

The Knight's Tale (2)

Suffering Bodies in the *Knight's Tale*

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One of the most controversial and debated episodes in the *Knight's Tale* occurs close to the tale's end. Theseus, the duke of Athens, delivers a long speech of consolation to his mournful Athenian subjects and to Palamon and Emelye. All of them are grieving for Arcite, the Theban knight and cousin to Palamon who died some years before. In his consolation speech, Theseus (and, through him, Chaucer) pulls out all the rhetorical stops, speaking for some hundred lines in elevated style and describing the whole structure of the cosmos. There is no reason to be upset, Theseus declares, because the "First Mover"—the deity who gives order to the universe—allots only a certain life span to each creature. No one can exceed that limit. Natural things "descend" from the First Mover's eternal domain, and in the process they become "corrumpable [corruptible]," or vulnerable to harm, decay, and death (3010). Whether we like it or not, the universe operates by returning each living thing to its cosmic origin when it dies—"convertynge" each back to its "propre welle [source] / From which it is dirryved [derived]" (3037-38). According to Theseus, those who continue to mourn Arcite should accept death's inevitability and move on.

In terms of its immediate result, Theseus's consolation seems successful. Palamon and Emelye promptly marry, "with all blisse and melodye," and the story reaches its happy ending (3097). Yet many readers have argued that Theseus's speech fails to address urgent questions raised earlier in the tale, questions about individuality, causation, agency, and suffering. In order to investigate how the narrative addresses such topics, we might focus on its depiction of embodiment, especially Arcite's injury and death. This portrayal—of what it's like to inhabit and suffer one's own material body—unites issues of human particularity, action, and vulnerability. That this is so should not be too surprising. After all, we're familiar with the importance of bodies to visualizing individual selfhood, a fact made vivid in the pilgrim portraits that Chaucer provides in the *General Prologue*. Bodies are also useful for thinking about action and vulnerability together: while our bodies are our primary means of accomplishing things in the material world, they are also the reason we are susceptible to sickness, death, and physical forces of all kinds. Bodies make us both active and passive, both capable and vulnerable. Over the course of the *Knight's Tale*, Arcite has to negotiate his embodied capacities and incapacities, and the tale sets his negotiations into complex relation with the story's larger structures of order.

Duke Theseus's consolation zooms out to the metaphysical scale, beyond the physical world of death and change. Yet at an important moment earlier in the *Knight's Tale*, the narration takes the opposite approach and zooms *in*, giving readers a close look at Arcite's "corrumpable" flesh. Instead of metaphysics, this passage adopts the medieval idiom of *phisik*, that is, of medicine and

natural science. Looking closely at this passage and a few related ones helps to sharpen the puzzle of what role embodied life plays in the *Knight's Tale* as a whole.

Tools

All of the rising action of the *Knight's Tale* culminates in the great tournament to decide whether Arcite or Palamon will marry Emelye. First-time readers are likely to be genuinely uncertain about which knight is more worthy of his lady's hand, or more likely to win it. Chaucer thoroughly altered his source, Giovanni Boccaccio's Italian epic the *Teseida*, to equalize the portrayal of the two knights. But at the end of the tournament, an important difference finally emerges. Palamon has been captured, and Arcite is victorious. In this moment of apparent decisiveness, as Arcite rides forward to meet his bride-to-be, something unexpected happens. A "furie infernal" bursts from the ground, sent from the underworld into the stadium. The apparition frightens Arcite's horse, and the knight is struck and injured. He lies momentarily motionless, as though dead, with "blood yronnen in his face," before being carried to Theseus's palace (2693).

When the narration comes back to Arcite, he is described in the technical language of medieval medicine:

Swellethe the brest of Arcite, and the soore
Encreeseth at his herte moore and moore.
The clothered [clotted] blood, for any lechecraft [in spite of any medical skill],
Corrupteth, and is in his bouk ylaft [torso remains],
That neither veyne-blood [blood-letting], ne ventusyng [cupping],
Ne drynke of herbes may ben his helpynge.
The vertu expulsif, or animal,
Fro thilke vertu cleped natural
Ne may the venym voyden ne expelle.
The pipes of his longes gonne to swelle,
And every lacerte [muscle] in his brest adoun
Is shent [clogged] with venym and corrupcioun.
Hym gayneth neither [neither helps him], for to gete his lif,
Vomyt upward, ne downward laxatif. (2743-56)

In these lines, the specialized language of *phisik* ostentatiously draws attention to itself. Six of these words ("ventosinge," "expulsif," "animal [*adj*]," "expelle," "lacerte," and "veyne-blood") have here their earliest recorded uses in Middle English, and the overall quality of the diction is technical. Employing such a specialized idiom, Chaucer would have been aware that he was giving his readers pause. The effect would be similar to, say, that of a disaster movie, in which characters deliver grave warnings about seismic activity, P and S waves, convergent plate boundaries, and subducted lithosphere—and while audiences may not know exactly what the terms mean, they can recognize them as a scientific prediction of an impending earthquake. Similarly, Chaucer's lines evoke medical danger. The lines also call for investigation because they depart sharply from Boccaccio's portrayal of the same scene in the *Teseida*. There, no similar jargon appears, but Boccaccio does include a bedside physician, "the great Idmon of

Epidaurus.” Even though Chaucer is consistently attentive to the language of craft and profession, he nonetheless cuts out the character that might have grounded this medical language in the social life of discourse. Instead, it seems to arise out of the injured body itself.

The medical description disrupts the tale’s narrative style and alters how readers see Arcite. The young Theban knight is the focus of the scene, but it is not he who acts. The grammatical subjects of the sentences are all *within* Arcite or *part* of him—“the brest of Arcite,” “the soore,” “the clothered blood,” “the vertu expulsif,” “The pipes of his longes,” “vomyt [purgative medicine]” and “laxatif.” This is pitched battle, but it takes place not among knights but between the body’s impulse to circulate its fluids and the counter-process of coagulation, as the clotted blood gathers in his chest. In the vocabulary of *phisik*, this is *vertu* versus *corrupcioun*. While these two terms have moral meanings in other contexts, their sense here is decidedly medical. According to medieval pathology, “corruption” referred to the state of a bodily substance transformed through excess and putrefaction, and it was one of the most common causes of disease. The substance in the human body most likely to become corrupted was a “humor,” which was understood to be one of the body’s four primary fluids—blood, phlegm, choler (or yellow bile), and melancholy (or black bile). These humors flowed through each person’s body, and the particular balance among them helped to determine each individual’s physiology and temperament. The build-up of a humor (often due to a physical blockage, or to the malfunctioning of an organ) almost always became toxic, and medieval medical practitioners used many techniques to purge such build-ups. Several such techniques are mentioned in Arcite’s description. Sometimes, however, no “lechecraft,” or medical procedure, would help. To be a living creature means to be corruptible, or to be made out of matter that can turn venomous for the organism that is constituted by it.

If *corrupcioun* is a term of pathology and mortality, *vertu* is from the vocabulary of life. It is a word of sprawling semantic range in Middle English; indeed, the *Middle English Dictionary* lists nineteen definitions. In Arcite’s medical description, however, Chaucer signals that he is using it in the technical sense of the three bodily *virtutes*, or energies, that were considered to be among the building blocks of living creatures. These biological building blocks were called the *res naturales*, or “natural things,” and they were listed and described in one of the most popular and influential works of medieval medicine, known as the *Isagoge* (or “Introduction”) of Johannitius. The text was actually the Arabic work of the ninth-century scholar Hunayn ibn Ishaq (d. 873), who wrote in what is now Iraq as part of the large-scale effort by Arabic scholars to translate and respond to Greek scientific thought. In the late eleventh century, the monk Constantine the African (d. c.1099) translated into Latin Hunayn ibn Ishaq’s treatise as well as other Arabic medical writings. The *Isagoge* became a foundational text of the medieval medical curriculum, and its account of what composed the body (the *res naturales*), what harmed the body (the *res contra naturam*), and what influenced the body (the *res non naturales*) circulated widely. Chaucer’s attempt in these lines to allude to a hierarchy of causation—in which the “vertu expulsif, or animal” stems from the “vertu cleped natural”—is somewhat confused in terms of physiological theory, but the verses succeed in evoking an array of forces that are operative within the embodied self.

While Chaucer’s readers would have been surprised to encounter such medical jargon at the heart of a chivalric romance, the constitution of the human body was very much on the minds of

the late-medieval reading public. Between the arrival of the Black Death, in 1348, and the start of English printing in 1476, England witnessed remarkable growth in the production of medical writings, largely for readers without university medical degrees. These readers represented a new audience for theory-rich medicine, which before had circulated primarily among the Latin-literate. The texts that were finding new English audiences depicted a universe teeming with various lines of causal force and bodies registering those forces on the skin's surface and in the bowels' depths, in the imbalance and recalibration of humors, in diseases chronic and acute. As medical knowledge became increasingly accessible, such naturalistic accounts of life and the material universe occasionally jostled against other models of embodied identity—for instance, religious, moralistic, or chivalric models—and challenged and transformed them.

So, why does Chaucer inflect Arcite's injuries with the jargon of medicine? Scholars and readers are still working to construct a full account of the effects and significance of Arcite's medicalization in this passage. A few points seem clear. First, the description shows that nonhuman forces undergird and participate in the constitution of a person. Humors, organs, *vertu*, and *corrupcioun* function below the level of Arcite's agency, but his life depends on them. Second, the lexical style of this description disrupts the stately formalism of the Knight's usual narrative style. Just like the "furie" that erupts into the tournament, this medical language seems to erupt into the tale. Readers are provoked to interpret the unexpected shift in diction. Third, this passage appears at a crucial turning point in the story, when the almost identical fates of Arcite and Palamon suddenly pull apart from one another. Readers are already likely to ask, "Why does this happen to Arcite, and not to Palamon?" Arcite's medicalization asks us to layer on top of that query another question: "Why is it important for us to think about Arcite's body at this moment?" This remains a question open to interpretation and debate.

Text

It is perhaps no coincidence that that the word *vertu* (used twice in this medical description of Arcite, lines 2749 and 2750) and the Latinate root *corruptio* (appearing here as *corrupteth*, line 2746, and *corrupcioun*, line 2754) both return in Theseus's final speech of consolation (see lines 3010 and 3042). After all, Theseus's words seek to overcome the idea that Arcite's death impugns the whole order of this universe. "No aspect of *The Knight's Tale* is so difficult to interpret as the circumstances of Arcite's death," writes Edward Schweitzer. "It is, in fact, Arcite's death and the manner of its presentation that above all make the meaning of the whole elusive."^[1] While this chapter won't get to the bottom of the "meaning of the whole," I turn now to three other passages that shed light on what it means to have a suffering, mortal body in the "Knight's Tale."

Lovesickness

It turns out that an earlier episode in the *Knight's Tale* foreshadows the scientific register in which Arcite's fatal injuries are described. When Arcite is exiled from Athens and can no longer see his beloved Emelye, he is described suffering both from lovesickness, which Chaucer calls by its technical name *Hereos*, and from mania. In the Middle Ages, the psychological and corporeal effects of unrequited love were thought to constitute a true pathology.^[2] Chaucer describes Arcite's lovelorn suffering in medical terms:

he ferde
Nat oonly lik the loveris maladye
Of Hereos, but rather lyk manye [mania],
Engendred of humour malencolik
Biforen, in his celle fantastic [imaginative chamber of his brain]. (1372-1376)

The double diagnosis of “Hereos” and “manye [mania],” together with the etiology of black bile (melancholic humor) in the brain, functions to cast love into a material, physiological register. Again, Chaucer has adapted the parallel passage in the *Teseida* by adding this medical terminology. Once readers have finished the tale, the medical terms are recognizable as foreshadowing the later description of Arcite’s internal injuries. But lovesickness is not all bad news for Arcite. It makes him so lean and pale that he is unrecognizable, a physical transformation that allows him to return to Athens and to serve at court under a false name, where he can be close to Emelye.

The connection between Arcite’s lovesickness and his later, fatal *corrupcioun* raises a number of questions. What is the significance of the similarity between these two medical passages? How are love and death related in the tale? What do you think it means that Arcite becomes *different from himself* in the course of his lovesickness, with his appearance altered and his “habit and eek disposicioun” turned “al up so doun [entirely upside-down]” (1379, 1378)? What does the example of Arcite’s pathologies suggest about the nature of embodiment as it is portrayed in the *Knight’s Tale*?

The Planetary Gods

Another change that Chaucer makes to Boccaccio’s *Teseida* is to increase the role of the planetary gods in the tale. Chaucer’s version emphasizes that Mars, Venus, Diana, and Saturn are planets as well as deities in the pagan pantheon. Saturn does not even appear in the *Teseida*, but Chaucer adds him and gives him a crucial function in the plot. When Arcite prays to Mars to help him win the tournament, and Palamon prays to Venus to win Emelye’s hand, the two gods then bicker over which supplicant will have his way. Saturn intervenes between the two of them with a promise to settle the dispute, and also with a fearsome speech about his own destructive powers. “My cours, that hath so wyde for to turne, / Hath moore power than woot any man,” he announces (2454-55). This refers to his path through the heavens, thought to be the broadest and therefore the most powerful among the planets. “My lookyng is the fader of pestilence,” he continues, reflecting the common medieval idea that planetary influence could cause disease (2469). And in fact it is Saturn who sends the *furie* that startles Arcite’s horse and causes the knight’s injury and eventual *corrupcioun* (“From Pluto sent at requeste of Saturne,” line 2685).

Medieval thinkers held that the stars and planets overhead had a powerful influence over individuals’ humoral complexions, their health, and what would happen to them. Forces “out there,” up in the sky, are also at work “in here,” inside persons’ bodies and psyches. V. A. Kolve has explored the salience of the astrological tradition for the *Knight’s Tale*, for instance, in the iconographic tradition of *Planetenkinder*, or “Children of the Planets,” which illustrates the kinds of people and activities supposedly governed by each planet.^[3] The prominent role of astrology in the tale raises questions about how free people are to determine their own destinies. Does

Arcite win the battle but lose Emelye because he is a “child” of Mars? Why does Chaucer add Saturn to his version, and why is Saturn the one responsible for sending the “furie”? What does the role of the planetary gods suggest about the experience of mortal human life in the *Knight’s Tale*?

Death

When the time comes for Arcite to die, he dies in what seems like slow motion:

[...] from his feet up to his brest was come
The coold of deeth, that hadde hym overcome,
And yet mooreover, for in his armes two
The vital strengthe is lost and al ago.
Only the intellect, withouten moore,
That dwelled in his herte syk and soore,
Gan failen [began to fail] whan the herte felte deeth.
Dusked his eyen two, and failed breath,
But on his lady yet caste he his ye.... (2799-807)

Chaucer seems intent on bringing his readers to the very point when Arcite’s body is saturated with physical determination, when his agency constricts to infinitesimal smallness and vanishes. Arcite’s description echoes the medieval genre of death lyrics, which describe the physical signs of approaching death. These lyrics were part of the medieval *ars moriendi*, or the “art of dying”—a discourse aimed to help medieval people “die well,” especially by instructing them in how to reconcile themselves with God before their mortal life ran out.^[4] In the pagan universe of the *Knight’s Tale*, Arcite instead uses his last breath to sigh, “Mercy, Emelye!” (2808). The description of his death also echoes Arcite’s medicalized description less than fifty lines before, which likewise tracks the changing balance of life and death inside his body.

Sandwiched between this description of death and the medical passage before it is Arcite’s last speech, made to Emelye and Palamon (2765-97). How do these different modes of depicting Arcite—in terms of his suffering body and in terms of his own words—produce different effects? What do you make of the narrator’s comments immediately after Arcite has died (2809-15)? What are the different rhetorical tones or moods that surround Arcite’s death? How are readers encouraged to think about mortal embodiment?

Transformation

- After reading the *Knight’s Tale* with suffering bodies in mind, what do YOU think about Theseus’s final speech of consolation? Does it seem to you a true and accurate account of the world of the tale? Does it offer comfort? What did you find unconvincing that you suspect medieval audiences might have appreciated? After evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of Theseus’s consolation, try writing your own, whether in Theseus’s voice or that of one of the other characters.

- This chapter has focused on Arcite's body, but we might also think about Emelye suffering her female body. After all, she is originally a prisoner of war, captured by Theseus when he conquers the Amazons. Look closely at Emelye's prayer to Diana (2297-2330) and describe Emelye's attitudes and desires, especially as they pertain to her body. How does her prayer lead us to regard her role in the rest of the tale?
- One common image drawn in medieval medical manuscripts is that of the Zodiac Man, which was used to help in the timing of bloodletting. It depicts a man's naked body literally crawling with symbols of the zodiac; these symbols represent the influence upon various body parts of the moon's path through the heavens. (A more complete description of these images and numerous examples can be found at <http://www.luminarium.org/encyclopedia/zodiacman.htm>.) What ideas about bodily life do these images seem to express? How might you connect them to the role of astrological forces in the *Knight's Tale*? Are there modern parallels today? What external forces do we understand to shape our bodies and personalities?
- On the basis of evidence inside and outside Chaucer's writings, scholars have concluded that the *Knight's Tale* was written *before* it was incorporated into the *Canterbury Tales*. First it was a stand-alone work, and then Chaucer incorporated it into the tale-telling frame (with some amount of revision). How does the tale change when it joins the context of the pilgrimage? What other bodies in "Fragment I" of the *Canterbury Tales* might Arcite connect to? How does the portrayal of bodies in the *Knight's Tale* differ from their portrayal in the *General Prologue* or in the *Miller's Tale*?

Suggestions for Further Reading:

Muscatine, Charles. "Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*." *PMLA* 65 (1950): 911-929. This is the most famous and influential essay in the modern reception of the *Knight's Tale*.

Seznec, Jean. *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*. Trans. Barbara F. Sessions. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953. A classic study of how the pagan gods were understood in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Wallis, Faith. *Medieval Medicine: A Reader*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010. This anthology includes a diverse array of medieval medical texts translated into modern English.

Notes:

[1] Edward C. Schweitzer, "Fate and Freedom in *The Knight's Tale*," *SAC* 3 (1981): 13-45, at 13.

[2] See Mary F. Wack, *Lovesickness in the Middle Ages: The "Viaticum" and Its Commentaries* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1966).

[3] See V. A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 115-30.

[4] For examples of such death lyrics, see Rossell Hope Robbins, "Signs of Death in Middle English," *Mediaeval Studies* 32 (1970): 282-98 and "How Death Comes" in R. T. Davies, ed., *Medieval English Lyrics: A Critical Anthology* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp74-75.



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