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## CHAUCER'S *KNIGHT'S TALE* AND EMOTIONS IN THE EPIC

*The Knight's Tale* continues the epic tradition and is worth reading from the perspective of the history of emotions, which allows us to interpret not only texts written after the "affective turn" of the eighteenth century, but also earlier ones. Emotions can be "found" in Chaucer's text, to mention only honour as a "lost" emotion. Other questions that need to be addressed are the weakening or empowering potential of emotions and feelings as something that is able to change collective bodies.

KEYWORDS: Middle English romance, epic, history of emotions, honour, potential of emotions

### CHAUCER'S *KNIGHT'S TALE* AND EMOTIONS IN THE EPIC

In the classic study *Epic and Romance: Essays on Medieval Literature* W. P. Ker inspects what he calls "heroic poems" of the early Middle Ages (1964: 3) and notes the affinity between them and the later romances in the statement: "by an equally common consent the name Romance is given to a number of kinds of medieval narrative by which the Epic is succeeded and displaced" (1964: 3). For Ker romances represent "new manners" of writing in relation to the epic (1964: 3). It is thus justifiable to read Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* as a continuation of the epic tradition, even if Elizabeth Salter noticed that epic elements were minimized there in comparison with Boccaccio's *Teseida* (10),<sup>1</sup> and to try to look at it from the perspective of what Stephanie Trigg observed as a recent "affective turn" in the social media, which was followed by the same turn in interpretations of literature (2014: 3). Studying emotions in the epic is not a novelty. So far it has mainly been related to the phenomenon of "finding emotions," as Ute Frevert terms it, in the eighteenth century (2011: 10). For instance, Grażyna Bystydzieńska not only analyzed the sensitivity of Sentimentalism and Pre-Romanticism on the example of Edward Young's "gloomy mood" and other difficult emotions that can be found in his work (1991: 51), but she also scrutinized the mock-heroic epic as a genre

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<sup>1</sup> Salter notices that the following epic elements were eliminated from *The Knight's Tale* despite its being a version of Boccaccio's *Teseida*: length of the narrative, invocations, discussion of Theseus's conquests, Arcite's wanderings in exile, catalogues of champions fighting on behalf of Palamon and Arcite, descriptions of battles that are full of pathos (10), and formal descriptions of the two lovers (11).

replete with emotional responses to the surrounding reality (1982). This study will inspect whether emotions make Chaucer's characters powerless or powerful, how honour intersects with love, and how emotions interact not only just between single characters, but between social bodies.

This is how Ute Frevert writes about the project of "finding emotions," which she finds appropriate for extending onto other literary epochs, not excluding the medieval period: "Finding emotions and exploring their relevance, importance and impact adds taste to the project's texture that has preoccupied contemporaries and historians from [the modernity project's] beginning. But it also helps to retrieve aspects and dimensions of people's actions and mindsets that have been lost in translating the past to the present" (2011: 10). The first dimension of emotions in the epic and romance as the epic's continuation that we could try to retrieve would be emotional responses of its model audiences. To illustrate it with the eighteenth-century example, Bystydzieńska notes that "the mock-heroic epic was to evoke specific emotional responses: to entertain (evoke merriment), to criticize (shame) apart from entertaining" (1982: 13). In *Feeling, Form and Function* Jeffrey Pence directs our attention to how rarely narratives are analyzed from this emotive perspective: "Emotions are a primary feature of our reaction to, or interactions with, narrative, yet this dimension of feeling's reaction to narrative has been treated as embarrassment for critics. Emotional responses are often seen as less standard and mature than other responses" (2004: 273). Nevertheless, the function of the epic is, as Bystydzieńska wrote, to evoke specific emotions in its readers and the awareness of these responses is inevitable in any serious discussion of such a text from the perspective of the "affective turn."

Emotions are not only genre-specific, but also rely on group identity. An adequate example of this could be honour, which Frevert labels a "lost emotion," hence "a disposition whose emotional power has more or less vanished" (2011: 10). Frevert relates the gradual disappearance of this emotion in modernity to the phenomenon of emotions, or emotive dispositions, as characteristics of specific social groups: "emotions [are linked] to social groups that feed and cultivate them before discarding them from their emotional economy" (2011: 11). Honour as a lost emotion appears in the universe of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*. Our modern perspective on the emotional economy of chivalric romances includes this omission of honour, as Tomasz Z. Majkowski claims about romances. He discusses them as predecessors of modern fantasy fiction, such as George R.R. Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* (2013: 298). He writes that the three most important emotions that cemented the community of romance knights were the sense of brotherhood, fidelity symbolized by the feudal oath, and romance love that cannot be fulfilled directly, hence it is expressed through feats of chivalry (2013: 298). Fantasy fiction may be an attempt at restoring to texts this fidelity or honour that characterized the chivalric world.

Nevertheless, the interest in emotions was almost non-existent in the pre-modern age. To cite Frevert again, "by comparison to the pre-modern period, modernity as

it is defined here [from the eighteenth century onwards – A.C.] takes a particularly strong and unique interest in emotions and what had formerly been called affect, passion, appetite or sentiment” (2011: 16). For the sake of convenience we will attach the label “emotion” and “feeling” to all of the above, even though the choice results from the brevity of this study. One may ask oneself the question whether emotions are what is felt or what is expressed (Frevort 2011: 7), but in the pre-modern period with its psychologically enigmatic literature it is safer to analyze expressions of emotions rather than the feeling of them. If *The Knight's Tale*, as Lois Roney claims, is a “spirited defense of ... the great poems of pagan antiquity” (1990: 3), it may be similar to them also in describing expression of emotions rather than the characters' psychological condition itself. Virgil refers to Juno's “unslumbering ire” (1995: 1) or “Aeneas' limbs ... loosened in the chill of fear” (1995: 3), but he is more interested in emotions expressed rather than those that are not articulated. Roney discusses psychology in her study of Chaucer's tale; still this psychology is Aquinas' scholastic concept of will and intellect as two conflicted parts of human psyche rather than discussion of the characters' emotions (1990: 52-103 *et passim*). Discussing expression rather than what is felt is safer in the context of pre-modern literature if one wishes to avoid the threat of “applying an overly instrumentalised notion of emotions to the period” (Rosenwein 1998, quoted in: Frevort 2011: 15). This would allow us not to follow in the footsteps of Johann Huizinga, who in 1919 portrayed the Middle Ages as a “period of exuberant passions” (Frevort 2011: 14), but rather notice that at the time vehement expression of emotions was widely tolerated, if not encouraged. Comparing the passions that medieval people had with what modern people feel would not be an issue then at all, since claiming that literature includes a one-to-one description of emotions that were felt should be avoided.

Emotions are vehemently expressed also in *The Knight's Tale*. Their expression determines the reception of the narrative, which is primarily seen through the sorrow that is felt firstly by Palamon and Arcite. Roney appears to be overcome by this vision when she writes: “The injustice is appalling; innocent people endure constant pain, affliction, and sorrow” (1990: 1). Also Salter comments on the poem in a similar manner: the text gives one “the overpowering sense of pain, of lives clamped down in unalterable misery” (1962: 24). The tradition of suffering that is expressed in order to formulate a specific worldview was transferred to romance from the ancient epic itself, since also “the *Aeneid* ... puts forward an unresolved double vision: of darkness, suffering, and divine malevolence on the one hand, and of human courage, endurance, achievement, and transcendence on the other” (Roney 1990: 6). In this take on Virgil's masterpiece, emotions are both felt and expressed, but without their expression feelings would not act as potently on the readers as they do.

What needs more attention in the case of Chaucer's tale is whether emotions that are expressed make the characters weak or they endow them with power.

For instance Frevert comments on rage as something that may transform female weakness into a sense of power (2011: 95). Women, stereotypically weak in the social context, are able to transform themselves into lionesses when they are full of wrath or even rage (Frevert 2011: 95). Power or powerlessness that characterize those who express their emotions may be one of the topics that are metaphorically summarized by the tale's narrator as "a large feelde to ere" (I: 886).<sup>2</sup> The feeling of domination over the people conquered is first illustrated by Theseus's triumphant riding into his city:

And thus with victorie and with melodye  
 Lete I this noble duc to Atthenes ryde,  
 And al his hoost in armes hym bisyde.

(I: 872-874)

Thus Theseus expresses his feeling of superiority after the military success he achieved, which demonstrates how important the staging of emotional states is in this world. This is also how the duke interprets the lament of "a compaignye of ladyes, tweye and tweye./ Ech after oother clad in clothes blake" (I: 898-899). Theseus suspects them of being envious of his success or even offended by someone else:

Quod Theseus. "Have ye so greet envye  
 Of myn honour, that thus compleyne and crye?  
 Or who hath yow mysboden or offended?  
 And telleth me if it may been amended,  
 And why that ye ben clothed thus in blak."

(I: 908-911)

The duke appears to be unexpectedly sensitive to the emotions demonstrated by his subjects, who turn out to be the wives of the conquered Thebans and who beseech him for the right to bury their dead ones with honour. The meaning of honour as a lost emotion is crystallized here and presented as a manner of responding to triumph, since Theseus suspects the ladies to crave the honour themselves, but it is also the feeling of pride at the death in battle of the loved ones and the need for respect shown towards them so that they could be buried in the right way.

This is how Theseus may remedy the situation that results from the actions of the present ruler of Thebes, Creon, who gave vent to his wrath and combated Cappaneus, the previous ruler. Creon is described by the widows as "fulfild of ire and of iniquitee" (I: 940), which shows that in Chaucer's narrative anger is an emotion whose expression is painful for others, since it may lead to evil acts. Expression of wrath may be harmful and it makes the ruler weak in his unreasonable actions, but this may be introduced here in order to provide a foil for Theseus's emotional attitude. The ruler's attitude is full of care and involves demonstrations

<sup>2</sup> The numbers of the lines will refer to Benson's edition (1988).

of empathy towards the widows. Showing increased emotionality strengthens his position as a ruler instead of exposing his weakness. We should not be misled by the reference to his heart breaking when he watched the ladies:

Hym thought 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 hem comforteth in ful good entente,  
 And swoor 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 death ful wel deserved.

(I: 954-964)

Emotional responses otherwise testifying to the softness of someone's heart here ultimately led to Theseus's raid on Thebes and the situation when he met Creon and "slough hym manly as a knyght" (I: 987). There is no conflict, but rather a continuity between the display of pity at the beginning and the manly reaction in the form of a military confrontation that leads to the tyrant's death. The sorrow that Theseus expresses leads to the reinforcing of his position as a ruler. This may be a criterion for distinguishing between a righteous king and a tyrant: the former reacts to the emotions of others and acts emotionally through displaying that he cares, while the latter disrespects what his subjects feel. In contrast, the display of disrespect for the corpses of his enemies ended for Creon in his own defeat and death. In turn, Theseus directed his aggression against the tyrant and gave vent to his anger through actions of military nature, which led to transporting Palamon and Arcite to Athens, where they were imprisoned and where they saw Emily for the first time.

Another question that requires analysis in *The Knight's Tale* is how the displays of two primary feelings of both Palamon and Arcite, sorrow and love, influence their power or powerlessness and the role honour plays in this emotional situation. As was the case with Theseus, the straightforward answer would be that a man who is sad and experiences the sorrow of a prisoner and the sorrow of unhappy love is made helpless through those emotions. Nevertheless, we have already stated that in Chaucer's narrative in the realm of emotions expression is more important than the feeling itself, since the expression shapes the perception of the one that demonstrates feelings and thus influences others, who may take adequate action as a response to what they see.

The situation of Palamon and Arcite locked in a tower as the enemy's warriors after the defeat of Creon is described primarily through the emotions that they feel: "in angwissh and in wo,/ This Palamon and his felawe Arcite/ For everemoore; ther may no gold hem quite" (I: 1030-1032). As those who cannot be ransomed

and as combated warriors they are expected to show the woe. Their honour is infringed as they expect not to return to their previous position of soldiers and thus stay prisoners of war for life. Expectedly for the genre of romance, Palamon, a “woful prisoner” (I: 1063), falls in love with Emily, Theseus’s sister-in-law, when she observes her in the garden through the tower window, but again love that is not displayed would not be recognized as this emotion:

He cast his eye upon Emelya,  
 And therewithal he bleynte and cride, “A!”  
 As though he stongen were unto the herte.

(I: 1077-1079)

It is not enough for Palamon to be smitten with Emily at first sight of her, but this onset of love needs to be validated by his getting pale and uttering a cry, as if he was really stung in the heart. Expression of psychological pain through the poetic “Ah,” so much characteristic of lyrical poetry, is as important as any expression of physical pain could be. What Arcite considers to be an expression of melancholy gives the feeling of superiority to Palamon, who proudly confesses that he suffers from a different type of pain:

Cosyn, for sothe, of this opinioun,  
 Thou hast a veyn ymaginacioun.  
 This prison caused me nat for to crye,  
 But I was hurt righ now thurghout myn ye  
 Into myn herte, that wol my bane be.  
 The fairnesse of that lady that I see  
 Yond in a gardyn romen to and fro  
 Is cause of al my crying and my wo.

(I: 1093-1100)

Demonstrating the woe of love is superior to expressing the sorrow of a prisoner, as Palamon claims with visible satisfaction. He was endowed with love that entered through his eye, an important organ in the emotional economy according to medieval physiognomists. They believed that not only could love enter a human through the eyes, but the eyes could mirror human emotions in the sense of eye movement signaling one’s inward psychological state. According to what John Block Friedman terms “affective physiognomy,” the state of mind of aristocratic characters could be diagnosed by their facial colour, colour changes, and eye movements (1981: 138-152). Whatever the origin of Palamon’s sorrow of love is, this love empowers him as it differs from the sorrow of a prisoner who will not be ransomed from the enemy. His feeling of honour is restored since he puts himself in the situation of a courtly lover of Emily and no longer feels overburdened with the loss of honour that befell him when, similarly to Arcite, he was taken out of the heap of dead bodies in Thebes.

Confronted with Palamon's outburst of emotions, Arcite expresses his feelings and claims that he was the first to see Emily and love her. Arcite's speech is a comparison of Palamon's love, which is to be close to awe one feels for a goddess, with the more mundane love that, according to Arcite, is a part of real human life:

This Arcite ful proudly spak ageyn:  
 "Thow shalt," quod he, "be rather fals than I;  
 And thou art fals, I telle thee outrely,  
 For paramour I loved hire first er thow.  
 What wiltow seyen? Thou woost nat yet now  
 Wheither she be a woman or goddesse!  
 Thyn is affecciou of hoolynesse,  
 An myn is love as to a creature;  
 For which I tolde thee myn aventure  
 As to my cosyng and my brother sworn.

(I: 1152-1161)

Arcite expresses his pride of loving Emily as first and loving her in the manner that is fit for a human. His love gives him the power to raise his head high and claim that his feeling is superior, and again regaining of his honour is at stake here. What the conflict takes place around is obviously not love itself, since it is not something that can be measured, but expressions of love, that is how one relates to one's subject of affection.

Arcite's honour of a soldier is secured when he is banished from Athens. Nevertheless, upon his return "homward" (I: 1217) leads to his dejection at having lost the physical proximity of his love object:

How greet a sorwe suffreth now Arcite!  
 The deeth he feeleth thurgh his herte smyte;  
 He wepeth, wayleth, crieth pitously;  
 To sleen hymself he waiteth prively.  
 He seyde, "Allas that day that I was born!  
 Now is my prisoun worse than biforn;  
 Now is my shape eternally to dwelle  
 Noght in purgatorie, but in helle.  
 Allas, that evere knew I Perotheus!  
 For elles hadde I dwelled with Theseus,  
 Yfetered in his prisoun everemo.  
 Thanne hadde I been in blisse and nat in wo.

(I: 1219-1230)

Even though his soldierly honour is restored, he rejects it as he prefers the fetters of a captive which allowed him to witness the presence of Emily in the prison garden to the freedom of a man separated from his beloved and imperiled by the loss of her. Arcite rejects the situation in which it is Palamon who is physically close to her and may, at least hypothetically, be loved back by her. The liberation

that Arcite should enjoy makes his a powerless figure, while the imprisonment gives Palamon the power to exert some emotional influence on Emily.

However, Arcite is not entirely helpless in his expressions of “wanhope and distresse” [despair and distress] (I: 1249), which led to the situation in which “so feble eek were his spiritz, and so lowe,/ And chaunged so” (I: 1369-1370). When Arcite decides to return to Athens under the false name of Philostrate, Palamon recognizes him and calls him “false traytour wikke” (I: 1580) and expresses his own “peyne and wo” (I: 1582) caused by the unreciprocated love for Emily. The feeling of power and powerlessness related to the expression of love is thus exposed as transitory in the world of this epic poem, since honour as an emotion and triumph at having a superior manner of loving comes and goes. What ultimately strengthens Palamon’s claim to the love of Emily is his appeal to Venus in her temple. Palamon wants to be strengthened by Venus in his jousting with Arcite over Emily. Palamon addresses the goddess as the one who knew his difficult emotions when he was imprisoned, as she was “lady bright, that knowest weele./ My thought and seest what harmes that I feele!” (I: 2231-2232). The expression of Palamon’s feeling that he has been harmed is essential for the development of the plot. Venus takes pity on the warrior, which is an emotion that leads her to finding “remedie” (I: 2452) with his father Saturn, a planet god affecting people in the so-called Age of Saturn, the time of melancholy for humanity. Saturn is the god who will cause Arcite’s death in spite of his triumph at the tournament.

Love is then not only the emotion due to which Palamon is “wounded sore” (I: 1115) and “Arcite is hurte as much as he, or moore” (I: 1116). Love is not limited to treating the either person as an object of a quasi-religious cult. It is an emotion that moves people to action, which in etymological terms works well with the meaning of the word. As James R. Averill reminds us, “emotion” stems from Latin *e-movere*, “to move out,” “to migrate,” “to transport an object” (Averill, quoted in Ibbett 2014: 18). From this etymological perspective, emotion must not only be moved out somehow, but it may also lead to changes in the outside world. In the world of *The Knight’s Tale* these are major changes, since expression of feelings provokes support of the two characters, Palamon and Arcite. That may also be related to the connection between emotion and law, hence something suggested in the treatment of honour in this and other texts. In the case of Chaucer’s tale the connection between love as emotion and love as law is even more visible. In the speech he delivers towards Mars, Arcite argues that “Love is a gretter law, by my pan,/ That may be yeve to any erthely man” (I: 1165-1166). The power that emotions endow the characters with may stem not only from support by others, but also from the legal dimension of loving or of being honourable that was very much present in the scholarly discourses of the Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of love and the law see, for instance, Ruth Mazzo Karras (2008); honour and treason in their legal aspects are discussed by Stephen D. White (2008).

The question of grief that pervades the Athenian society once the victorious Arcite is wounded due to the fact that, under the influence of Saturn, he fell from his horse, has been discussed in other studies. Elizabeth B. Edwards writes that in Chaucer's tale there is a work of mourning which in Freudian terms has to be carried out by the whole community represented by Theseus (2008: 364). Otherwise it would be difficult to understand "why Arcite is lamented so much: he is a foreigner; while he had lived in the Athenian court and became popular, it was under an assumed name; he had broken Theseus's laws, been condemned to death, and pardoned only for 'pitee'" (2008: 363). Both the "joye of this, so loude and heighe" (I: 2661) that pervades Athenians when Arcite wins Emily in the tournament and their sorrow at his death, since "infinite been the sorwes and the teeres" (I: 2827), give the community a sense of togetherness. The ending of the tale demonstrates collective feelings in the manner in which it discussed them at the beginning. What is striking is that honour, which Frevert calls one of the emotions or emotional styles that "fade away or get lost" throughout the successive stages of the history of emotions, is very much present here, as being mourned ultimately restores full honour to Arcite (2011: 12). No longer a marginal prisoner, he becomes central for the community with its need for heroes, especially if those heroes were undoubtedly victorious just before they died.

What we should also be interested here are collective responses to the individual feelings expressed by Palamon and Arcite. To quote Stephanie Trigg,

In Sara Ahmed's influential work, for example, affect is tied closely to social and cultural movements ... "the unfolding of bodies into worlds" ... For Ahmed, affect is constitutive not just of social beings, but also of social bodies in relation to objects and to each other (Ahmed 2010: 29-51, quoted in Trigg 2014: 6).

It is fascinating to trace how the position of Palamon and Arcite changes in the Athenian society depending on what emotions are attributed to them and what they express they feel. The confrontation of two social bodies, the Theban and the Athenian, was already observable in the initial encounter of the triumphant Theseus with the widows in mourning. The characters in the scene were no longer merely social individuals voicing how they felt about the new situation, but they were two groups distinct in their feelings, hence two social bodies, who negotiated with each other how the emotionally difficult situation of the Thebans could be remedied. The other group demonstrated their strength through how they achieved what they desired despite, or because of, the grief, loss, and resentment that they felt. With Palamon and Arcite it is noticeable that their sorrow progresses towards developing its social dimension. It starts as firstly the sorrow of prisoners separated from their homeland and then metamorphoses into the paradoxically empowering sorrow of love, only to finish as one of the collective emotions: grief over Arcite, loved by the society when alive and revered by them when dead due to Saturn's maleficent influence. The inhabitants of Athens become what Barbara H. Rosenwein calls an

“emotional community” (2006, quoted in: Trigg 2014: 8) and thus the posthumous influence exerted by Arcite is very strong. It appears that again we witness an interaction of two social bodies, Athenians and Thebans, but here it is enough for the latter to be represented by two people only, Palamon and Arcite, even if, or precisely because the latter dies.

This discussion only touches on the issue of articulating emotions, especially sorrow and honour, in Chaucer's tale. Its purpose is to attempt to “find emotions” in the text in their individual and social context. The well-known passages reveal their treatment of the topic as the source of powerlessness or rather an empowering phenomenon, also socially. The two social bodies, that of Athenians and the smaller but no less influential social body of Thebans, seem to intersect. The result are changes in the emotions expressed by Athenians. This collective body is affected by deep mourning of Arcite that is ended by the marriage of Palamon and Emily. The social body of Athenians is thus turned towards the others and then transformed by them, which displays the social dimension of emotions and illustrates their economy in the text. Honour intersects there with love. In contrast to the epic, medieval romance as a development of epic at length discusses emotions expressed by the characters with a particular focus on the emotive social dimension. The darkness of sorrow and powerlessness metamorphoses into social changes, which gives the emotions expressed the power to reinvigorate the social world of the community.

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