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The Duel in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*

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Table of contents

1. INTRODUCTION	3
2. DISCUSSING <i>THE KNIGHT'S TALE</i> IN TERMS OF HISTORIC ACCURACY	3
3.2 WORTHY CONTENDERS - ARCITE AND PALAMON FULFILL THE REQUIREMENTS OF VALID DUELISTS.....	6
3.3 THE DUEL AS A CEREMONY	6
3.3 THE UNAPPROVED DUEL OF ARCITE AND PALAMON	7
4. CONCLUSION	11
5. WORKS CITED.....	12
6. APPENDIX.....	12

1. Introduction

In *The Knight's Tale*¹, the two cousins Arcite and Palamon duel over Emelye's hand in marriage. The concept of dueling is commonly portrayed in literary works as a means to resolve a quarrel between two men. In *The Knight's Tale* the duel is depicted in much detail. To readers of medieval tales such as Chaucer's it may seem a perfectly common climax of a story that a close combat is described. It is perhaps a safe assumption that modern readers of Chaucer would be unaware of the complex rules and regulations of dueling in medieval times. In this paper I will make the claim that the duel between Arcite and Palamon does not follow, what seems to be, the proper etiquette, because it is disrupted by Theseus, Duke of Athens. One might assume that since it is a knight who tells the tale, he would know the rules and regulations of a proper duel, and therefore would make this clear in his story telling. I will argue that the termination of the duel in *The Knight's Tale* is a means to draw attention to a kind of misbehavior on Arcite's and Palamon's part. For reasons that will be explained in this text, the function of Duke Theseus, who terminates the unruly duel, might serve as a means to inform the reader of a violation of the knightly code. Therefore, this paper discusses the protocol of dueling in the Middle Ages in comparison to Chaucer's *The Knights Tale*.

2. Discussing *The Knight's Tale* In Terms of Historic Accuracy

The concepts of dueling differ greatly between a medieval one and one, for instance, in the 18th century. In addition they differ even within the period we usually call the Middle Ages. Inevitably, this paper will not offer a hermeneutic representation of the duel, as the focus in this paper is set solely in European late Middle Ages. The references to *The Knight's Tale*, which are discussed in this section, serve as a means to draw attention to the issues that will be dealt with in more detail in the course of this text.

Victor Gordon Kiernan has devoted an entire book to the subject of dueling in European History. In the chapter "Europe of the Knights" entitled in

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer. "The Knight's Tale". *The Riverside Chaucer*. Ed. Larry D. Benson. 3rd edition. Oxford: University Press, 1988.

The Duel In European History, Kiernan refers to Marc Bloch and states that the Middle Ages lived under the sign of private vengeance and that individuals and their extended kinship regarded this as the most sacred duties.² Moreover, the Middle Ages were a feudalistic era and a system of man-to-man relationships.³

If one applies this notion to *The Knight's Tale*, private vengeance does occur in a man-to-man relationship, namely in the one between the two cousins, Arcite and Palamon: They take vengeance on each other.

Kiernan further states that Feuds between private families inevitably involved their vassals, kindred or retainers, which lead to private warfare. This instance was cherished as a feudal right, whenever honor and pride called for bloodshed.⁴ It is noteworthy, that there was an alternative to unlicensed, unlimited scrimmaging, which took on the shape of a judicial combat, or a trial by battle. This can be traced back to Germanic custom.⁵

This notion does not directly apply to the case of Arcite and Palamon, for their feud is only between them, and thus does not concern any other members of their family. Yet, the two rivals are related and therefore, one could argue that the feud between two individuals is enough to call it a private warfare. On the other hand, there are two instances, which indicate that the battle between Arcite and Palamon does not comply with Kiernan's points: Historically, there is such a thing as "unlicensed scrimmaging". Therefore one has reason to believe that some form of combat was forbidden if there was no judge present at the scene. Secondly, in the case of *The Knight's Tale*, where the first duel takes place, there is no judicial trial. (This will be discussed at a later point in this paper). So, according to Kiernan the unsupervised duel between Arcite and Palamon would be "unlicensed".

Kiernan states, that with the rising of judicial combat, rules were being codified, and resembled a ceremony.⁶ Furthermore, it was not uncommon that

² Bloch, 1965 in Kiernan 1988, p. 32.

³ Kiernan 1988, p. 32.

⁴ Kiernan 1988, p. 32.

⁵ Kiernan 1988, p. 33.

⁶ Kiernan 1988, p. 33.

representatives of the church and secular authorities were present when combats were carried out in public.⁷

This is only the case in the second, public duel in *The Knight's Tale*: The combat is open to the public and Duke Theseus functions as the judge. However, there are no members of the church involved in the observation of the public battle. But one could argue that in the *Knight's Tale* the Roman gods function as representatives of a higher power, which, in a way applies to Kiernan's statement concerning church representatives.

With regard to the proceedings of a duel, they would often commence with the challenger throwing down a gauntlet. Kiernan notes that originally, it was the challenger who was to choose his weapons first. This procedure was later⁸ reversed, leaving the other party the first choice.

The reader will find that in *The Knight's Tale*, it is Arcite who challenges and that Palamon is left with the choice of weapons. "And ches the beste, and leef the worste for me." (1613). Therefore, this excerpt corresponds with the historic background.

3. Analysis Of The Duel In *The Knight's Tale*

3.1 Reasons For Dueling In *The Knight's Tale*

According to Wolfgang Schild there are several reasons for dueling in the Middle Ages.⁹ Factors that called for dueling were revenge or striving for rulership, over prey, recognition, to decide which party won the battle, legal disputes, or disputes per se, or to entertain an audience.¹⁰

In Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, it is a female that is the primary reason for a duel between Arcite and Palamon. In retrospect, it is Palamon who sees Emelye first. Thus, Palamon sees it as his prerogative to have her in marriage and not his cousin, Arcite, who unfortunately happens to be in love with Emelye as well. To Palamon, it is an audacious act by Arcite to hold claim to a woman, who, in his view, is bespoken to him. His sole reason for holding this prior claim is based on

⁷ Kiernan 1988, p. 34.

⁸ Date not specified in Kiernan's text.

⁹ For the reader's convenience I translate directly from the original German text into English.

¹⁰ Schild, Wolfgang. „Zweikampf“. *Lexikon des Mittelalters*. 1977-1999, p. 723. (The original text in German is given in the appendix of this paper).

the factor of *who sees first*. In contrast, Arcite feels that it is his prerogative to love any woman whom he pleases, and he objects to Palamon's reasoning. To sum up, both men want to rule over a lady, which they both see as an object (it is as if Emelye were the pray in a hunting game). Lastly both men want to be recognized as the rightful suitor of Emelye.

3.2 Worthy Contenders - Arcite And Palamon Fulfill The Requirements Of Valid Duelists

Until the tale reaches its first climax, that is, when Arcite and Palamon duel after their first encounter outside of the royal prison tower, subtle indications are given to the fulfillment of requirements, which have to be met in order to do perform a duel. Kiernan refers to the act of dueling as "a badge of rank"¹¹. Therefore, close attention should already be drawn to the lines 1017 to 1018, as they offer valuable information about Arcite and Palamon's heritage, which is important for fulfilling the regulations of dueling. "The heraudes knewe hem best in special [a]s they that weren of the blood roial [...]" Not until the tale reaches the dueling scene, the aspect of "the blood roial" is the sole reason why Arcite and Palamon are not slain on the spot, but are kept as live battle trophies in the Duke's tower. Yet, this royal heritage also meets the rules and regulations of a proper duel. If Arcite and Palamon were not equal in rank, they could not duel against each other. This is suggested in line 1608/9 with Arcite's exclamation, [b]ut as muche thou art a worthy knyght, [a]nd wilnest to darreyne hire by bataille, [...]. Arcite acknowledges that Palamon is a "worthy" knight. By defining his opponent as worthy, Palamon seems to acknowledge equal rank as one of the elements, which make a duel valid.

3.3 The Duel As A Ceremony

The idea of a duel having a somewhat ceremonial execution reads in the context of Arcite's exclamation in line 1608/9 that recognizes Palamon as a *worthy* contender. Arcite, having been antagonized by Palamon, wants to slay him in an instant but retracts when he notices that his enemy holds no weapon. "And eek that thow no wepne hast in place, [t]hou sholdest nevere out of this grove

¹¹ Kiernan 1988, Preface.

pace,[...]” (1601-1602). What the reader can derive from this exclamation is that Arcite cherishes his and Palamon’s honor by drawing back his sword. What is more, by doing so, Arcite is aware of putting his honor as a “worthy knyght” (1608) at risk if he were to kill a defenseless knight. Instead, Arcite postpones the duel to the next day.

Have heere my trouthe; tomorwe I wol nat faille,
 Withoute wityng of any oother wight,
 That heere I wool be founden as a knyght,
 And bryngen harneys right ynough for thee;¹²

What appears to belong to the standard ritual is the setting of a date for the duel, just as can be seen in the first line of the quote. A part from this, the overall appearance of the contenders must signal their status. Arcite’s statement, “[h]ere I wool be founden as a knyght”, substantiates this idea. He wants to *look* the part of someone that duels. Therefore, his accentuation of the word *knight* lets the reader know that he is aware of his right to indulge in a duel. Finally, the last line is somewhat peculiar in its content. As modern readers would probably expect rivals to show every lack of respect to one another, there is no sign of profanity when Arcite announces that he will bring Palamon enough weapons. In *Chaucer’s Knight*, Terry Jones states that “[t]he responsibility of equipping and arming had always rested with the knight himself.”¹³ As a consequence, Arcite guarantees the equality and he respects Arcite as a valid contender, but at the same time he emasculates Palamon because it would be his duty, as a worthy knight, or say, a man as such, to gather his own armor. This evokes an image of a little boy who is dependent on a grown up. What is more, one can deduce that Arcite does not seem to think Palamon capable of gathering his own armor, as he does not ask Palamon if he agrees with his terms.

3.3 The Unapproved Duel Of Arcite And Palamon

However, there are two main depictions which suggest that the duel between Arcite and Palamon is not a valid one. Firstly, there appears to be no escalation of violence endorsed by the contenders. The reader might expect the duel to

¹² 1610-1613.

¹³ Jones 1980, P. 5.

commence gradually and resemble a sort of tournament, which then becomes more violent towards the end. Yet, the depiction of Arcite and Palamon's duel is beastly from the beginning and with no prearranged rules as to the execution of the duel. Consider the sentences:

“[U]p to the ancle foghte they in hir blood” (1660), and, “[t]hat foughten breme as it were bores two. The brighte swordes wenten to and fro, so hideously that with the leeste strook It seemed as it wolde felle an ook.” (1699-1702).

Arcite and Palomon are no longer depicted as men, but as wild boars, and the force with which they stab each other is compared to the strength it takes to cut an oak tree. As Jones points out, the imagery of wild beast is a recurrent theme in *The Knight's Tale*.¹⁴ Indeed, the way Arcite and Palamon's duel is executed resembles a massacre. The considerable amount of violence, which appears to degrade the proper act of dueling, is not the main reason why Theseus is aghast when he sees the two men fight. The fact that the duel takes place unsupervised appears to be a disgrace.

The next lines of the tale, which appear just after the ones discussed above, offer a valuable insight into the rules of dueling. It is the passage, where Arcite and Palamon perform a duel unobserved and are interrupted by Duke Theseus and his hunting party who coincidentally happen to ride by the scene. The following quote is Theseus' reaction to the goings on.

“Hoo!
Namore, up peyne of leysinge of youre heed!
By myghty Mars, he shal anon be deed
That smyteth any strook that I may seen.
But telleth me what myster men ye been,
Withouten judge or oother officere,
As it were in a lystes lystes roially.”¹⁵

Theseus is clearly appalled by the spectacle that is unfolding in front of him, which is why he aborts the duel immediately. In the sentence, “By myghty Mars, he shal anon be deed [t]hat smyteth any strook that I may seen.”, the Duke establishes his superiority over the two duelers. This sentence suggests that the

¹⁴ Jones 1980, P. 178.

¹⁵ 1706-1713.

duel should not have commenced without Theseus' approval. It is safe to assume that the grounds on which Arcite and Palamon fight, belong to him. Therefore the duke perceives this as a slanderous act. What is more, Theseus is so offended that he wants to kill them. The third and last indication that Arcite and Palamon's duel is violating the terms of the duel is given in the last two lines of Theseus' exclamation. "Withouten judge or oother officere, [a]s it were in a lystes roially." The content of the last two lines are historically accurate.¹⁶ To be more precise, the performance of a duel had to be supervised by someone functioning as judge.

According to the opening lines, 1706 to 1708 of Theseus' exclamation and the depiction discussed above, that degrades the contenders to boars, the duel between Arcite and Palamon does not follow a certain etiquette.

3.4 The Duel As A Public Spectacle In *The Knight's Tale*

In section 3.2, of this paper I have listed several reasons for dueling in the Middle Ages, of which I last mentioned the duel as entertainment of an audience. In this section, I discuss the duel in *The Knight's Tale* as a means of public spectacle. It is noteworthy that the duel between Arcite and Palamon, which is conducted by exclusion of spectators, is early terminated by Theseus. The Duke, having been moved by the idea of battling over love, elevates the private duel to a public spectacle, which is to take place a year later. What is more, Arcite and Palamon each have to gather an army of one hundred knights, who are to join them in combat. By this agreement, the duel is elevated from a duel to a tournament.

There is a certain historic untruthfulness in this depiction of a public battle. Terry Jones argues that personal animosity sometimes entered into such tournaments, but they were seen as a disgrace towards chivalry. Knights were supposed to take an oath that they would participate in tournaments for the sole purpose to exercise war and not to see it as an opportunity for personal revenge.¹⁷ In *The Knight's Tale*, the public battle would be a disgrace, as personal revenge is the reason for Arcite and Palamon to duel against each other and not to exercise war. Having this in mind, it seems absurd that Duke Theseus, being a

¹⁶ See chapter 2. Discussing *The Knight's Tale In Terms Of Historic Accuracy*.

¹⁷ Jones 1980, P. 178/79.

worthy judge, would allow a public battle that does not serve the means of practice, and instead, violates “the true spirit of chivalry”. (178)¹⁸

Apart from this, Theseus has a costly arena and several temples erected for the sole purpose of this spectacle. This is minutely described in the third part of *The Knight's Tale*. I will not discuss this passage in further detail, as it would exceed the length of this paper. Instead, I want to focus on the idea that in the third part of the tale, the duel is no longer a concern between two men; it is the subject matter of Theseus' play. In the opening lines of the third part of *The Knight's Tale*, the following is mentioned.

Of Theseus, that gooth so bisily
To maken up lystes royally,
That swich a noble theatre as it was
I dar well seyen in this world it nas.¹⁹

Attention should be drawn to the third line of this quote, where “a noble theatre” is mentioned. The use of the word *theatre* evokes the idea that the duel is being adapted into a theater spectacle. The third part consists of minute depictions of the building of this theater and the temples, all of which are based on what might be a mixture of Greek and Roman architecture. The temples are dedicated to the Roman gods Venus, Mars, and Diana. Clearly, the *Knights Tale* is set in Ancient times, so the inclusion of an audience in a theater appears to be a natural setting and meets the overall perception of ancient Athens, the town in which this tale unfolds. To conclude, it appears that the early termination of Arcite and Palamon's first duel makes way for the public battle in a more refined setting, which is the theater. It seems that the first setting (a field) on which the duel takes place is not worthy enough for this spectacle.

¹⁸ Jones 1980, P. 178.

¹⁹ 1883-1886.

4. Conclusion

The act of dueling consisted of several criteria. Firstly, there had to be a dispute which called for this act. In addition, terms for the execution of a duel had to be set in advance, and most importantly, the duelists had to be of the same rank, but not necessarily of royal heritage. I have argued that the duel between Arcite and Palamon is a violation of the code of dueling because it is conducted with the exclusion of a judge. Moreover, the interruption of Duke Theseus is interpreted as a means to tell the readers that this is not a proper duel. I have substantiated my position by offering historical background information which discusses this factor. Apart from this, Theseus postpones the duel of Arcite and Palamon and elevates it from a simple duel to a battle. What is more, the costly production of the theater, which Theseus has erected for the public battle, is a means of amusement and seems to serve the purpose of judging a duel. Therefore, I have argued that Theseus production does not serve the true spirit of chivalry. The public battle in *The Knight's Tale* is a theater spectacle.

5. Works Cited

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6. Appendix

Lexikon des Mittelalters. Original text:

Rache, Streben nach Herrschaft, Beute oder Anerkennung, zur Entscheidung einer Schlacht [...] oder eines (Rechts-) Streites oder zur Unterhaltung von Zuschauern. (723).