

# Male Invasion of the Female in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*

Min Young Kim

It is intriguing to note the “worthy” Knight depicted in the *General Prologue* of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* only embodies half of what belongs to a knight. A knight, by definition, is “a mounted man-at-arms serving a feudal superior” (“Knight” def. 1a), and at the same time, “a man devoted to the service of a lady” (“Knight” def. 1b). The Knight in Chaucer's work, however, only has the qualities of the former; his descriptions consist of his journey, war, “mortal batailes” (*GP* 61), and acquaintances with male lords. Considering how his son the Squire, “A love-re and a lusty bachelor” (80) fights not in major battlefields but in romanticized French locales “[i]n hope to stonden in his lady grace” (88), the father Knight's indifference to the feminine is strikingly explicit.

Not surprisingly, the tale the Knight tells also neglects women, who are not only stripped of power but also ruthlessly intruded by men. In other words, as Anne Laskaya convincingly argues, the “depiction of men's relationship with women are very stereotyped” in *The Knight's Tale* (74), and they merely “serve to illustrate the potency of Theseus's power” (75). Specifically, female characters in *The Knight's Tale* suffer from male invasion in three areas: their body, their voice, and their gender role. In this paper, I will explore how female characters in *The Knight's Tale* are subtly invaded, infringed, and violated by male characters.

At the very beginning of the tale, what the reader encounters is the “conquerour” Theseus returning from his battle with the Amazons. If the name “Amazons” evokes the image of strong woman warriors, the Knight deliberately chooses to delineate them in terms of territory rather than of people: for example, “Amazones” (22) in *The Knight's Tale* is a name of a place, op-

posed to the land Athens, hence “the regne of Femenye” (8, 19). Including the word “Femenye,” which is likely to be invented by Chaucer (Fisher 25), the militarized language such as “conquered” (*KT* 8) and “asseged” (23) indicates Theseus’s marriage to Hippolyta was not a result of love, but a mere strategy to put an end to war. Chaucer’s primary source, Boccaccio’s *Teseida delle Nozze d’Emilia*, shows how Theseus falls in love with Hippolyta and how she, by her own consent, ends up marrying him. However, these details, including the actual battle with the Amazons, are obliterated by the Knight’s *occupatio*, rendering the narrative to shape Hippolyta and Emily’s fate as property won by conquest. It is in this sense that Tory Vandeventer Pearman claims that “the Knight bases the duke’s worthiness of the title ‘conqueror’ on his specific ability to conquer women” (32). Thus the body of the Amazons are hopelessly reduced as space invaded by men, and Hippolyta herself is literally conquered by Theseus and finally reduced to his property.

Hippolyta’s sister Emily also suffers a similar fate. In addition to her existence under Theseus’s power, she is exposed, unwillingly and unwittingly, to the lustful gaze of the two Theban warriors: Palamon and Arcite. Comparing Emily in *The Knight’s Tale* with Emilia in Boccaccio’s *Teseida delle Nozze d’Emilia*, Elaine Tuttle Hansen points out that “whereas the Boccaccian lady knows she is being watched, and responds immediately by playing to her audience, Emily is apparently oblivious to the gaze of Palamon and Arcite that seals her fate” (221). Although Emilia and Emily both are exposed to the voyeurs in prison, it is only Emily who becomes an object of lust, regardless of her will and wish. Furthermore, in spite of her wishes to remain a virgin, she is to be wedded to the knight who triumphs in the tournament Theseus stages; plus, in the end, she must marry Palamon by the design of Theseus and “The First Moevere of the cause above” (*KT* 2129). What makes this possible in the first place is that Emily is Theseus’s property—hence transferred by Theseus to another man, only to be conquered again (Pearman 37). Emily’s body, then, is intruded by all the main male characters of the tale: Palamon, Arcite, and, to a certain extent, Theseus. This removes and shuts out the smallest power women may possess, including the potential danger Emily signifies as an Amazonian sister-in-law in Theseus’ court, the realm of men (Hansen 223).

Consequently, women in *The Knight's Tale* are incapable of speaking out. This is amplified as Hippolyta and Emily are literally silent, unlike the two women in Boccaccio's original. Astonishingly, the "hardy" (*KT* 24) Amazonian queen has no voice at all; plus the only action she takes in the plot is weeping in public. Her plea for mercy is merged with the voices of other ladies, as "alle crieden both lasse and more" (898) indicates; in other instances, Hippolyta remains silent. Even the scene where the ladies weep for Theseus's mercy fails to be a unique, powerful moment, for the Theban women early in the text has already done the same, making Hippolyta's tears merely a part of the parallel structure of the tale.

As William E. Coleman points out, Emily also "loses much of her voice and personality," speaking "just two sentences invented by Chaucer" (89). Even the content of her ever-so-little speech is uttered just to be ignored again, for despite her "Desire to been a mayden al my lyf" (1447), she has to be "wedded unto oon of tho" after all (1493). In this sense, Emily's voice is silenced in the end and becomes like Hippolyta's (Pearman 37), for her voice, although heard, fails to have any function at all.

Emily's inability to maintain her wish for virginity adds another dimension to the male intrusion of the female illustrated in *The Knight's Tale*. Emily dedicates her hopes to Diana, the goddess of Chastity. However, Diana tells Emily that she must marry either Palamon or Arcite because the gods have affirmed that she must do so (1492). While Venus accepts Palamon's prayer in the beginning and Mars intrudes to nullify her decision later on, Diana has no power whatsoever. This is not because Venus has already allowed Palamon to have Emily's heart; if it had been so, Mars could not have invaded Venus's power, nor would Diana have said Emily's marriage is destined by the "goddess" (1492). In short, Diana's power is utterly vulnerable in the world of the gods, indicating that male invasions occur at the celestial level as well. After all, "the world of the gods and goddesses is ultimately a patriarchal one, governed by Saturn" (Laskaya 75).

Furthermore, Diana's voice is shut up by the Knight narrator. Diana reveals herself in front of Emily to tell her it is her destiny to marry, but she cannot tell as yet which knight she will marry. However, Diana assures Emily

that she will declare her fortune in love before she leaves the temple:

Farwel, for I ne may no lenger dwelle,  
 The fyres which that on myn auter brenne  
 Shulle thee declaren, er that thou go henne,  
 Thyn aventure of love, as in this cas. (*KT* 1496-99)

Right after presenting Emily's response to Diana's statement, however, the Knight cruelly declares that "This is th'effect, ther is namore to seye" (508). It is ambivalent whether Emily simply submits herself to Diana and returns home without waiting for her sign or the Knight deliberately omits it. Either way, Diana's role as a goddess is outright neglected, both by the male gods and the narrator of the tale.

The various types of male infringement on women are signified by the stories depicted on the walls of the temple of Diana. As Jill Mann aptly points out, "the description of Diana's temple is another of Chaucer's additions to his source; Boccaccio devotes all his descriptive efforts to the temples of Mars and Venus" (140). For this reason, a careful, close reading of the pictures on the temple of Diana is crucial. William F. Woods argues that "her temple paintings are scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*" (291). Considering that they are Chaucer's original inventions, however, one may say that the paintings reveal much more. Moreover, the fact that the temples are constructed under Theseus's orders reflects the manipulative power of Theseus and the Knight narrator over women. Hence the depiction of women in the stories illustrated on Diana's temple symbolizes the whole idea of male invasion of women's domain in *The Knight's Tale*.

Diana's naked body, like Emily's, is exposed to the gaze of Actaeon (Ovid 165-205). Although not an explicitly bodily invasion, the Amazon Atlanta loses her claim to Diana's boar skin given by Meleager, because of the intrusion of men who "tooke / The gift from hir, and right of gift from him" (Ovid 574-75). The two remaining stories of Callisto and Daphne render a much more profound incident of the male invasion of the female. As for the Callisto episode, her female body is doubly invaded, for Jove not only raped Callisto, but also "Diana's shape and habit strait he took" (Ovid 527). Here both Callisto and

Diana are violated and assaulted by Jove, the former physically and the latter symbolically, because Jove transforms himself into Diana, hence literally taking her body, in order to seduce and rape Callisto. Moreover, it is somewhat surprising that the story of Daphne is drawn on the wall of the temple of Diana, because Daphne's morphing into a laurel is a myth belonging to Apollo, not to Diana. It is an episode explaining how the laurel becomes the symbol of Apollo; Diana does not appear in this episode at all. Thus the very fact that the myth of Apollo can be found in the temple of Diana well illustrates another case of the male invasion of the female.

The last two stories are especially significant because they reveal that the male invasion of the female in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* goes as far as men impertinently assume women's roles. Like Phoebus who violates the temple of Diana, Mars and Saturn are presumptuous enough to intrude the realm of Venus, who has already granted Palamon's wish to win him Emily's love. Mars, however, gives out a sign to Arcite more explicitly than Venus, by giving him a "Full owe and dim, that sayde thus, 'Victorie'" (1575). Consequently, conflicts occur among the gods, and Venus, being humiliated, begins to weep. It is worth noticing that at this point, another male god, Saturn, intrudes in order to put an end to the dispute. Saturn promises Venus that "Palamon, that is thyn owene knight, / Shal have his lady, as thou hast him hight" (1613-14). It is true that Palamon wins Emily in the end, and that the Knight is content to say that Emily, in fact, "him loveth so tendrely" (2245). Nevertheless, what is problematic here is the ways in which Saturn makes his intercession. In order to allow Mars's power to have its effect, Saturn allows Arcite to win the tournament. Right after his victory, however, Saturn asks Pluto to injure Arcite seriously by surprising the horse he is mounting. The fatal wound eventually kills Arcite, hence making him fail to "have" Emily despite his triumph at the tournament.

The death of the knight who cannot have Emily echoes the earlier battle of Palamon and Arcite in the grove. Enraged at Arcite's secret, Palamon, who has just got out of prison, reveals his fury:

And though that I no wepene have in this place,

But out of prison am astert by grace,  
 I drede nought that outhter thou shalt dye,  
 Or thou ne shalt nat loven Emelye.  
 Choose which you want, for you shall not escape. (733-37)

Palamon insists that Arcite either dies or gives up his love for Emily. Arcite, seeing Palamon unarmed, offers a fair duel on the very next day in the same place:

And if so be that thou my lady winne,  
 And slee me in this wode ther I am inne,  
 Thou mayst wel have thy lady, as for me. (759-61)

Arcite's fierce challenge, as well as Palamon's acceptance thereof, indicates that they either must have Emily or would rather forfeit their lives. It is in this sense that Palamon, after discovered by Theseus, pleads him to kill him, "But slee my felaw eek as wel as me" (864), and goes even further to ask him to slay Arcite first (865). As both knights are equally worthy, it is natural that the surviving knight wins Emily; hence for them it is either death or Emily, and nothing more. Thus the ways in which Saturn solves the conflict of Mars and Venus in the tale are, in fact, only in favor of men, not the women; Saturn's solution only grants the wish of the two knights, who would rather die than not winning Emily's love, and nothing more.

One may argue that women in *The Knight's Tale* have power, too. Theseus, for instance, the most acclaimed character depicted by the Knight, is not just a hero, but an "ideal of feminized masculinity" (Mann 134). As Laskaya and Mann argue, Theseus grows to be a wise, merciful governor by embodying himself the "womanly quality of pity" (134). It is true that Theseus needs to be "feminized" in order to be the best man in the tale. This, however, does not prove that the feminine principle is portrayed as a positive, valid force in the tale. As Susan Crane points out, "the 'fully human ideal' is finally masculine" (21); even Mann acknowledges that the reason why Theseus is delineated as an ideal hero is because the tale "feminizes him without rendering him effeminate" (136). Besides, if the Knight has truly believed in a man's feminization as a positive shift, he would not have omitted certain episodes from the

original tale. Hansen points out that “the Knight omits a crucial episode in Boccaccio’s version, wherein Theseus dallies in Scythia after his marriage to Hippolyta and is summoned back to manly fame and glory in a dream that links immaturity with a comfortable life among foreign women” (219). Hence, as Pearman argues, “the resultant feminization Theseus undergoes during his stay with the Amazons” is utterly, deliberately cut out of its Boccaccian source (35). Variations are made from the original text in *The Knight's Tale*; if the Knight wished to depict the whole feminizing process of the hero positive, he would have done so by using actual moments of feminization occurring in *Teseida delle Nozze d'Emilia*. This, however, is not the case. Rather, the Knight goes far as to delete the feminizing scene in his tale as if it never happened. Thus, in *The Knight's Tale* the feminine principle is not depicted positively; the Knight-narrator does not think so either.

As Crane persuasively argues in *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*, mature masculinity may be integrated into the feminine, but the same does not happen the other way around. The feminine “flux and chaos offer up the possibility for wisdom, for growth” (Laskaya 71), but this growth, in fact, is for men only. Ultimately, this is the male invasion of gender roles, signified by Jove’s assuming the identity of the goddess Diana. Men’s taking advantage of the positive elements of femininity for themselves is one-sided only; hence an utter exploitation of femininity. Consequently, women in *The Knight's Tale* are stripped from virtually everything that they may call their own to establish their identity: their voice, their feminine qualities, and gender role. This is why Hippolyta and Emily barley play an important role in the tale. They function as instruments to make the masculinity of men mature or as a prize to be won in order to draw a distinction between two equally worthy knights. This is also true with other women characters in the tale:

[T]he Knight for once lets women speak for themselves, but in a way that reauthorizes both their status as male property and their own foolish incomprehension of the higher ideals that men serve: the women of Athens, bemoaning Arcite’s loss, ask the corpse, “Why woldestow be deed . . . And haddest gold ynough, and Emelye?”

(Hansen 223)

In this aspect, it is not simply femininity itself that is vulnerable and fragile. It is the system of a patriarchal order that men endeavors to establish throughout the tale that renders it so. The Knight narrator intentionally has deleted the details regarding women in his tale, and even when he does allow women characters to speak, he grants it only when it reinforces the patriarchal order; Theseus possesses the Amazonian women and uses their merits and roles for himself in order to become an impeccable men-hero who would not need women's help. It is in this sense that Laskaya claims Theseus to be "always in control of women" (74).

This uncompromising system of the patriarchal order is problematic in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*. Hence reading the tale either as a narrative stigmatizing feminine passiveness or a positive "integration of activity and passivity into a fully human ideal will eventually that erases male/female role-divisions" (Mann 144) is, in fact, reductive. *The Knight's Tale* is full of attempts of men, both the narrator and the male characters who try to put women absolutely under their control to construct an utterly patriarchal order. This is well illustrated when Theseus tries to locate the feminine Wheel of Fortune under the influence of the masculine First Mover (Laskaya 77). Because of this one-sided system both in heaven and earth, however, there lurks "ever threatening forces of chaos" everywhere (Muscatine 929). There can be no "ultimate order of all things" (Muscatine 929) as long as men force to silence and cripple the will power of women. Taking passiveness and mutability of women as a sign of weakness or negativity may stem from the bias inherent in the patriarchal society; but one must be aware that if those qualities deprive from oppression, it can never be a positive force. It is this patriarchal oppression which produces potential chaos. *The Knight's Tale* enables the reader to explore the theme of "male invasion of female" in the patriarchal world by presenting a male-oriented narrator who tells a "noble" yet troublesome story.

## WORKS CITED

- Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Book of Theseus: Tesida delle Nozze d'Emilia*. Trans. Bernadette Marie McCoy. New York: Teesdale, 1974.



- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *Chaucer: Canterbury Tales*. Ed. A. Kent Hieatt and Constance Hieatt. Bantam Dual-Language Books. New York: Bantam, 1964. 2-41.
- Coleman, William E. "The Knight's Tale." *Sources and Analogues of The Canterbury Tales*. Ed. Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel. Cambridge: Brewer, 2005.
- Crane, Susan. *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994.
- Fisher, John H. Footnote. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer*. Ed. John H. Fisher. New York: Holt, 1977. 25.
- Hansen, Elaine Tuttle. *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992.
- "Knight." *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989.
- Laskaya, Anne. *Chaucer's Approach to Gender in The Canterbury Tales*. Woodbridge: Boydell, 1995.
- Mann, Jill. *Feminizing Chaucer*. Rochester: Brewer, 2002.
- Muscatine, Charles. "Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*." *PMLA* 65 (1950): 911-29.
- Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Trans. David Raeburn. New York: Penguin, 2004.
- Pearman, Tory Vandeventer. "Laying Siege to Female Power: Theseus the 'Conqueror' and Hippolita the 'Asseged' in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*." *Essays in Medieval Studies* 26 (2006): 31-40.
- Woods, William F. "'My Sweete Foo': Emelye's Role in *The Knight's Tale*." *Studies in Philology* 88.3 (1991): 276-306.

## ABSTRACT

## Male Invasion of the Female in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*

Min Young Kim

This paper analyzes the ways in which female characters in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* are intricately but ruthlessly intruded by men. A close reading of the text will reveal the fact that female characters in *The Knight's Tale* suffer from male invasion in virtually every aspect of their lives: their bodies, their voices, their feminine qualities, and their gender roles.

The various types of male infringement on women are signified by the stories depicted on the walls of the temple of Diana. For this reason, a careful, close reading of the pictures on the temple of Diana is crucial. William F. Woods argues that "her temple paintings are scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*." Considering that they are Chaucer's original inventions, however, one may assume that the paintings unfold much more. Moreover, the fact that the temples are constructed under Theseus's orders reflects the manipulative power of Theseus and the Knight narrator over women. Hence the depiction of women in the stories illustrated on Diana's temple symbolizes the whole idea of male invasion of women's domain in *The Knight's Tale*.

The problem, then, does not lie in femininity itself which men tend to disparage as vulnerable and fragile, but rather in the stubborn patriarchal order that men endeavor to establish and impose on women throughout the tale. The Knight narrator intentionally deletes the details regarding women in his tale, and even when he allows women characters to speak, he grants it only when it reinforces the patriarchal order; Theseus possesses the Amazonian women and uses their merits and roles for himself in order to become an impeccable men-hero who would not need women's help.

The uncompromising system of the patriarchal order is indeed prevalent in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*. Hence reading the tale either only as a narrative

stigmatizing feminine passiveness or only as a positive “integration of activity and passivity into a fully human ideal” would be incomplete. *The Knight's Tale* is full of attempts of men, both the narrator and the male characters who try to put women absolutely under their control to construct an utterly patriarchal order. This is well illustrated when Theseus tries to locate the feminine Wheel of Fortune under the influence of the masculine First Mover. Because of this one-sided system both in heaven and earth, however, there lurks “ever threatening forces of chaos” everywhere.” There can be no “ultimate order of all things” as long as men force to silence and cripple the will power of women. Taking passiveness and mutability of women as a sign of weakness or negativity may stem from the bias inherent in the patriarchal society; but one must be aware that if those feminine qualities are deprived from male oppression, they can never be a positive force. It is this patriarchal oppression which produces potential chaos. *The Knight's Tale* enables the reader to explore the theme of “male invasion of the female” in the patriarchal world by presenting a male-oriented narrator who tells a “noble” yet troublesome story.

*Key Words* patriarchal order, system, voice, silence, body, gender role

