level as animals, and that their two battles are to be considered equivalent.<sup>12</sup> Although the fights of Palamon and Arcite escalate from the verbal argument to the one-on-one duel to the full-scale mêlée, there is no proportional escalation of their descriptions. More accurately, their descriptions are intensified, but they always remain on the "animal" level. When the two cousins are arguing over Emelye, Arcite compares himself and Palamon to two hounds fighting over a bone (1177 ff.). When they come to blows seven years later, they are compared to lions and tigers. A year after that, they are like lions and tigers still, clearly remaining at a low level in the natural hierarchy. The disorder of their lives and the asocial nature of their interaction (shown on one hand by their breaking the oaths they swore to one another and to Theseus, and symbolized on the other hand by their battle in the grove outside



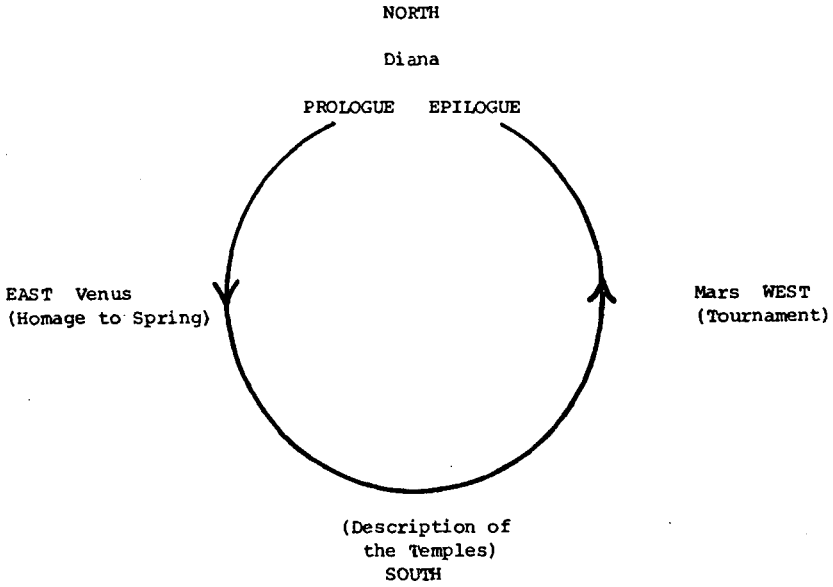
orderly Athens), as well as the repetition of their "characteristic" similes, prove them to be more like animals than men.

I would like now to return to the problem of Section III. Although the lavishness of the descriptions certainly makes it stylistically compatible with the rest of the *Knight's Tale*, Chaucer's insistence here on the symmetry of the lists and temples draws attention to the lengthy description of the building and the subsequent halt in the narrative. Kean merely says that it is through the description of their temples that the theme of the gods is developed.<sup>13</sup> Wilson regards the description of the lists as a break in the action "calculated to amplify its significance by providing a sumptuous setting for the climax and relating it more definitely to the astrological forces which are conceived as the instruments of Providence."<sup>14</sup> Fifield, coming closest to what I consider to be the correct interpretation, observes that the third section contrasts the symmetry on earth with the disorder of the gods and concludes that it is "placed as a pivot between the first two sections . . . and the last two sections," in which "the theater description reverses the human expectations of man's and gods' actions."<sup>15</sup> I see the description of the lists as a microcosm of the universe of the *Knight's Tale*. The wild disorder caused by the gods is merely a mural on the walls of a circular, symmetrical structure very similar to the circular, symmetrical structure of the poem itself. Just as the lists are "ful of degrees, the heighte of sixty pas, / That whan a man was set on o degree, / He letted nat his felawe for to see" (1890-93), so does the poem have "degrees" of characters and rising tiers of disorder and order.

In fact, the circular structure of the *Knight's Tale* can be mapped onto the circular structure of the amphitheatre in the following way. Section II of the poem contains a number of references to Venus, whom we should remember was originally the Latin goddess of spring: Emelye's homage to May, when she "walketh up and down, and as hire liste / She gadereth floures, party white and rede, / To make a subtil gerland for hire hede; / And as an aungel hevenyssshly she soong" (1052-55), Palamon's prayer to Venus (1104-11), Arcite's parallel homage to May, when "he gan . . . / To maken hym a gerland of the greves / Were it of wodebynde or hawethorn leves, / And loude he song ayeyn the sonne shene" (1506-09), and the narrator's subsequent "digression" about Venus (1528-29). These correspond to the great event in Section IV which falls into the domain of Mars, namely, the tournament between the armies of Arcite and Palamon. These parallels are diagrammed in Figure 2.

Figure 2

The Circular Structure of the *Knight's Tale*



When the points of the compass are added to the diagram, the spring section is "in" the east and the battle section is "in" the west. This corresponds exactly with the placement of the temples of Venus and Mars in the amphitheatre, and leaves only the location of Diana's section to be identified, which we can deduce in the following way. Both Arcite and Palamon receive the object of their prayers from Mars and Venus, respectively. Emelye, on the other hand, prays to Diana, but does not get what she most desires. In the same way, the "temple" of Diana, Emelye's patron deity, is marked on the diagrammed circle not, for example, by lengthy scenes devoted to hunting, but by Diana's failures to protect the maidens who call on her. In the diagram, "North" (where Diana's section should be) is occupied by the Prologue and the Epilogue. In the former we find the defeat of the Amazons, and in the latter is the corresponding defeat of Diana's plans, i.e., the marriage of Emelye to Palamon.

In the opinion of Frederick Turner, "The circular harmony of the poem, symbolized in microcosm by the circular shape of Theseus' lists (1887-89), is also a major structural element. The various linear oppositions and conjunctions of the gods can be mapped onto the mediaeval spherical model of the universe: Diana is the Moon, which was fixed to the innermost crystalline sphere that contained the earth and its environs; concentrically outwards are the planets of the major gods in the poem: Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn. Outside Saturn was the sphere of the fixed stars, and outside that the *Primum Mobile*, the First Mover."<sup>16</sup> A further word may be added about the mediaeval model of the universe: in it, the Earth was the stationary centre about which the various spheres turned. In just the same way is the centre of the *Knight's Tale*, in terms of the action, at any rate, literally still and unmoving. I do not venture to guess whether Chaucer regarded this narrative immobility of Section III as simply appropriate, humorous, or both, but in view of the careful construction of the poem we cannot believe that the slowness of the pace is due to "random references to generous periods of time."<sup>17</sup>

I would now like to turn from the problem of Theseus' lists to the problem of Theseus himself. His part in the *Knight's Tale* is large, and although he does not undergo any development of character, Theseus is the only figure in the poem who appears in a variety of roles. For this reason (as well as the fact that he is one of classical mythology's most famous heroes, as Arcite and Palamon are not) Theseus dominates the action of the *Knight's Tale* from the beginning. Yet he does not sit easily in his niche,

corresponding to Jupiter in the same way that Egeus, his father, corresponds to Saturn. In fact, with the exception of Saturn, Theseus can be identified with each of the major gods who appears in the poem. His identification with Jupiter does not need to be rehearsed, but what of his relationship to Mars, Diana, and Venus?

Theseus is described in terms of the god whose activity he performs. His service to Mars is mentioned several times in the course of the poem, as when he carries a banner with the figure of Mars on it in going to war with Creon (975). Although Theseus, as conqueror of the Amazons, is the opponent of Diana when we first see him, he comes to serve her when he goes out hunting: "for after Mars he serveth now Dyane" (1682). Theseus' connection with Venus is likewise easily seen; not only did he serve her "ful yore agon" (1813) when he was a servant of Love in his youth, but also after the death of Arcite, when he is unhappy and Egeus comforts him (2837). This scene parallels the one which takes place after Palamon is captured in the tournament, when Venus weeps and Saturn comforts her. Finally, although he imagines he is serving the cause of Athens, Theseus is actually serving Venus when he arranges the marriage of Palamon and Emelye. It may well be that Theseus' success, both as a ruler and as a character, is due to his multifaceted personality, in contrast to the one-dimensional characterization of those who dedicate themselves to a single deity.<sup>18</sup>

Another problematical aspect of Theseus' character is the weight which should be given to his sermon. We must call his philosophical viewpoint pseudo-Boethian, rather than Boethian, for he does not take into account either the possibility of human transcendence of Fortune / Disorder through the knowledge of God or the apparently complete (and completely arbitrary) control which the Olympian gods exercise over men, with no First Mover in sight.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Theseus' identification of Jupiter with the First Mover (3035) is incorrect.<sup>20</sup> Yet if Theseus' view of the universe is not the right one, why then is it given so much prominence in the tale? Egeus' philosophy, which appears in some ways to be more in keeping with the chaotic story of Palamon and Arcite, is treated quite briefly. The Knight quotes a short section of Egeus' speech (2843-49) and says, "And over al this yet seyde he muchel moore / To this effect, ful wisely to enhorte / The peple that they should hem reconforte" (2850-52), giving no hint as to the content of the remainder. The solution to this problem is closely connected to the solution of the next problem I want to discuss, so let us consider the two of them together.

Why is the *Knight's Tale* divided into four parts? If either the *Teseida* or the *Thebaid* had four books, we might not have to look further for an answer, but such is not the case.<sup>21</sup> Instead, rather than looking outside the *Knight's Tale* for a four-part model, we must look within the text itself. And as it happens, Theseus' sermon is divided into four sections, each begun by a reference to the "Firste Moevere." The first part (2987-93) explains the reason for the creation of the "faire cheyne of love." The second part (2994-3004) describes the establishment of lifespans for all "engendered" creatures, by which, Theseus says, "may men . . . wel discerne / That thilke Moevere stable is and eterne." The nature of Nature is described in the third part (3005-34), and examples are given to show that even things that are long-lived and physically enduring, as well as more obviously mortal creatures such as men, must come to an end. In the fourth part (3035-69), Theseus identifies the First Mover with Jupiter and discusses wisdom and honour. At the end he turns from the general to the specific and concludes with rhetorical questions about the pointlessness of bewailing Arcite's death.

The advice and philosophy contained in this speech are perfectly appropriate for chivalric figures such as Duke Theseus or the Knight himself. For any soldier it would be wisdom "To maken vertu of necessitee, / And take it weel that we may nat eschue, / And namely that to us alle is due" (3041-44), but it is particularly the rhetoric of (military) authority which condemns complaints about the way things are as folly or rebellion (3057). It is equally part of military rhetoric (or is it propaganda?) to say that it is more honourable to die in one's "excellence and flour" (3048) than in one's old age, and therefore that a man ought to grieve less for a friend cut down in his prime (as Theseus presumably does for Arcite) than for a friend who dies with his deeds of glory forgotten. With this in mind, I would attribute the attention given to Theseus' sermon to the Knight rather than to Chaucer. The philosophical outlook of Theseus' sermon coincides not with the actual situation of the *Knight's Tale*, but with the Knight's perception of it. The identification of the Knight's interests with Theseus' assures it a prominent place in the tale which the Knight is narrating, even though his philosophy does not account very well for the events he relates.

The four-part division of the text is a similar example of narratorial obtuseness. The Knight feels that he needs to shape his discourse on some authoritative model, and he does so, but not on the model of Statius or Boccaccio, or even on the actual structure of his story. Instead (and understandably) he takes Theseus for his model, and the shape of Theseus'

sermon as the model for what appears to be a statement of his own philosophy. This military (or chivalric) context explains why their shared philosophy is "pseudo-Boethian." The truly Boethian approach to honour, fame, and glory is to regard them as the gifts of Fortune, and as such to be ignored rather than sought after:

"Certes for ye han joie to clepen thynges with false names, that beren hem al in the contrarie; the whiche names ben ful ofte reproved by the effect of the same thynges; so that thise ilke rychesses ne oughten nat by ryghte to ben cleped rychesses, ne swych power ne aughte nat ben clepyd power, ne swich dignyte ne aughte nat ben clepyd dignyte. And at the laste, I may conclude the same thyng of alle the yftes of Fortune, in which ther nys nothyng to ben desired, ne that hath in hymselfe naturel bownte, as it es ful wel yseene. For neither thei ne joygnen hem nat, alwey to gode men, ne maken hem alwey gode to whom they been ijoyned." (Book II, pr. 6)<sup>22</sup>

The quest for the knowledge of God is incompatible with the quest for earthly fame.

The relationship of form to meaning in the *Knight's Tale* is like that of a mirror to the thing it reflects. Naturally, the truth of this statement depends on what we interpret the meaning of the *Knight's Tale* to be. We can be certain that there is a form to the poem, that it is circular, interlocking, and repeating, but what of its meaning? Not surprisingly, there is no critical consensus as to the meaning of the *Knight's Tale*, and it has been construed as everything from a Boethian tragedy to the working out of a problem in courtly love. My own view is that the *Knight's Tale* is a satire of the narrator's pseudo-Boethian world-view. The Knight tells a story which he believes shows the virtues of good government, with the ideals of a militarily-oriented aristocracy reflected in both the Athenian Duke Theseus and the celestial First Mover. Instead, the story shows how the chivalric ideal is contained, manipulated, and subverted by discordant Nature: quarrelling Olympian gods above and ambiguous Thebans below. The ironical part of it is, of course, that the Knight never realizes how his own tale turns his cherished ideology inside out. There is order in the universe; the problem lies in the fact that it seems to be naturally bounded by higher and lower levels of disorder.

The advantage of recognizing the "layered" conception of the universe -- whether it is the concentric universe of mediaeval Europe, the pseudo-Boethian hierarchy of the Knight, or the horizontal and vertical structure of the narrative itself -- is that this horizontal and vertical structure becomes significant, instead of artificial or contrived. In constructing the *Knight's Tale* in this way, Chaucer seems to have used the Aristotelian chain as his model. Patricia Kean has noted that:

In the *Somnium Scipionis*, Macrobius refers to the "unbreakable chain" ("*mutuatus insolubili inter se vinculo elementa devinxit*," I.vi.24) by which the elements are bound and which, according to the *Timæus*, depends on the numbers three and four. This is the chain which Chaucer attributes to love in Theseus' speech and to Nature in the *Parlement of Foules*. For Macrobius, the bond of the elements is especially associated with the planetary movements and spheres, a fact which may throw some light on the transition in the *Knight's Tale* from the planet-gods as prime movers in the love story in parts i-iii, to, in part iv, the Aristotelian unmoved first mover which initiates their, and all other, movement.<sup>23</sup>

This chain is reflected in the interlocking chain of events in the *Knight's Tale*. If we accept that Group A and Group B are the alternating links of the chain, then we can attempt to incorporate them into the plan of alternating order and disorder. Social or orderly events make up Group A, and taking Turner's Hegelian interpretation one step further,<sup>24</sup> we can call the battle element of Group A the thesis, the plea for mercy the antithesis, and Theseus' attempt to restore order the synthesis. Group B, on the other hand, dealing as it does only with Palamon and Arcite, comprises asocial or disorderly concerns. We have also seen how the circular structure of the poem corresponds to both the configuration of Theseus' amphitheatre within the poem, and the mediaeval view of the universe external to Chaucer's writing. The idea that the world is composed of alternating layers of disorder and order expands to include levels of existence outside the text in a disturbingly easy fashion. Inside the text is the disorder of Palamon and Arcite, then the rationality of Theseus, and then the disorder of the gods. Outside of the text, above them, we may set Chaucer, whose creation the orderly structure of the *Knight's Tale* is. Affecting Chaucer is the disorderly world of fourteenth-century Europe, and above that perhaps is the orderly Christian Creator.

As the lack of consensus about the narrative structure of the *Knight's Tale* shows, structural analysis is far from objective, and the identification of patterns seems a pursuit more subjective still. That the sequence of episodes in the *Knight's Tale* should resemble the famous chain of love is almost too pat to be considered seriously. Yet no one denies the character correspondences, and the general circular shape of the text is not unusual for Chaucer's poetry, as the circular structure of *Troilus and Criseyde* bears witness. Proceeding from accepted structures, then, little things such as the strange pleas for mercy and the brief scene of Venus weeping at Palamon's defeat begin to fall into place; and the elaborate pattern that emerges seemed indisputable, at least to this writer. However, the ultimate validity of my interpretation will rest on two things. One is the demonstration of a mediaeval tradition of highly-wrought "pattern-structured" poetry available to Chaucer. The other is the presence of reflections of the patterns of the *Knight's Tale* elsewhere in the *Canterbury Tales*, particularly in the poems of Fragment I, which are most closely connected with the *Knight's Tale*.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (Berkeley 1957) 173.

<sup>2</sup> Merle Fifiield, "The *Knight's Tale*: Incident, Idea, Incorporation," *ChauR* 3 (1968) 96.

<sup>3</sup> All quotations from and line numbers referring to the *Knight's Tale* are from F.N. Robinson's edition of *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (2nd ed., Boston 1957).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Frederick Turner, "A Structuralist Analysis of the *Knight's Tale*," *ChauR* 8 (1974) 279-86.

<sup>5</sup> Fifiield (at n. 2) 105.



<sup>6</sup> Patricia M. Kean, *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*: Vol. II, *The Art of Narrative* (London 1972) 16-17, 31.

<sup>7</sup> H.S. Wilson, "The Knight's Tale and the Teseida Again," *UTQ* 18 (1949) 140.

<sup>8</sup> Fifield (at n. 2) 96.

<sup>9</sup> See Paul M. Clogan, *The Medieval Achilleid of Statius* (Leiden 1968) 1-7.

<sup>10</sup> David Vesey, *Statius and the Thebaid* (Cambridge 1973) 320.

<sup>11</sup> Edward C. Schweitzer points out that "Chaucer's apparent eagerness to mark the correspondence [i.e., that Arcite is 'brent to asshen colde' (2957) in the very grove where he suffered the 'hoothe fires' of love (2862)] creates an inconsistency in the text; for Theseus has already destroyed the grove to make way for the stadium and so, it seems, to realize another metaphor by constructing actual lists on the site where he found Palamon and Arcite fighting 'as it were in a lystes roially' (1713)"; see "Fate and Freedom in *The Knight's Tale*," *SAC* 3 (1981) 25.

<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, the bestiaries do not reveal any evidence to suggest that Palamon and Arcite are deliberately associated with those particular animals, aside from the general connotations of braveness and ferocity. See Jeffrey Helterman, "The Dehumanizing Metamorphoses of *The Knight's Tale*," *ELH* 38 (1971) 493-511, for a Boethian reading of these metaphors.

<sup>13</sup> Kean (at n. 6) 17.

<sup>14</sup> Wilson (at n. 7) 140.

<sup>15</sup> Fifield (at n. 2) 102.

<sup>16</sup> Turner (at n. 4) 286.

<sup>17</sup> Muscatine (at n. 1) 177.

<sup>18</sup> For a Boethian interpretation, see Schweitzer (at n. 11) 35.

<sup>19</sup> Schweitzer, offering a detailed argument, calls Theseus' speech "un-Boethian" (at n. 11, pp. 38-42).

<sup>20</sup> For a slightly differing view, see Bernard D. Harder, "Fortune's Chain of Love: Chaucer's Irony in Theseus' Marriage Counselling," *University of Windsor Review* 18 (1984) 47-52.

<sup>21</sup> Both the *Thebaid* and *Il Teseida* have 12 books, being modelled on Virgil's *Aeneid*.

<sup>22</sup> This reference to the *Consolation of Philosophy* is to Chaucer's translation in Robinson's edition of his works, p. 338.

<sup>23</sup> Kean (at n. 6) 30-31.

<sup>24</sup> Turner (at n. 4) 282.