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THE CHARACTERIZATION OF THESEUS IN CHAUCER

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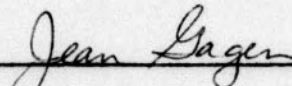
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A Thesis Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

6855

Greensboro
May, 1964

Approved by


Director

APPROVAL SHEET

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Theseus, legendary slayer of the Minotaur, betrayer of Ariadne, ruler of Athens, and conqueror of the Amazons, appears as either a heroic figure or a villain in four of Chaucer's works. Yet the development of Theseus as a character in these works has no logical progression; for Chaucer presents Theseus as a villain in an early unfinished work, The House of Fame, as the virtuous duke of Athens in Anelida and Arcite--which was presumably written only a few years after The House of Fame--again as a villain in The Legend of Good Women, written after Anelida and Arcite and before The Knight's Tale, from which Theseus emerges as a fully-developed character, and one who is greatly admired for his bravery, kindness, and wisdom. Chaucer uses classical legend in one work after another, without regard to consistency in his characterization of Theseus, and draws from various classical sources traits and actions which may contribute to the kind of character that he desires to create. It is not as though Chaucer's conception of Theseus moves consistently toward the final image of the worthy ruler in The Knight's Tale as he consults more and more classical sources for insight into the legendary figure. Rather Chaucer draws upon various aspects of the life of Theseus, whether they be those agreed upon by classical writers or details that conflict from author to author; he suits the character to the general purpose of his work rather than basing the

work upon the character. The question arises then as to why Chaucer uses the figure of Theseus at all. The reason is simple. By merely alluding to one or another action or trait of Theseus, Chaucer is able to evoke from the reader precisely the response that he wishes, since the legends of Theseus have become familiar through the reading of many classical and medieval authors, such as Ovid, Plutarch, Hyginus, Boccaccio, Virgil, Catullus, Machaut, and Filippo Ceffi. At a nudge from Chaucer, the reader immediately feels sympathy for Theseus, or contempt, or admiration. And what is more, the use of legend in no way hinders Chaucer in the addition of humanizing characteristics and currently fashionable behavior, when it suits his purpose to make such additions.

It is notable that as Chaucer continues his use of the Theseus legends, his character becomes increasingly more multifarious and realistic, as we have seen in the progression from two early works, The House of Fame and Anelida and Arcite, to The Legend of Good Women, and then to The Knight's Tale. As Chaucer himself emerges as an author of great creative genius, he tends to rely less and less upon stereotyped figures and popular literary conventions in his writings. So it is that Theseus has come to stand for more than a legendary villain, or a legendary hero, and that he need not be catalogued with a dozen others of his kind in order to assume significance.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank Miss Jean Gagen for her invaluable guidance in the writing of this paper, and also Mr. John E. Bridgers, Jr., for his assistance.

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CHAPTER I

THESEUS: "THE GRETE UNTROUTHE OF LOVE"

The first book of The House of Fame presents only a sketchy introduction to the character of Theseus, for Chaucer seems to feel that his villainy merits merely twenty lines, while Aeneas is elevated to the primary position with one hundred-nine lines devoted to epitomizing him as the perfect rogue. (ll. 405-425; 165-374).¹ However, the treachery of Theseus is sufficient to warrant a hearty curse from Chaucer: "The devel be hys soules bane!" (l. 408). It is Chaucer's intention to parallel the wickedness of Theseus to that of Aeneas--and, moreover, to Achilles, Paris, Jason, and Hercules, who are mentioned in passing--thereby depending upon the impact of Aeneas' story to give scope to the skimpy creation of Theseus. Initially the character of Aeneas wins our sympathy, for he is compelled to flee from Troy as it burns, taking his father, old Anchises, with him. And not only must he be deprived of his homeland, but also of his sons and his wife, Creusa, "which that he [loves] as hys lyf." (l. 176). As if these were not sufficient causes for grief, cruel Juno, hating the Trojans, bids the blustery Aeolus to swell the sea into a tempest and to ruin every lord and lady of the Trojan kind. But just when the position

¹Citations from Chaucer in my text are to The Complete Works, ed. F. N. Robinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1933).

of Aeneas seems most perilous, his mother, Venus, interposes and brings all manner of good fortune to him: he not only emerges from the tempest unscathed, but when he lands safely in the city of Carthage, the queen, Dido, grants him grace and eventually her love. Apparently Aeneas has pledged his love to her, as she has to him, for Chaucer tells us that she believes "hyt had al be so/ As he hir swor; and herby demed/ That he was good, for he such semed." (ll. 262-264). And later she pleads with him not to desert her, crying,

O Eneas, what wol ye doo?
 O that your love, ne your bond
 That ye have sworn with your ryght hond,
 Ne my crewel deth,...
 May holde yow stille here with me! (ll. 319-324).

Aeneas remains pitiless, however, ignoring both his vow and Dido's ruined name; he leaves the queen distraught and sails for Italy. Having lost both honor and love as a result of the treachery of Aeneas, Dido takes her own life. The story of Theseus' betrayal of Ariadne is related briefly, but similarly. Theseus, too, has once been in a pitiable situation, which Chaucer merely alludes to without elaborating upon (ll. 410-414), and Ariadne is responsible for saving him from death. And although he professes no love for her, Theseus vows in his gratitude to make Ariadne his wife. Yet he, Aeneas-like, flees from the woman to whom he has pledged himself. The crime of Theseus, however, is even more detestable than is that of his prototype, for not only does he betray the woman who has saved his life, but he leaves her alone on

a deserted island and sails away with her younger sister, Phaedra. And what is more, the man has not the courage to tell the lady of his plans for departure as did Aeneas, but instead steals away from Ariadne as she sleeps, leaving her to distress and confusion.

The House of Fame takes the form of a love-vision, prefaced by the hope that all dreams may be good, and a discourse on the various reasons for having them at all. The list of causes culminates with the disturbance of love, and the god of sleep is invoked before the story begins. As he begins to dream, Chaucer sees himself within a temple of glass. There are statues and portraits of incredible beauty and intricacy within the temple and a vast mural depicting the histories of Aeneas, Demophon, Achilles, Paris, Jason, Hercules, and Theseus in their falseness to women. But it is a realistic as well as a wonderful dream, for we see Chaucer cursing villainies and moralizing throughout:

Allas! what harm doth apparence,
 Whan hit is fals in existence....
 Loo, how a woman doth amys
 To love him that unknowen ys!
 For, be Cryste, lo, thus yt fareth:
 'Hyt is not al gold that glareth!....
 For this shal every woman fynde,
 That som man, of his pure kynde,
 Wol shewen outward the fayreste,
 Tyl he have caught that what him leste;
 And thanne wol he causes fynde,
 And swere how that she ys unkynde,
 Or fals, or privy, or double was....
 'he that fully knoweth th'erbe
 May saufly leye hyt to his ye.
 (ll. 165-6; 269-72; 279-85; 290-91).

And of Theseus specifically he says: "How fals eke was he.../

The devel be hys soules bane!" (ll. 405, 408). Chaucer devotes the bulk of his first book of The House of Fame to denouncing men for not being what they appear to be in their relationships with gullible, defenseless women, for their heartless abandoning of women who have sacrificed their honorable fame to love. Theseus then emerges to exemplify the author's hypothesis. And Chaucer fortunately has just enough time to convince us that men really are wicked before the golden eagle comes to snatch him away to the House of Fame, where he may forget such weighty matters.

Chaucer does not tell us in his text of the sources from which he draws the story of Theseus; but he does tell us that we may consult Virgil, Ovid, Claudius, and Dante for further information about Aeneas. The literary debt of The House of Fame to Virgil, Claudius, and Dante is negligible, however, in presenting the character of Theseus; rather, as Edgar Finley Shannon has indicated, Chaucer gleans material for this character chiefly from the Heroides of Ovid and the De Genealogia Deorum of Boccaccio.² In the Heroides is recorded the story of the hero's promise of marriage in his gratitude for help. It tells of Ariadne, who is deserted by her lover as she sleeps and left alone on the island of Naxos, to be supplanted in the favor of Theseus by her sister. (See Ovid's Heroides X.). Boccaccio, too, depicts the scene of

²Edgar Finley Shannon, Chaucer and the Roman Poets (Cambridge, Mass., 1929), p. 67.

Ariadne's abandonment and the elopement of Theseus and Phaedra from Naxos. (See De Genealogia Deorum XXIX, XXX.). But in addition several other works to which Chaucer had access recognize this desertion: Ovid's Metamorphoses (VIII, 169-176), Filippo Ceffi's Ovide Moralise, and Machaut's Jugement dou Roy de Navarre, the last two affirming that Ariadne slept while Theseus stole away from her.³ Sanford Brown Meech and C. G. Child have pointed out that Phaedra's name does not appear in Ovid's account of the desertion of Ariadne--although she is alluded to--and cite, therefore, other works which may have supplied Chaucer with a more complete account of her in her relationship to Theseus.⁴ Shannon has given Boccaccio's De Genealogia Deorum as substantiating material for the Heroides in Chaucer's creation of Phaedra; Child agrees that Boccaccio is the alternative source, but believes that the Amorosa Visione rather than De Genealogia Deorum is responsible for adding flesh and name to the sister of Ariadne.⁵ Hubertis M. Cummings attacks the assertion of Mr. Child, however, noting that the parallels of Chaucer to the Amorosa Visione drawn by Child are somewhat contrived and superficial; and since Chaucer was apparently well acquainted with the Heroides, he must have known the name of Ariadne's sister from "Epistle IV,"

³Sanford Brown Meech, "Chaucer and the Ovide Moralise-- A Further Study," PMLA XLVI, 183.

⁴See C. G. Child, as quoted by Shannon, p. 72, and Meech, p. 196.

⁵See C. G. Child, as quoted by Shannon, p. 72.

in which Phaedra complains to Hippolytus.⁶ Meech, on the other hand, affirms that Chaucer has established his character from a second-hand account of Ovid, Filippo Ceffi's translation of the Heroides, the Ovide Moralise.⁷ A close comparison of the texts of Chaucer and the Heroides establishes Ovid's work as a basis for the sketch of Theseus, Ariadne, and Phaedra in The House of Fame.⁸ Chaucer may have consulted one of the works alluded to, or all of them in collaboration of the legend, but it is probable that the story of Ariadne and Theseus is an amalgam of at least two or more sources.

.....

The Legend of Good Women, like The House of Fame, conforms to the pattern of the love-vision, but in addition it takes the form of a palinode, in which Chaucer recants his villainous treatment of women in Troilus and Criseyde and his translation of the Roman de la Rose. And in both, the stated reasons for the vision are the enlightenment and perfection of the poet. Chaucer is chided alternately by the golden eagle and the God of Love for being a one-sided poet: in the case of The House of Fame he is accused of being too serious in his poetics, too often neglectful of the fanciful and playful; and in The Legend of Good Women, of viewing

⁶Hubertis M. Cummings, The Indebtedness of Chaucer's Works to the Italian Works of Boccaccio (Menasha, Wis., 1916), p. 29.

⁷Meech, p. 183.

⁸Cummings, p. 29.

women solely as faithless and destructive. But in the latter situation, he is granted pity by the beautiful and kindly Alcestis, who points out to the God of Love the merits of Chaucer in translating Boethius and writing about the life of St. Cecilia. In his own defense Chaucer says:

a trewe lover oght me not to blame,
 Thogh that I speke a fals love som shame.
 They oghte rather with me for to holde,
 For that I of Creseyde wroot or tolde,
 Or of the Rose; what so myn auctour mente,
 Algate, God woot, yt was myn entente
 To forthren trouthe in love and yt cheryce,
 And to ben war fro falsnesse and fro vice
 By swich ensample; this was my menyng. (ll. 466-474).

At this affirmation of his good intentions Alcestis becomes somewhat less magnanimous and demands that the wayward poet do penance for his crimes "in makyng of a glorious legende/ Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves,/ That weren trewe in lovyng al hire lyves." (ll. 484-485). He then dutifully commences his argument for the inherent worth of women, steadfast even when deserted by their lovers. After expounding upon the magnificent woes of Cleopatra, Thisbe, Dido, Medea, and Lucretia, Chaucer eventually approaches the legend of Ariadne. But strangely it is not Theseus, the betrayer of Ariadne, who is addressed in the opening lines of the sixth legend, but Ariadne's father Minos, whom Chaucer presents as the king of Crete and the ruler of hell. And only after Chaucer has pointed his finger at Minos--"Now cometh thy lot, now comestow on the ryng," (l. 1886)--does he allude to the true villain of the tale:

Nat for thy sake only write I this storye,
 But for to clepe ageyn unto memorye
 Of Theseus the grete untrouthe of love;
 For which the goddes of the heven above
 Ben wrothe, and wreche han take for thy synne.
 (ll. 1888-1892).

After dedicating the paltry five lines to Theseus, the poet turns again to Minos, recounting in forty-eight lines the story of his capture of Athens and the abhorrent tribute which he demands from Athenians on every third year. Yet this discussion of Minos is not a structural fault, for after reading Chaucer's compact history of the despicable Minos, we realize that facets of his character and that of Theseus have significant parallels. At the untimely and unaccountable slaying of Androgeos, the son of Minos, in Athens, his distraught and enraged father attacks the city; but the strength of Nisus, the king, thwarts every seige of Minos and he is denied revenge for his dead son. The daughter of Nisus in her curiosity to view the battle one day stands upon the city wall and falls in love with her father's enemy as he bravely attacks Athens. It is by her aid that Minos finally overcomes Nisus; but the Cretan does not reward the love of the Athenian woman with love; instead he "wikkedly...quitte hire kyndnesse,/ And let hire drenche in sorwe and destresse." (ll. 1918-1920). The hate of Minos for the people of Athens is not satisfied by merely conquering them. He demands, moreover, that on every third year lots be cast to determine which sons of the city will be brought to Crete for the fierce Minotaur's devouring. The thraldom of Athenians thus persists until the

time when Aegeus is king of Athens, and his son, Theseus, is chosen by lot to be a victim to Minos' "wikked best." (l. 1928). So it is that Chaucer draws us chronologically into the legend of Theseus. He expresses pity for the joyless prince, and then proceeds to some of the kind of moralizing which is presented more emphatically in The House of Fame. He does not shake his fist at Theseus, however, as he has done previously in The House of Fame, but merely admonishes him:

Me thynketh this, that thow were depe yholde
 To whom that savede thee from cares cold!
 And if now any woman helpe the,
 Wel oughtestow hire servaunt for to be,
 And ben hire trewe loveve yer be yere! (ll. 1954-1958).

Again Chaucer seems the dutiful, penitent poet, who mouths the words that are certain to assuage the anger of the Lady Alcestis and her God of Love. Woman is restored by these lines to her rightful station upon a pedestal. And man is bidden to be the truthful servant of any woman who gives him aid--the responsibility of gratitude is allotted terrible significance. Chaucer must have made the statement with his tongue at least half in cheek. By this device of the interposed advice to young Theseus, the poet warns us that another helpful female is to appear and that she is probably to be forsaken, as was the daughter of Nisus at Athens--as well as Cleopatra, Thisbe, Dido, Medea, Lucretia, Philomela, Phyllis, and Hypermnestra, to be discussed later in The Legend. Now the similarities of the experiences of Theseus and Minos begin to emerge. Just as the daughter of Minos' enemy pitied and admired him, so do the daughters of Theseus'

enemy have the same sentiments toward him. And, ironically, they, too, stand upon a wall better to view the royal foe. Ariadne, with Phaedra, her sister, determines, like the Athenian woman, to aid the man of whom she is enamoured at sight-- thus betraying her father, also. Theseus, the prototype of Minos, accepts the proffered means of deliverance and deserts the woman who has saved him. Chaucer does not tell us, however, that Minos swore faithfulness to the lady who allowed him to avenge his son's death. But Theseus vows:

I, sorweful man, ydampned to the deth,
 Fro yow, whil that me lasteth lyf or breth,
 I wol nat twynne, after this aventure,
 But in youre servise thus I wol endure,
 That, as a wreche unknowe, I wol yow serve
 For evermo, til that myn herte sterve.
 Forsake I wol at hom myn herytage,
 And, as I sayde, ben of your court a page,
 If that ye vouche-sauf that in this place
 Ye graunte me to han so gret a grace
 That I may han nat but my mete and drynke....
 And if I profre yow in low manere
 To ben youre page and serven yow ryght here,
 But I yow serve as lowly in that place,
 I preye to Mars to yeve me swich a grace
 That shames deth on me there mote falle,
 And deth and poverte to my frendes alle
 And that my spirit by nyghte mote go,
 After my deth, and walke to and fro,
 That I mote of traytour have a name,
 For which my spirit go, to do me shame!....
 Upon my trouthe, I swere, and yow assure
 This sevene yer I have youre servaunt be.
 Now have I yow, and also have ye me.

(ll. 2030-40; 2060-69; 2119-21).

This oath comes prior to escape, however. And not only does Theseus flatter Ariadne with promises of his servitude, but he swears that he has loved her for the duration of seven years. It makes no matter that he has only now met her. This

kind of frivolity is pleasing to Ariadne, for she smiles--presumably as Alcestis smiles to hear Chaucer's five-line admonition of Theseus, quoted above. (See ll. 1954-58.).

"The Legend of Ariadne" presents a highly complex situation, a situation intriguingly interwoven with other situations--despite the contention of Robert O. Payne, who says that "in neither [The House of Fame or The Legend of Good Women] is there any 'plot' as we ordinarily understand that term in connection with fiction; the themes are not externalized in a formally interlinked sequence of action and character."⁹ Mr. Payne's statement is confusing for its vague use of the terms "externalized" and "formally." There can be little argument concerning the plot of The House of Fame, for the flash views of legendary figures and literary events are held together loosely by the framework of the dream. Chaucer does not stop to realize his characters or the relationship of their actions. But on the other hand, "The Legend of Ariadne" presents an ingenious system of continuity and interaction, and sufficiently characterizes at least two of the central figures to constitute the "plot" which Mr. Payne does not recognize in the story. The first significant theme encountered in the sixth legend, and the less apparent of the two, is that of retribution. The son of Minos is slain in Athens as he studies philosophy--"nat but for envye," as

⁹ Robert O. Payne, The Key of Remembrance: A Study of Chaucer's Poetics (New Haven, 1963), p. 121.

Chaucer tells us. (l. 1899). For generations thereafter Minos demands of Athenians the sacrifice of their sons to the Minotaur. It is as though every man in Athens had a part in the murder of Androgeos: the entire population is tainted with crime and must be punished. And Minos' betrayal of an Athenian king's daughter warrants the betrayal of his daughter Ariadne--also the daughter of a king--by an Athenian prince. Minos, too, is guilty of betrayal, and in his turn is tricked by his own daughter. Retribution for the crime of Theseus is not presented in the story, for his wicked act takes place at the end of "The Legend," and the generation that he has wronged has not yet had the opportunity to wreak its retributive justice. In every circumstance, retaliation comes through the offspring of the offender--punishing evil by striking at those who are innocent: the youths of Athens and the poor Ariadne. Innocent, too, are those whose mere presence suggested a crime, like the son of Minos and the daughter of Nisus. It is only with Theseus that we see variation, for he merges from innocence into falseness and treachery, although he was to have been sacrificed for an older generation wrong.

The second theme, which pervades the entire Legend of Good Women, is that of the falseness of men in their relations with women. In "The Legend of Ariadne" King Minos is first to desert one who loves him and has helped him to gain his heart's desire--the avenging of his son's death. Theseus,

the most fully drawn character of the account, provides the second example of the "untrouthe of love." (l. 1890). And we later learn in the eighth legend that Demophon, the son of Theseus, carries on the tradition of falseness which his father has established, in his betrayal of Phyllis.

But for this ende I speke this as now,
 To tellen yow of false Demophon.
 In love a falsere herde I nevere non,
 But if it were his fader Theseus....
 At shorte wordes, ryght so Demophon
 The same wey, the same path hath gon,
 That dide his false fader Theseus.

(ll. 2397-2400; 2462-2464).

In continuing the argument for the plot of "Ariadne," let us consider the development of character. Chaucer does more than present the legendary figure of Theseus as a mere example, as he has done in The House of Fame. For in telling the traditional story of Theseus as a lady-killer, Chaucer characterizes him by describing the sentiments both of Theseus and himself, by extending his verbal role, and by presenting the two sisters--Ariadne and Phaedra--in such a way that there is doubt as to whether Theseus is really, or at least solely, to blame for the desertion of his betrothed wife. First of all Chaucer tells us that Theseus is the son of a king, that he is to be devoured by the Cretan Minotaur, and calls him "this woful yonge knyght." (l. 1948). The youthful Theseus, now introduced as worthy and honorable and pathetic, is put in irons and thrown into prison, where he bewails his plight. It is no great wonder then that Ariadne and her sister pity him. And after the plan for Theseus'

deliverance is explained, Chaucer again emphasizes the few years which the captive has to his credit, and the sympathy that his words are able to arouse:

A semely knyght was Theseus to se,
 And yong, but of a twenty yer and thre.
 But whoso hadde seyn his contenance,
 He wolde have wept, for routhe of his penaunce.

(ll. 2074-77).

Later when Theseus has vowed his love and devotion to Ariadne, she interprets his bearing and verbal tributes as creditable to him as well as to her: "This lady smyleth at his stedefastnesse,/ And at his hertely wordes, and his chere." (ll. 2123-24). Theseus has flattered Ariadne--some might say "falsely"--by declaring that his love for her was born seven years prior to their meeting. But this trifle is more nearly the typical courting procedure of a young knight than a deliberate deception. Ariadne is aware that his statement is not altogether accurate, but nevertheless, she is pleased to accept it. It is only when Theseus has sailed away from Ariadne that he becomes the "false lovere" who "can begyle/ His trewe love," inciting Chaucer to curse him: "the devel quyte him his while!" (ll. 2226-27). The insertions of the narrator's feelings about the character of Theseus--as well as those of Ariadne--tend to make him, not the one-sided, solely treacherous figure that Alcestis would have relished as foil to a good woman, but a figure that is contemptible only in fifty-seven of the legend's three hundred forty-two lines.

In addition to the fuller use of narrative commentary

in presenting Theseus in "The Legend of Ariadne," Chaucer gives to him a role of sixty-three spoken lines; he has none in The House of Fame. He, too, feels pity for his situation, seeing himself as a "sorweful man, ydampned to the deth" (l. 2030); and throwing himself upon his knee, he does seem appealing and sympathetic. His initial statement comes from a desperate and humble man. It is worth sacrificing his royal status in order to live at all; so Theseus pledges himself to servitude and insignificance. The jailer who will free him shall be sent to Athens and made a noble, and ironically so, for just as Theseus--a king's son--is to become a lowly page, the subservient jail-keeper is to rise to a high position in the court of Aegeus. The daughters of Minos are to remain socially static, though gaining moral gratification and a new page. But Theseus then protests so loudly and long of his sincerity that we tend to become somewhat suspicious of him. Perhaps his overly ardent vows do foreshadow the treachery that lies ahead. But it is more likely that these are the ravings of a desperate man who is sincere at the moment he makes the vows. In any case, Theseus begs for the duration of ten lines that dishonor and misery come to him and his friends if what he says is not true. (See ll. 2062-72.). The second and final speech of Theseus follows the suggestion of Ariadne that she become his wife; and again our Theseus emphatically asserts that he will serve Ariadne--but as husband rather than page. He is still intent upon

proving himself to the daughters of Minos even after it is certain that they are to help him, thus discrediting the idea that Theseus, like Shakespeare's queen "doth protest too much."

By his speech he is characterized as the lusty young knight, anxious to prove himself as honorable and worthy to the ladies who save him from death; he is brave and fierce, confident of subduing the Minotaur and escaping with Phaedra, Ariadne, and the jailer to his native Athens; and he is the courtly lover who flatters his lady with allusions to her desirability and the duration of his love for her. Theseus is victorious over the Minotaur and takes the Cretan ladies away with him as he has promised. But then he, apparently without premeditation--for Chaucer has not thus far characterized Theseus as villainous, although he has forewarned us in his own commentary--leaves Ariadne to the wild beasts on a deserted island and sails away with her sister to his homeland. And this is the last we see of Theseus. Why the sudden change in Theseus? Is his treachery inherent, or is there some justification for his foul deed? An examination of the characters of Ariadne and Phaedra affords insight into the answers to these questions: Ariadne and Phaedra stand together on the wall and simultaneously hear the pitiful cries of the doomed Theseus; it is Ariadne, however, who first determines to help the "gilteless" man. (l. 1982). But strangely enough, Phaedra devises the plan for Theseus' salvation without any suggestion from her sister. And although not explicitly stated by Chaucer, the implication is that Ariadne is

inferior to Phaedra in intelligence and--if older--habitually abides by the decisions of her younger sister. Ariadne is anxious to wed Theseus, but thoughtful enough to remember her younger sister, whom she wishes betrothed to the son of Theseus. But then we see that indeed she is anxious to wed Theseus for more than one reason, for after the son of Aegeus has vowed to wed Ariadne, she says to Phaedra "al softely" (l. 2124):

Now be we duchesses, bothe I and ye,
 And sekered to the regals of Athenes,
 And bothe hereafter likly to ben quenes;
 And saved from his deth a kynges sone,
 As evere of gentil women is the wone
 To save a gentyl man, emforth hire myght,
 In honest cause, and namely in his ryght.
 Me thynketh no wight oughte herof us blame,
 Ne beren us therfore an evil name. (ll. 2127-35).

Ariadne is shown to be ambitious and conniving. The word "now" tells us that she has been considering the role of an Athenian duchess all the while she has been plotting with her sister to free poor Theseus; and now that the preliminaries of planning the match have been disposed of, she anticipates a royal reception in Athens.

Moreover, she visualizes herself as the prototype of all genteel womankind in saving a worthy man from a terrible death, and attempts thus to justify the betrayal of her father, Minos. But her plans for future grandeur go amiss, for Theseus deserts her and takes instead her sister. Ariadne in her anguish at desertion is portrayed by Chaucer as somewhat naive, for even after she has said, "I am beyrayed," (l. 2188) she nevertheless cherishes some hope that her Theseus has

simply forgotten her and will sail back to the island when he sees her signal. Now unless a man has no affection for his lover whatsoever, he can not carelessly leave behind a woman who has lived with him as his wife. And indeed he cannot forget any woman with whom he has been so intimate so easily--be she angel or shrew--unless she is colorless and negligible. And while it is not the case that Ariadne has been forgotten, Chaucer appears to feel that she is colorless and negligible, for she is less attractive than Phaedra, and even her ambition is not magnificent. At the conclusion of "The Legend" when the author talks about the complaints of Ariadne, he becomes too bored to elaborate upon them further, citing instead Ovid's Epistle for those readers who are able to tolerate further comment on Ariadne:

What shulde I more telle hire compleynyng?
 It is so long, it were an hevy thyng.
 In hire Epistel Naso telleth al. (ll. 1128-30).

Phaedra, on the other hand, is both fair and witty, devising the entire scheme for the escape of Theseus: he must fight the Minotaur, but he will have a weapon, and the jaws of the beast will be rendered ineffective by a choking missile contrived by Phaedra and Ariadne. Since Theseus must wander through the incomprehensible maze of the labyrinth to approach the Minotaur, the clever Phaedra determines that he should leave a trail of twine as he goes and return thus by the path on which he has come. It is her proposal, also, that Theseus take the jailer back to Athens

with him; it is not her idea, however, that she and her sister should go as well. There is some confusion initially as to whom Theseus addresses his gratitude and promises, for Phaedra has contrived the plan and Chaucer does not tell us that Ariadne relates it rather than her sister. The speech of Phaedra that tells of this plan immediately precedes the speech of Theseus; and in his vow Theseus makes no direct allusion to either of the ladies. Ariadne, however, quickly responds to the words of the young Athenian and proposes marriage to him. For all that Chaucer tells us, it may be Phaedra whom Theseus has been addressing and not Ariadne at all. Oddly, Chaucer affirms that Theseus overcomes the Minotaur "by the techynge of this Ariadne." (l. 2146). The effect of his statement is to convince us that indeed Ariadne has related the plan of Phaedra to Theseus, persuading him thus that she is responsible for his deliverance. While it is true that he does deceive Ariadne, it is also true--though in a relatively insignificant manner--that Ariadne has deceived him, too. When Ariadne is considered in this light, her concern for the future of Phaedra seems less magnanimous, since Ariadne has presented the ideas of Phaedra as though they are her own. And since the sister of Ariadne is so clever, one wonders whether she has not had some part in conceiving the elopement from the desert island.

And so upon close scrutiny, Theseus no longer appears as a merely allegorical figure, as he has in The House of

Fame, where it is necessary to add flesh to him by a parallel to Aeneas--in "The Legend of Ariadne" one need not look to another figure for insight into his character. The function of Theseus here begins to be ambiguous and complex. For although Chaucer curses him and calls him "the grete untrouthe of love," he attributes to Theseus certain noble qualities, and in repeated allusions to his youth, partially explains the betrayal of Ariadne. In addition Chaucer does not epitomize Ariadne as the ideal woman, making her, in fact, rather ugly and dull; he accentuates, in contrast, her appealing younger sister. Thus the complex circumstances in which these characters are related constitute, as The House of Fame does not, a significant, though ambiguous, plot.

The question arises as to Chaucer's actual purpose in writing The Legend of Good Women. Is the vision in its entirety to be taken ironically? Paull F. Baum contends that it is, pointing to the paradoxical honoring of the God of Love by presenting faithful women--but unfaithful men.¹⁰ And there are some things to be said in defense of his argument. Chaucer's queen of love is Alcestis, that long-suffering woman who has been foolish enough to die for her selfish husband. She seems the typical self-righteous martyr who revels in exaltation of the virtue and woe of her sex, despising all men, whom she categorizes as universally

¹⁰ Paull F. Baum, "Chaucer's 'Glorious Legende,'" Modern Language Notes LX, 377.

faithless. She describes to Chaucer the penance which he is to do for his former wicked treatment of women in his works:

Thow shalt, while that thou lyvest, yer by yere,
 The moste partye of thy tyme spende
 In makyng of a glorious legende
 Of goode wymmen, maydenes and wyves,
 That weren trewe in lovyng al hir lyves;
 And telle of false men that hem bytraien,
 That al hir lyf ne do nat but assayen
 How many women they may doon a shame;
 For in youre world that is now holde a game. (ll. 481-9).

She would have Theseus be simply the embodiment of evil; but Chaucer, in presenting Theseus--though he raves at intervals about his falseness--affords him sympathetic, if not good, qualities. Thus he does not emerge quite the character that Alcestis has demanded. But even though he does have sympathetic qualities and Ariadne has some weak ones, Theseus is, nevertheless, guilty of a broken vow and the cruel desertion of his lady. Baum then asserts that "the men Chaucer [has] chosen to inveigh against most vigorously, Jason, Minos, and Theseus, [are] all entangled with women who [have] forced themselves on their attention, women who [are] so accessible that they [invite] trouble."¹¹ Baum's statement, though accurate, does not attempt to explain the vow of Theseus to Ariadne. There is some substantiation for his view of The Legend of Good Women as a satiric work, but it is not sufficient to be convincing. All the principal characters in "The Legend of Ariadne" embrace both good and evil. Baum is then

¹¹Baum, p. 381.

correct in assuming that Chaucer is not carrying out the instructions of Alcestis literally. But since there is at least a strong suggestion of duality in Minos, Theseus, Ariadne, and Phaedra, one cannot say that any one of them solely is to be blamed or is blameless. Chaucer renders them highly complex and believable characters. The Legend of Good Women, like The House of Fame, however, is incomplete. Thomas R. Lounsbury contends that a lack of interest characterizes the entire work and is responsible for Chaucer's never completing it:

There is nothing more peculiar in The Legend of Good Women than the steadily growing dissatisfaction of the author with his subject which marks its progress. It was not long before Chaucer began to see the folly of what he had set out to accomplish. His keen artistic sense could not fail to recognize the insufficiency of a plan which permitted him to deal only with the variations of a single theme. He was hampered by the legendary stories he was versifying.¹²

But the very nature of Theseus disputes this last hypothesis, for in the capable hands of Chaucer, he supersedes romantic legend and becomes a realistic, credible man. And apparently Chaucer does not immediately tire of Theseus, for he treats him in four of his works, characterizing him fully in two of them; and what is more, neither is he cramped by a use of legendary stories and figures, for Theseus is viewed from varying points of view, ultimately representing his own opposite.

¹²Thomas R. Lounsbury, Studies in Chaucer: His Life and Writings, Vol. III (New York, 1892), p. 337.

The Legend of Good Women seems to be an outgrowth of The House of Fame, which represents a sketchier form of the love-vision, and cites a number of men false in love. Chaucer treats in The Legend three of the men whom he has denounced in The House of Fame--namely, Jason, Aeneas, and Theseus--and presumably would have exploited more had he continued his tribute to the God of Love. For his characterization of Theseus then he has drawn upon the same sources that he consulted for The House of Fame, although in the fuller presentation of Theseus are reflected the influences of additional works dealing with the story. Chaucer himself points to Ovid for further ravings of Ariadne. And Shannon emphasizes the debt to this author, not only for his Heroides, but for the eighth book of The Metamorphoses, which affords the following information: (1) that Ariadne is responsible for Theseus' escape from the labyrinth, (2) that the monster of the labyrinth feeds upon human flesh, (3) that the tribute is demanded by Minos every three years, (4) that the victims are selected by lot, (5) that the purpose of Minos in his evil deed is to avenge his son's death, (6) that the name of the Athenian king is Aegeus, and (7) that Theseus is chosen by lot.¹³ But Meech cites two reasons why Filippo Ceffi's translation of Ovid seems to be the source of Chaucer, or at least a supplement to Ovid, for him. In the Ovide Moralise and The Legend of Good Women the choking device used for the

¹³Shannon, p. 246.

Minotaur is "of mixed composition, while the Italian glosses... describe the [missiles] simply as made of pitch."¹⁴ And Ovid does not mention the proposed marriage of Phaedra and Hippolytus, though the Ovide Moralise does.¹⁵ Shannon goes on to cite the points which Boccaccio has contributed to Chaucer through his De Genealogia Deorum: that Minos demands yearly an offering of a number of Athenian youths, selected by lot--as a result of his desire to avenge the death of his son; that the Athenian king is Aegeus, and his son, Theseus, is chosen by lot to approach the Minotaur.¹⁶ The Metamorphoses and De Genealogia Deorum thus provide equal information for "The Legend of Ariadne." But, says Shannon, "Chaucer follows Boccaccio's method in developing his story."¹⁷ Child tells us, however, that the confusion of Minos, ruler of hell, and Minos, king of Crete, is originated in De Genealogia Deorum XI.¹⁸ And the idea of having Theseus obtain a husband for Phaedra is found there, although there is no mention of her betrothal to the son of Theseus.¹⁹ W. W. Skeat, in addition to the sources previously alluded to, suggests that

¹⁴Meech, p. 198.

¹⁵Meech, p. 199.

¹⁶Shannon, p. 247.

¹⁷Shannon, p. 247.

¹⁸See Child, Modern Language Notes, XI, p. 483, as quoted by Shannon, p. 229.

¹⁹Shannon, p. 250.

Chaucer probably consulted a translation of Plutarch's "Life of Theseus," Virgil's Aeneid VI, and the Fabulae of Hyginus.²⁰ Several critics have pointed to the anger of the gods at the evil deed of Theseus, as it is seen in Catullus' Carmen. James A. S. McPeck goes so far as to say that "Catullus alone of all authors who have written on the Ariadne legend could have furnished Chaucer with the motive of vengeance implied in the introduction of The Legend."²¹ F. N. Robinson, however, believes that Chaucer's knowledge of Catullus should be regarded as doubtful.²² Chaucer himself must be credited with some originality in presenting the legend of Theseus. The ironies of action, as Germaine Dempster demonstrates, are creations of Chaucer, not his sources, for (1) Ariadne arouses her sister's interest in the imprisoned Theseus, whose passion for Phaedra later betrays Ariadne; (2) Ariadne, offering to marry Theseus, keeps pushing Phaedra into the foreground; and (3) Ariadne is happy with the future as she has planned it for both her sister and herself.²³ The inconsistencies of The Legend may also be traced to Chaucer, for he has told us that Theseus is twenty-three years of age, and yet he betroths

²⁰W. W. Skeat, Oxford Chaucer, III (Oxford, 1895), p. 39.

²¹James A. S. McPeck, "Did Chaucer Know Catullus?" Modern Language Notes XLVI (1931), 299.

²²Robinson, p. 851.

²³Germaine Dempster, Dramatic Irony in Chaucer (New York, 1959), p. 85.

Phaedra to the son of Theseus. And as Lounsbury points out--
citing Bech--Lucretia says at the end of the fifth legend:

For wel I wot that Crist himselve telleth
That in Israel, as wyd as is the lond,
That so gret feyth in al that he ne fond
As in a woman; and this is no lye. (ll. 1879-1882).

For while this is a very wonderful thing for our Lord to say
of womankind, he actually did not say it of women at all, but
of the Roman centurion at Capernaum.²⁴

²⁴Lounsbury, Vol. II, 188.

CHAPTER II

THESEUS: "THIS NOBLE DUC"

The Theseus of The House of Fame becomes his own opposite in a subsequent work of Chaucer's, the unfinished Compleynt of Feire Anelida and Fals Arcite. He no longer represents the despicable faithless lover, meriting only contempt. Instead he is the "noble prince" of Athens, admired by all his people upon his victorious return from the Scythian wars. (l. 45). He is crowned with laurel and sits on a chair of gold with the Amazon queen, Hippolyta, and her beautiful young sister, Emily, at his side; he is preceded by his proud troops and the banner of Mars the Warrior. Chaucer tells us of the welcome at his homecoming,

For which the peple, blisful al and somme,
So cryeden that to the sterres hit wente,
And him to honouren dide al her entente. (ll. 26-28).

Chaucer probably intended to include in his poem further examples of the greatness and goodness of Theseus, since he gives to him the initial place in the story and introduces him as a kind of epic hero who brings glory to himself and his people. What we have of Anelida and Arcite presents type figures rather than realistic characters. Theseus is the young, noble conqueror; Creon, the strong and admirable, though old, conqueror; Arcite, the traitorous lover; and Anelida, the beautiful and constant in love. Chaucer treats

the same theme in Anelida and Arcite that he has treated in The House of Fame--and, moreover, The Legend of Good Women, which presumably comes after these two--but with a significant difference. Not only does Chaucer delineate man's falseness in love through a character other than Theseus in this poem, but he attributes to Theseus only admirable qualities with no reference whatever to his falseness to Ariadne. Chaucer then does not attempt to reconcile to himself the moral ambiguity that the historical and legendary Theseus provides. Rather he draws from various phases in the life of Theseus, as found in numerous sources, and chooses variously which aspect of the man best suits his purposes. Though Theseus was entirely wicked and false in The House of Fame, and only ambiguously so in The Legend of Good Women, we now see Chaucer assigning Theseus to an altogether new role. Theseus has the advantage of being older now, sobered by the suicide of his father Aegeus, who believed his son to be dead; and as ruler of Athens Theseus assumes the responsibility for his people.

Perhaps in later writing The Legend after using Theseus to represent treachery in The House of Fame and virtue in Anelida and Arcite, Chaucer realized that the early falseness of Theseus might be attributed to youth and a desperate situation; and as a result he softened his original premise in The House of Fame. But whatever the case may be, Chaucer's use of the Theseus story is clearly twofold.

Chaucer claims as his sources for Anelida and Arcite Statius and Corinne, who is probably the Theban poetess Corinna, well known for her defeat of Pindar in competition. However, this allusion to antiquity is merely "Chaucer's way of claiming ancient authority for his tale....For scholars are loath to credit anything to pure invention." Instead of the Thebaid of Statius, as Robinson points out, Chaucer uses the Teseide of Boccaccio.²⁵ Shannon also acknowledges Chaucer's indebtedness to the Teseide, pointing specifically to the first three stanzas, and the eighth, ninth, and tenth of Anelida and Arcite.²⁶ The court setting comes from Boccaccio²⁷; but Shannon believes the story of Anelida to be Chaucer's own creation, modeled after the Heroides of Ovid.²⁸ Several attempts have been made to prove that Chaucer used as models certain of his contemporaries, but the suggestions seem contrived and unnecessary.²⁹

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Of the four works of Chaucer in which Theseus appears, only one of them The Knight's Tale, is complete. And Theseus is given the major role for the first time. Again he is

²⁵Robinson, p. 303.

²⁶Shannon, p. 15.

²⁷Shannon, p. 16.

²⁸Shannon, p. 36.

²⁹See Frederick Tupper, "Chaucer's Tale of Ireland," PMLA XXXVI, 186-222; and J. B. Bilderbeck, "Chaucer's 'Anelida and Arcite,'" Notes and Queries, 8th Ser., IX (1896), 301-2.

the virtuous warrior and ruler of Athens, as in Anelida and Arcite, which is the basis for this characterization. Yet Chaucer adds to the tradition many of his own humanizing touches, creating a realistic, very credible ruler and human being. Chaucer salutes Theseus as a hero of epic dimensions:

Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,
 Ther was a duc that highte Theseus;
 Of Atthenes he was lord and governour,
 And in his tyme swich a conquerour,
 That gretter was ther noon under the sonne.
 Ful many a riche contree hadde he wonne;
 What with his wysdom and his chivelrie,
 He conquered al the regne of Femenye,
 That whilom was ycleped Scithia,
 And weddede the queene Ypolita. (ll. 860-868).

As Charles Muscatine tells us, "The Knight's Tale is essentially neither a story, nor a static picture, but a poetic pageant, and...all its materials are organized and contributory to a complex design expressing the nature of noble life."³⁰ Theseus as the central figure is then "representative of the highest chivalric conceptions of nobility."³¹ Theseus is, first of all, a warrior, his banner bearing "the rede statue of Mars, with spere and targe," his pennon embroidered with the image of the Minotaur that he has slain in Crete. (l. 975). Our first encounter with him in The Knight's Tale identifies Theseus as a great conqueror: his return to Athens after a victorious campaign in Scythia is

³⁰ Charles Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer's Knight's Tale," Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York, 1959), p. 69.

³¹ Muscatine, p. 72.

retold from Anelida and Arcite, though with greater ceremony and splendor. Yet his long-anticipated home-coming is not to be immediately realized, for as he approaches near to Athens, the duke encounters the procession of mourning ladies who grieve for the atrocities committed upon their dead husbands by the wicked Creon. In his pity for them then,

this gentil duc...
 swear his ooth, as he was trewe knyght,
 He wolde doon so ferforthly his myght
 Upon the tiraunt Creon hem to wreke,
 That al the peple of Grece sholde speke
 How Creon was of Theseus yserved
 As he that hadde his deeth ful wel deserved.
 (ll. 952; 959-64).

Theseus is off to the wars once more, and

With Creon, which that was of Tebes kyng,
 He faught, and slough hym manly as a knyght
 In pleyn bataille, and putte the folk to flyght.
 (ll. 986-988).

Theseus in his nobility demonstrates his great respect for womankind and his pity at their distresses. Hippolyta and Emily, though rightfully his captives, are entertained ceremoniously and made a part of the royal household. He is so much grieved at the mourning procession of Theban women that

This gentil duc doun from his courser sterte
 With herte pitous, whan he herde hem speke.
 Hym thoughte that his herte wolde breke,
 Whan he saugh hem so pitous and so maat,
 That whilom weren of so greet estaat;
 And in his armes he hem alle up hente,
 And conforteth in ful good entente. (ll. 952-958).

And when wicked Creon is suppressed, Chaucer tells us of

the grete honour
 That Theseus, the noble conquerour,
 Dooth to the ladyes, whan they from hym wente.
 (ll. 997-999).

Later in the story Theseus finds the disguised Arcite and the escaped Palamon fighting illegally in the forest, and at the request of Palamon decrees that the two shall die; yet when the queen, Hippolyta, and the fair Emily, along with the women attending them, begin to weep at the idea of killing Emily's two young lovers, Theseus immediately softens and retracts his punishment altogether. He is unable to reject the pleas of suppliant ladies, as he is a knight and nobleman. Chaucer says that "pitee renneth soone in gentil herte," but it does so in this circumstance only by the persuasion of woeful women. (l. 1961). How different this honorable and respectful man from the Theseus of The House of Fame and The Legend of Good Women, who cares not for the anguish which he causes a woman that loves him. The Theseus of The Knight's Tale also places great significance upon friendship, loving his friend, Pirithous, to such a degree that he breaks his vow that Palamon and Arcite shall not be ransomed, and releases Arcite at the request of Pirithous. Chaucer intensifies this view of the duke of Athens by alluding to the ancient myth:

So wel they lovede, as olde bookes sayn,
That whan that oon [Pirithous] was deed, soothly to telle,
His felawe wente and soughte hym doun in helle.
(ll. 1198-1200).

Theseus, as the knightly code demands, also represents justice. He has no honorable alternative but to fight Creon in order to avenge the wives of dead Theban husbands whom Creon has piled in a heap and denied burial. When the

admirable Philostrate--in reality, Arcite--serves his lord well, Theseus promotes him to squire, though he believes the young man to be of low birth. He thus is more concerned with the inherent worth of the man than with his lineage. In making plans for the lists, which are to determine the futures of Palamon, Arcite, and Emily, Duke Theseus is careful to make the contest as fair as is possible, affording to each man the right to choose one hundred warriors to aid him in his battle for the hand of Emily. And in constructing the theater for the lists the duke concerns himself with erecting oratories to each of the gods that the suitors honor most, even to Diana, the goddess to whom Emily prays for her unharmed chastity. When the great warriors of the country assemble then in Athens, in anticipation of the contest, Theseus honors each man richly according to his rank, as is the custom of his time; his service to them is just and great:

This Theseus, this duc, this worthy knyght,
 When he had broght hem into his citee,
 And inned hem, everich at his degree,
 He festeth hem, and dooth so greet labour
 To esen hem and doon hem al honour,
 That yet men wenen that no mannes wit
 Of noon estaat ne koude amenden it. (ll. 2189-96).

Even after the cruel misfortune of Arcite's fall from his horse, for which he is grieved, Theseus nevertheless celebrates the battle and feasts the warriors grandly: "He nolde nocht disconforten hem alle." (l. 2704). And moreover, as if in proof of his justice, this ruler of Athens

leet crye,
 To stynten alle rancour and envye,

The gree as wel of o syde as of oother,
 And eyther syde ylik as ootheres brother.

(ll. 2731-2734).

Chaucer next, in enhancing the nobility of Theseus, adds to his portrait of the valorous conqueror, defender of women, friend of man, and just ruler, the essential elements of grandeur and love of magnificence. We are told that the initial homecoming of Theseus following the Scythian wars is splendid, as is his final one after the defeat of old Creon. Yet even though his life is no longer that of the eternally victorious warrior, Theseus somehow manages to draw even greater admiration to himself for the scope of his understanding and the magnitude of his enterprises. The theater for the lists is incredibly conceived, its circumference being a mile and the height of its walls reaching sixty feet. And all the excellent craftsmen of the kingdom are employed in creating the magnificent structure, that ultimately boasts gates of marble with oratories to Venus and Mars above them, and a wondrous oratory devised for the worship of the goddess of chastity. The walls of these temples Theseus graces with illustrations of various aspects of the gods, be they benign or cruel--in form of intricate carving or gorgeous painting. He spares no cost or effort in this production which demonstrates his greatness of imagination and power. In like manner, Theseus prepares elaborately for the burial of the luckless Arcite. Theseus dresses the body of the young Theban knight in cloth of gold--"the richeste that he hadde"--and with the same stuff he covers the bier.

(l. 2872). A keen sword is placed in the white-gloved hand of Arcite, and a crown of laurel upon his head. Three great steel-trapped horses bear worthy men carrying the arms which have served Arcite in battle. The Greeks whom Theseus deems noblest bear the bier itself upon their shoulders; and the duke and old Aegeus, his father, walk on either side, carrying golden pitchers filled with honey, wine, milk, and blood, with which to honor the funeral pyre. Chaucer, as narrator, is extremely impressed with the entire procedure; we see him with mouth agape as he views the "heigh labour and ful greet apparaillynge" (l. 2913): the preparations for the burning are so great that the pyre

with his grene top the hevene raughte;
And twenty fadme of brede the armes straughte--
This is to seyn, the bowes weren so brode.

(ll. 2915-2917).

We are then told of twenty-one varieties of trees that have been chosen for the fire as a part of the great homage to Arcite, and cannot help feeling that Theseus in his show of noble grief exhausts every resource possible in creating still another marvelous spectacle. The birds and beasts, and even the gods of the forest have been driven from their habitations at the behest of great Theseus, that sufficient tribute might be given to the dead Arcite. He epitomizes the noble state, being comparable to "a god in trone" (l. 2529); and his subjects recognize him as such:

The peple preesseth thiderward ful soone
Hym for to seen, and doon heigh reverence,

And eek to herkne his heste and his sentence.
(ll. 2530-2532).

Their awe of the king, however, is transcended by the love and admiration with which these people laud Theseus following his decree that none shall be killed in the battle for Emily's hand. This pity for the slaughter of worthy manhood and understanding of the innate desire of man to live marks Theseus as a human being as well as the archetype of valorous knighthood and admirable nobility. He at once affords the warriors who anxiously gather to prove their merit the opportunity to do so, and the opportunity to do so without the danger of losing life as a result. Chaucer, in addition, gives to Theseus further qualities which make him real and believable. He is gifted with a sense of humor, as we see when he separates the battling Palamon and Arcite-- being persuaded that they shall not be put to death:

Lo heere this Arcite and this Palamoun,
That quitly weren out of my prisoun,
And myghte han lyved in Thebes roially,
And witen I am hir mortal enemy,
And that hir deth lith in my myght also;
And yet hath love, maugree hir eyen two,
Brought hem hyder bothe for to dye.
Now looketh, is nat that an heigh folye?
Who may been a fool, but if he love?
Se how they blede! be they nocht wel arrayed?
Thus hath hir lord, the god of love, ypayed
Hir wages and hir fees for hir servyse!
And yet they wenen for to been ful wyse
That serven love, for aught that may bifalle.
But this is yet the beste game of alle,
That she for whom they han this jolitee
Kan hem therfore as mucche thank as me.
She woot namoore of al this hoote fare,
By God, than woot a cokkow or an hare! (ll. 1791-1810).

He is willing even to admit that once he himself has been

love's fool and to laugh at himself. Then at the close of his Knight's Tale Chaucer again allows a glance at his capacity for humor; for when Theseus brings Palamon and Emily together, suggesting their marriage, he says to Palamon: "I trowe ther nedeth litel sermonyng/ To make yow assente to this thyng." (ll. 3091-2).

But there is, too, a somewhat frightening aspect of Theseus--as there is of most real people: he is occasionally headstrong. Henry Barrett Hinckley says of him: "Chaucer's Theseus...has not a little of the ferocity of a Plantagenet."³² In his anger at the horrors performed by Creon's warriors, Theseus refuses to ransom Palamon and Arcite, though they are young and nobly born. But when his initial passion has subsided, he frees Arcite at the request of Pirithous and eventually allows both young Thebans to go free. Once more, when the duke finds Palamon and Arcite fighting in the forest, he immediately accepts the proposal of Palamon that both should die. Arcite has deceived him with his disguised appearance and is in Athens at the danger of losing his life; Palamon has escaped from prison and thus wrongs Theseus also--and in addition they are guilty of fighting illegally outside the lists. The duke indeed has the right to be angry. Yet he alters his hasty decision upon further contemplation of the matter. His plans for the great battle to be led by Palamon

³²Henry Barrett Hinckley, Notes on Chaucer: A Commentary on the Prolog and Six Canterbury Tales (Northampton, 1907), p. 61.

and Arcite do not exclude brutality and killing; however, just before the fight is to begin, Theseus proclaims that none shall die. So, while he seems hot-tempered and rather cruel at times, he habitually softens and retracts these passionate decisions. As he reckons with the harsh side of himself he says:

Fy

Upon a lord that wol have no mercy,
 But been a leon, bothe in word and dede,
 To hem that been in repentaunce and drede,
 As well as to a proud despitous man
 That wol mayntene that he first bigan. (ll. 1773-8).

As has been indicated, the Theseus of The Knight's Tale is first a nobleman and knight, and secondly a human being; but he represents still another stratum, which, although less significant than these other two, exists in Chaucer's characterization of him here. Chaucer, as is cited above, alludes to Theseus as appearing god-like on his throne; and this allusion has deeper meaning than is at first apparent. All the major characters of this tale seem to have parallels in the gods. Arcite worships Mars and is more pugnacious than his cousin, who prays to Venus and is more spiritual in his view of womankind and love. The chaste Emily is the mortal prototype of Diana. And Aegeus, the father of Theseus, reminds us of old Saturn in his sagacity and great age. Theseus then must also be an earthly reflection of heavenly existence. As ruler of the world that Chaucer reveals to us in The Knight's Tale, Theseus is like Jupiter; and he is like him in other ways, for Edith Hamilton says of

the god:

Jupiter became the supreme ruler. He was Lord of the Sky, the Rain-god and the Cloud-gatherer, who wielded the awful thunderbolt. His power was greater than that of all the other divinities together....Nevertheless he was not omnipotent or omniscient, either. He could be opposed and deceived. Poseidon dupes him in the Iliad and so does Hera. Sometimes, too, the mysterious power, Fate, is spoken of as stronger than he.³³

Theseus is unquestionably the superior of those characters in the story representing Mars, Venus, Diana, and even Saturn. Yet he, too, may be opposed--and in many instances it is well that he may be, as when his decisions are hasty and not carefully made--the opposition resulting often in a change of heart. Arcite successfully deceives the duke, moreover, in making himself one of the most beloved and trusted servants of the royal household; and Palamon escapes from his prison. He is, however, superhuman in his role as the "executant of destiny," as William Frost tells us: he is

terrifying in action; philosophical in outlook; richly experienced/ yet detached in point of view; warmly sympathetic to misfortune yet mockingly ironical at the expense of youthful enthusiasm. From the moment when he gives orders that the captured knights be imprisoned to the moment when he arranges the final nuptials of Emelye and Palamon he dominates the plot without ever being a partisan.³⁴

³³Edith Hamilton, Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes (New York, 1953), p. 27.

³⁴William Frost, "An Interpretation of Chaucer's Knight's Tale," Review of English Studies XXV (1949), 297-8.

And it is true that Theseus does dominate the plot as the most powerful character; but the function of destiny or Fate in the tale needs definition in order to point out his position in relation to a more powerful phenomenon, and to strengthen the parallel of Theseus to Jupiter. The woeful widows of Thebes give credit for the victory of Theseus over the Amazons not to Theseus, but to Fate; he is the "Lord to whom Fortune hath given/ Victorie." (ll. 915-16). This same Fortune is also responsible for their miserable plight:

"Thanks be Fortune and hire false wheel,/ That noon estaat assureth to be weel." (ll. 925-26). Thus it is that no man, neither peasant nor king, has the might to overcome the merest whim of Fate. Arcite in a long speech following his release from prison indicates that he, too, feels that he is actually ruled by Fortune, and not primarily by Theseus, who sets him free:

Wel hath Fortune yturned thee the dys,
That hast the sighte of hire, and I th'absence,...
Allas, why pleyen folk so in commune
On purveiaunce of God, or of Fortune,
That yeveth hem ful often in many a gyse
Wel bettre than they kan hemself devyse?
(ll. 1938-39; 1251-54).

It is interesting that his cousin, Palamon, looks to various gods--Saturn, Juno, and Venus--in his anger at perpetual imprisonment. Chaucer, however, attributes the meeting of the two cousins in the forest, as well as all other occurrences, to Fortune, that is merged with God here:

The destinee, ministre general,
That executeth in the world over al

The purveiaunce that God hath seyn biforn,
 So strong it is that, though the world had sworn
 The contrairie of a thyng by ye or nay,
 Yet somtyme it shal fallen on a day
 That falleth nat eft withinne a thousand yeer.
 (ll. 1663-1669).

So it is that Theseus, like Jupiter, is overshadowed by the power of Fate; indeed, as Frost has noted, Theseus appears to be the "executant of destiny," or the tool of Fate. Theseus tells Palamon and Arcite: "ech of yow shal have his destyne/ As hym is shape," but proceeds to abet this destiny by determining that there shall be a list with a hundred warriors for each man. (ll. 1842-43). What is more, though Emily is to wed whichever man "to whom that Fortune yeveth so fair a grace," Theseus will preside as judge over the great battle. (l. 1861). And while the course of Fortune is to shape the futures of these two young men, Theseus' decree, "This is your ende and youre conclusion," sounds formidable and final. (l. 1869). But then we remember that Theseus has appeared in behalf of Fate on other occasions. He brings Hippolyta and Emily to Athens from their native land. He imprisons Palamon and Arcite where they are likely to view the beautiful Emily as she walks in the garden. By chance he stumbles upon the two young knights, standing in their own blood and still slashing furiously at each other. He later affirms that Arcite has beaten his cousin in combat and promises him the hand of Emily. And when Arcite has been dead for some time, it is Theseus who suggests that Emily take Palamon for her husband. The power of Theseus as compared

with that of Fate becomes most evident when death occurs in the lists even though Theseus has ordered that there shall be none.

Lounsbury, who has asserted that Chaucer is cramped by the use of legendary material, points to the inconsistencies of The Knight's Tale:

Anachronisms in Chaucer's writings are certainly numerous. They are far from being confined to particular incidents. The whole action of the piece is often pervaded by their spirit. In the Knight's Tale...this is very conspicuous. It is in the time of the Greek heroic age that the events recorded in it take place; but the atmosphere which envelops it is the atmosphere of medieval chivalry. Not only is the feudal system, with its ideas and feelings, transferred to the mythologic age of Greece, but even/ its petty peculiarities of manners and of daily life. Theseus holds at Athens a great tournament. It is not only a fourteenth-century tournament in its general characteristics, but also in its smallest details, down even to the costume and armor of those who take part in it. One of the combatants is even furnished with a Prussian shield. Later in the story one of the weapons borne at the funeral of Arcite is his Turkish bow....Theseus has at Athens a parliament like that of England, and announces his decisions as having been reached by its advice.³⁵

There are more inconsistencies that he might have named. Chaucer juxtaposes the belief in the Christian God and the pagan belief in the worship of many gods; for the Christian idea of God's goodness and omnipotence that Boethius presents in his Consolation is attributed by Theseus to Jupiter, king of the mythological realm. God and Fate are allied and proclaimed supreme, although Mars, Venus, Diana, and Jupiter

³⁵Lounsbury, Vol. III, 376-377.

receive the adoration of Chaucer's characters. The father of Theseus, old Aegeus, is significant to the story in a demonstration of seasoned wisdom; yet according to legend, he should not be living at all: Aegeus is reported to have thrown himself into the sea when he believed his son killed by the Minotaur in Crete. And the question arises as to whether Palamon and Arcite should logically be fighting along with wicked Creon against Theseus. Chaucer tells us that the two young knights are Theban; also that Creon is the enemy of Thebans, having slain the men of the city and refused them customary death rites. As honorable knights it seems likely that these two nobly-born cousins should be the defenders of their countrymen rather than of the tyrant who has taken the throne by force. Chaucer's presentation of Creon and Arcite in The Knight's Tale is also an ironical one. For although Chaucer appears to have based his Theseus upon the character in Anelida and Arcite--as drawn from Boccaccio's Teseide--his Creon and Arcite alter considerably in the transplanting from that poem. In Anelida and Arcite we see that Creon has pity on the nobility of Thebes:

And when the olde Creon gan espye
 How that the blood roial was broght a-doun,
 He held the cite by his tyrannye,
 And dyde the gentils of that regioun
 To ben his frendes, and dwellen in the toun.
 So, what for love of him, and what for awe,
 The noble folk were to the toun idrawe. (ll. 64-70).

But this kind of man does not fit Chaucer's design for The Knight's Tale. And so it is with Arcite, who--as we are told

upon first encountering him--is treacherous and cunning, preying upon love; Chaucer molds him into the prey of love for his more fully-developed character, however, in the later tale. It is true that Chaucer combines diverse interpretations of the legend, even adding variations of his own, in creating The Knight's Tale. Yet this is evidence, not for the point which Mr. Lounsbury attempts to make concerning the confinement and dullness of using legends as bases for his works, but rather against it. Chaucer shapes the traditional figures and events at will, using only which aspects are at the moment valuable to him. He diminishes and enlarges here and there like the sculptor who begins with a mass of clay: the myth conforms then to his every whim, emerging riper and more real.

One critic, Henry J. Webb, contends that Chaucer's treatment of Theseus throughout The Knight's Tale is ironical--that Theseus is in reality ignoble, though outwardly representing the perfection of knighthood and nobility. He bases his argument upon seven points: (1) Although the destruction of Thebes is not recorded in Boccaccio's Teseide, it does appear in the Roman de Thèbes; and then it occurs before the death of Creon and may be justified as an act of war. Yet Theseus lays waste the city after Creon is dead--thus without justification. (2) Theseus does not provide for proper disposal of the dead and wounded of the Theban fighters after the battle, as Teseo does in the Teseide.

(3) Mercy is expected of nobility, yet Theseus contributes to the great woe of Palamon and Arcite, who are miserable in prison. (4) Theseus does not treat the noble young Thebans as the chivalrous knight customarily does. And here Webb cites the case of the Black Prince, who in 1356 captured King John, serving him readily, however, and allowing him to go about freely with his household. (5) He unfairly frees only Arcite and leaves poor Palamon in prison. (6) The first concern of Theseus is always himself, as when he encounters the mourning ladies, he thinks of the praises he will draw to himself in subduing the wicked Creon. And (7) the duke is hot-headed, dashing off immediately to battle Creon, and immediately sentencing Palamon and Arcite to death when he finds them engaged in an illegal contest.³⁶ However, there are several factors which dispute this thesis. Plutarch relates that habitually

Theseus...went on his way chastising the wicked, who were visited with the same violence from him which they were visiting upon others, and suffered justice after the manner of their own injustice.³⁷

Plutarch is referring here to Theseus as a younger man; but it is significant that he regards the retributive method of punishment as justice. Creon has committed atrocities against

³⁶Henry J. Webb, "A Reinterpretation of Chaucer's Theseus," Review of English Studies, XXIII (1947), 290-295 passim.

³⁷Plutarch's Lives, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (New York, 1928), p. 23.

dead Theban lords, and, subsequently, their ladies. Theseus' rending of the city walls and pillaging of the city then, though brutal, is not yet sufficiently horrible to match the crime of Creon, whom he seeks to work justice upon. We must note, too, that Theseus is merciful in allowing Palamon and Arcite to live--even in prison--and that these knights are carried tenderly into the tent of Theseus. Webb seems appalled at the concern of Theseus for grandness and personal glory, and yet this is a quality that is typical of knighthood and nobility. This critic says, too, that Theseus is a hot-head. And he is quite correct. But he is capable of feeling great pity, generally retracting his poorly-considered decisions. Whatever his faults, the overall effect created by Theseus in The Knight's Tale is reflected in the people who surround him; peasants and nobles alike admire, respect, and love this duke. Webb concludes his theory with the conviction that Chaucer's ultimate opinion of Theseus may be seen in The Legend of Good Women and The House of Fame. If this be the case, however, these two incomplete and metrically and structurally inferior pieces must succeed The Knight's Tale, which seems most unlikely.

John L. Lowes says of The Legend of Good Women: "That after he had created the very noble and stately figure of Theseus in The Knight's Tale Chaucer should...superimpose upon it in his readers' minds the despicable traitor of The Legend of Ariadne, only the most convincing external evidence could lead one to believe. On the other hand, that the crude and not

particularly meritorious sketch should precede the more finished and elaborate development is merely in the natural order of things."³⁸ And what is more unlikely still is that Chaucer should put into the mouth of a "parfit, gentil knyght" a tongue-in-cheek tale about knighthood and nobility. (l. 73). Another critic, Agnes K. Getty, does not go as far as Mr. Webb, though she believes that Theseus represents "a strong revolt against [the chivalric] code."³⁹ As evidence for her case, she cites the speech of Theseus to Palamon and Arcite in the forest following the decision to spare their lives. "Theseus...emphasizes the fact that he does not support the theories of romantic love when he tells Palamon and Arcite that they know they both may not have Emelye, though they be ever so jealous, angry, or fight for evermore."⁴⁰ It appears, since she does not exploit this idea further, that Miss Getty is taking Chaucer too literally here, at a time when Theseus is displaying his subtle sense of humor. The good duke means to say no more than that it is impossible for both young knights to wed Emily, to have her in a tangible, physical sense; he does not discount the possibility that the one who does not have Emily for his wife may continue

³⁸John L. Lowes, "The Prologue to The Legend of Ariadne Considered in its Chronological Relations," PMLA, XX, 810.

³⁹Agnes K. Getty, "Chaucer's Changing Conception of the Humble Lover," PMLA, XLIV (1929), 210.

⁴⁰Getty, p. 211.

to love her spiritually for the duration of his life. Charles Muscatine calls Theseus' speech on love "a mature appraisal, not an adverse criticism, of courtly love."⁴¹

Critics agree that Chaucer's principal source for The Knight's Tale is Boccaccio's Teseide. It is the belief of Cummings that, while The Knight's Tale improves upon the work of Boccaccio in intensifying the action and simplifying the wealth of beauty, Chaucer loses greatly in artistic effect when he allows Theseus rather than Emily to discover Palamon and Arcite fighting, and when he interposes the philosophy of Boethius at the end of the tale.⁴² However, Chaucer has a distinct purpose in having Theseus chance upon the forest battle, for his duke is presented as the executant of destiny throughout the tale and must appear so in this case for consistency's sake. It also affords a better opportunity to display the hot temper which helps to make Theseus real. And the use of Boethian philosophy at the end of The Knight's Tale is not in the least regrettable, though Lounsbury agrees with Cummings that "almost the only thing that impairs in the least the perfect unity of The Knight's Tale is a speech of over one hundred lines put in the mouth of Theseus at the close."⁴³ Bernard L. Jefferson points out that Chaucer takes

⁴¹Muscatine, p. 75.

⁴²Cummings, pp. 125, 127, 138.

⁴³Lounsbury, Vol. III, 372.

from Boethius the ideas that God brings about all things and that the Divine Love is an all-embracing, or unifying power.⁴⁴ And since our desires are instilled within us by the divine spirit, Theseus, as the tool of Fate or God, desires to hunt and so happens upon Palamon and Arcite.⁴⁵ D. S. Brewer believes that the attraction of Boethius for Chaucer is his allusion to the possibility of synthesizing spiritual and earthly love.⁴⁶ The speech of Theseus, taken from The Consolation of Philosophy, incorporates both ideas, thereby delineating the strata of meaning which may be attributed to being, or essence, and love in The Knight's Tale. Lounsbury's feeling that Chaucer draws this speech from Boethius simply to translate "several passages from the favorite work of a favorite author" does not convince us that he has analyzed the speech carefully enough in its relation to the overall structure or the work.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Bernard L. Jefferson, Chaucer and the Consolation of Philosophy of Boethius (London, 1917), p. 66.

⁴⁵Jefferson, p. 143.

⁴⁶D. S. Brewer, Chaucer (London, 1953), p. 66.

⁴⁷Lounsbury, Vol. III, 373.

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

Contrary to the opinion of Mr. Lounsbury then, Chaucer does not tire of legendary material, nor is his literary genius hampered by its use. The figure of Theseus provides adequate evidence for this argument, since Chaucer uses him in four of his works, and in doing so shapes him at will for diverse purposes. By drawing from various parts of the Theseus legend, as seen in the writings of many authors, he is able to contrive an allegorical figure representing evil for The House of Fame and representing the perfection of knight-hood in Anelida and Arcite. He is, moreover, able to create, using the history of Theseus as a basis, the complex and ambiguous villain of The Legend of Good Women, and the believable and noble ruler of The Knight's Tale. In two of these works, notably The House of Fame and The Legend of Good Women, Chaucer uses the device of paralleling Theseus to other characters for additional insight into his motives and actions, and to a lesser degree in The Knight's Tale; for in the later work the poet is concentrating more heavily upon shaping Theseus himself into a well-rounded character. The remaining work discussed, Anelida and Arcite, is so far from completion that it is difficult to determine Chaucer's ultimate plan for Theseus there.

It is notable that as Chaucer continues his use of the Theseus legends, his character becomes increasingly more multifarious and realistic, as we have seen in the progression from two early works, The House of Fame and Anelida and Arcite, to The Legend of Good Women, and then to The Knight's Tale. As Chaucer himself emerges as an author of great creative genius, he tends to rely less and less upon stereotyped figures and popular literary conventions in his writings. So it is that Theseus has come to stand for more than a legendary villain, or a legendary hero, and that he need no longer be catalogued with a dozen others of his kind in order to assume significance. Chaucer steps free of the limitations which some critics claim the use of legends imposes; and Theseus acquires enough flesh by the time of The Knight's Tale to rank with the best of Chaucer's people.

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