INTRODUCTION

ORIGINS

Like most of Chaucer’s poetry, and indeed like most medieval literature, *The Knight’s Tale* is not original in its story. It was not the habit of medieval writers to invent their own stories; on the contrary, they were pleased to be able to claim the authority of age for the tales they told, and to begin:

Whilom, as olde stories tellen us . . .

*The Knight’s Tale* is derived from a specific written source, though Chaucer does not anywhere say what it is. It is in fact the *Teseida* of Giovanni Boccaccio, an Italian poet who was an older contemporary of Chaucer, and from whose work he translated the whole or part of a number of his own poems. Notably, Chaucer’s longest single work, *Troilus and Criseyde*, is essentially a translation of Boccaccio’s *Filostrato*, while Chaucer borrows from the *Teseida* not only in *The Knight’s Tale* but also in *The House of Fame*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The Franklin’s Tale*, the *Troilus* again, and in an unfinished poem called *Anelida and Arcite*. The last appears to be a first attempt at a self-contained translation from the *Teseida*, though in it Chaucer shows more interest in the ‘epic’ style of Boccaccio’s poem than in its story.

The *Teseida* was written in 1339–40. It too had an ‘old history’ as its source, the *Thebaid* of Statius, a Latin epic
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completed in AD 92. (Chaucer also made some direct use of the *Thebaid* in *The Knight’s Tale*; in many *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts this tale is prefaced by a brief quotation from Statius, possibly placed there by Chaucer himself.) Boccaccio’s aim in the *Teseida* was characteristic of the early Renaissance—to produce an equivalent to classical epic poetry in a modern vernacular language. His poem has the same number of books and even the same number of lines as Virgil’s *Aeneid*, and he was careful to present it in the form in which classical epics were read in the medieval schools—accompanies by a prose commentary interpreting the meaning of its fiction in moral and allegorical terms. (Whether Chaucer knew this commentary is uncertain; if he did, he probably made little use of it.) Boccaccio claimed that the *Teseida* was the first vernacular poem to match the classics in treating the predominant epic subject of war. An additional part of his fiction was that the *Teseida* was addressed to Maria d’Aquino, allegedly his mistress, in order to regain her favour. The part of the story that concerns Palemon (Chaucer’s Palamon) and Arcite (Arcite) was probably invented by Boccaccio himself, and Emilia (Emelye) was intended to stand for Maria, while Arcite, the unrecognized lover who is compelled by his lady’s attraction to return to the danger of Athens and who eventually suffers death in his pursuit of her, represented Boccaccio. This level of personal allusion is, so far as we know, completely absent from Chaucer’s poem, and in general his ‘translation’ from Boccaccio is very different from the literal rendering that we understand by the word in modern times. He transmutes his source, to an extent which is most obvious in the fact that he reduces its length from nearly 10,000 lines to 2250. He makes in effect a new
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poem, a reinterpretation of the old story which is thoroughly and unmistakably Chaucerian.

The work of the great Italian poets of the fourteenth century, Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio, was not familiar in Chaucer’s England. These poets meant much to Chaucer himself, for they gave him a sense of the heights attainable by poetry in a vernacular language that he could not have gained from reading the French courtly poets who were fashionable in England during his lifetime, still less from the mainly anonymous English writings likely to have been known to him, beautiful though some of these are. The Italian poets offered models for a poetry of elevated style and learned substance, emulating the great Latin writers of classical antiquity, but employing the living and changing flexibility of a modern language. But these models were available only to those few Englishmen who could visit Italy to encounter them directly, and Chaucer is the only English poet we know of before the sixteenth century who was in this position. Chaucer was employed as a diplomat and trade negotiator, and he was sent to Italy on royal business in 1372–3 (to Genoa and Florence) and again in 1378 (to Milan). Then as later, French was the language of diplomacy, and in this Chaucer was fluent, but presumably he was chosen for these trips in part because, as an apt linguist, he also knew some Italian, which he could have learned from the Italian merchants and bankers resident in London in his time. Both Boccaccio and Petrarch would have been in Florence in the early 1370s; there is no telling whether Chaucer had a chance to meet them, but we can be sure that while in Italy he acquired manuscripts of Italian poetry, including copies of Boccaccio’s Filostrato and Teseida, which he brought back to England with him.
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These manuscripts were a basis for the creative borrowing that inspired the works listed above.

Beyond their general value as models for a new, more serious and learned type of vernacular poetry, capable of handling large political, moral, and philosophical issues, the Teseida and Filostrato are likely to have interested Chaucer in several ways. Perhaps more than anything else, he was attracted by their imaginative reconstruction of the pagan past; this aspect of The Knight’s Tale will be discussed below. The sheer energy and scope of Boccaccio’s narrative power must have appealed greatly to Chaucer; and it has rightly been suggested that Chaucer found stimulus to the development of his own work in the Italian poet’s freedom from doctrinal narrowness, his ‘intimation of many legitimately held attitudes towards the life of man at war, man in love, man faced by the working of Fate and the Gods’. It would be a mistake, though, to suppose that Chaucer’s public were in a position, like modern scholars, to measure his achievement against Boccaccio’s. Neither in The Knight’s Tale nor anywhere else in his work does Chaucer mention Boccaccio’s name, and there is no reason to think that it would have meant anything to his readers if he had done so. The Teseida and even its story were completely unknown in England, and Chaucer’s pretence throughout The Knight’s Tale is that he is translating from authentic classical sources, presumably in Latin: ‘Stace of Thebes [the Thebaid of Statius] and thise booke olde’ (1436), as he vaguely puts it in describing Emelye’s rites in the temple of Diana. If Chaucer’s intentions had emerged only from a comparison of his poem with its Italian source, he would

have failed. I shall therefore refer to the Teseida only when comparison seems to clarify specific points, rather than using it as a permanent guiding star.

In the General Prologue to The Canterbury Tales, the group of pilgrims (including an ‘I’ who is apparently Geoffrey Chaucer) who are about to set out from the Tabard Inn in Southwark for the shrine of St Thomas à Becket at Canterbury agree to the suggestion of Harry Bailly, landlord of the Tabard, that they should pass the time on their journey by telling stories to each other. On the morning when they depart, Harry proposes that they should draw lots to decide who is to tell the first story. They do so, and, ‘Were it by aventure, or sort, or cas’ (Whether by chance, or fate, or accident), the lot falls to the Knight. This is highly appropriate, for the Knight is the person of highest secular rank among the pilgrims and was the first of them to be described in the General Prologue, and questions of ‘aventure, or sort, or cas’ will be of central interest in his tale. The Knight immediately agrees to begin, and the tale he tells is the poem with which we are concerned in this book.

But the poem we call The Knight’s Tale did not begin life as the first of The Canterbury Tales. In another poem, dating from about 1386–8, the Prologue to The Legend of Good Women, Chaucer dreams that he is being defended by Alcestis against the charge that, in writing about unfaithful women, he has committed heresy against the God of Love. Alcestis lists the works he has written in praise of love, and includes among them:

> al the love of Palamon and Arcite
> Of Thebes, thogh the story is knowne lite.
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This poem, ‘little known’ in the late 1380s perhaps because it had only recently been written, and since then completely unknown, must be an earlier version of The Knight’s Tale. We have no way of telling how it may have differed from the poem that survives, but there is little to indicate that Chaucer made many changes. Lines 27–34 are clearly inserted to connect the story with its new context in the pilgrims’ tale-telling competition; the final couplet may have the same purpose; lines 1252–8 could be read as an insertion addressed by the Knight to his fellow-pilgrims, inviting them to share a military man’s enthusiastic transposition of the ancient tournament to the English present. Apart from these brief passages, there is nothing in The Knight’s Tale that could not have belonged to a separate version of the Teseida, composed before Chaucer had begun to compile The Canterbury Tales. Occasionally, indeed, he fails to alter turns of phrase that are inappropriate to the fiction of oral tale-telling, and that recall the written nature of the text before us:

What sholde I al day of his wo endite? (522)
Of this bataille I wol namoore endite,
But speke of Palamon and of Arcite. (1883–4)

There are similar moments, though, in other Canterbury Tales, many of which are also likely to have had an earlier existence as separate poems. (One of them, later to become The Second Nun’s Tale, is also mentioned in the Prologue to The Legend of Good Women.) Writing, as he was, on the border between an age in which storytelling had been oral and communal and one in which private reading was to become the norm, Chaucer frequently plays on the double existence of his works, as scores for performance and as
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texts for study. *The Canterbury Tales* itself, after all, survives as a written fiction of oral delivery and reception.

Why did Chaucer choose ‘the love of Palamon and Arcite’ as the story for the Knight to tell? As described in the *General Prologue*, the Knight has devoted his life to warfare governed by the chivalric values of ‘Trouthe and honour, fredom and curtesie’. His career is a list of battles extending over some thirty years, and in that sense *The Knight’s Tale*, which contains more descriptions of fighting than any of Chaucer’s other poems (more, it has been suggested, than all his other poems put together), has an obvious appropriateness to its teller. The battles in which the Knight has served have all been far from England, part of that crusading activity that was still a living and valid ideal for fourteenth-century Englishmen of knightly rank, though it was rare for any to be so totally devoted to the ideal in reality. It has kept him far distant from the public life of administration and business in which many English knights of Chaucer’s time were engaged, and in that way too the remote setting of the tale he tells is suitable to him. Few would dispute that *The Knight’s Tale* is a knightly tale.¹ In other ways, though, there is a marked gap between the tale and the teller to whom it is attributed. The Knight’s battles have nearly all been fought on behalf of Christianity against the heathen; unlike the Squire, his son, he has taken no part in the Hundred Years War between England and France, that struggle among Christian nations that had

¹ A few twentieth-century scholars have taken a different view, seeing the Knight as a brutal mercenary and the Tale as an account of Theseus’s hypocritical tyranny. For an extreme example of this interpretation, in my opinion based on misunderstanding both of fourteenth-century England and of Chaucer’s poetry, see Terry Jones, *Chaucer’s Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980).
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begun shortly before Chaucer’s birth and was by far the commonest field of activity for English soldiers during his lifetime. (Chaucer himself had seen service in France as a young squire, and had been captured by the French and ransomed by King Edward III.) The conspicuously Christian motivation of the Knight’s career makes the exclusively pagan setting of the tale he tells seem extremely surprising. Moreover, that pagan setting is associated, as we shall see, with a learned probing of fundamental philosophical issues, of a kind also found in other poems by Chaucer set in pagan times, such as Troilus and Criseyde and The Franklin’s Tale; and it is hard to see how this could have any connection with the man who has spent his life riding from one battle to another and who joins the Canterbury pilgrimage still wearing a tunic rust-stained from his mailcoat.

Determined attempts have been made to show that The Knight’s Tale expresses the specific character or consciousness of its teller, but in my view these have been unconvincing.¹ In The Canterbury Tales generally, Chaucer was content to establish generic relationships between tales and their tellers: pilgrims of low rank such as the Miller and Reeve tell comic tales about their social equals, nuns tell religious tales about miracles, and so on. He was often careless about narratorial detail (as when in describing the temples of Mars and of Diana in The Knight’s Tale he repeatedly writes ‘Ther saugh I . . . ’, even though the Knight cannot conceivably have seen these buildings). In

¹ Among the most important recent attempts are those of H. Marshall Leicester, The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales (University of California Press, 1996), Part iii, and Lee Patterson, Chaucer and the Subject of History (University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), ch. 3.
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some cases he did not even get round to creating generic links (the Shipman, for example, tells a tale evidently intended for a woman), while in a few extremely interesting cases, such as those of the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath, he seems to have gone beyond the merely generic, devising tales that are in some sense dramatic monologues, and that reveal more about their tellers than the tellers realize. The Knight’s Tale is a tale appropriate in many ways to a knight, but it tells us more about Chaucer and his interests than about the idealized Knight who is among the Canterbury pilgrims. I shall normally refer to the teller of The Knight’s Tale simply as Chaucer, because even phrases such as ‘the teller’ or ‘the narrator’ tend to imply the existence of a distinct and consistent narratorial persona, of a kind that I do not believe Chaucer ever imagined. ‘Narration’, as we shall see, is a central part of our experience in reading the tale; ‘the narrator’ is not. For a medieval man, Chaucer was unusually sensitive to the ways in which tales can reveal the preconceptions and prejudices of those who tell them, but he largely shared his contemporaries’ assumption that stories have a life of their own, larger and more fruitful of meaning than any individual consciousness. Can we be sure that he was wrong?

THE KNIGHT’S TALE AS CHIVALRIC ROMANCE

Chivalric romances
The ‘knightly tale’ attributed to the Knight is of a kind that modern scholars would define as chivalric romance. The term ‘romance’ is commonly used in medieval languages
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(roman in French, romaunt or romaunce in English), but it does not have a very precise meaning. It may indicate no more than a narrative in a vernacular language, as opposed to Latin (we still speak of ‘Romance languages’, meaning those descended from Latin, such as French and Italian); or, in an age when Latin was the language of serious thought and learning, it may imply the kind of material that would be supposed characteristic of vernacular narrative—fictional, fanciful, extravagant, lacking in intellectual seriousness. Modern scholars recognize a large group of narratives, in many vernacular languages, as belonging to a somewhat more precise category of ‘chivalric romances’ or ‘courtly romances’. These narratives have certain fundamental features in common, but rather than a precisely delimited genre they form an extended family, with many variant branches. The most important thing they have in common, and the feature that makes it especially appropriate that one of them should be told by Chaucer’s Knight, is that they are stories of aristocratic life—stories of kings and queens, dukes and duchesses, knights and ladies. The normal medieval assumption is that social rank, conveyed by birth for men and by birth or marriage for women, is a fundamental and permanent human category. Terms such as cherl or vileyn (peasant) and gentil (noble) have ethical as well as social meanings: a peasant, it is assumed, will behave cherlissely, while a nobleman or gentleman will behave gentilly. (Everyone knew, of course, that this assumption might sometimes not be fulfilled, and Chaucer himself in other poems, such as the tales of the Wife of Bath and the Franklin, is anxious to argue that true gentillesse is a matter of conduct, not of social origin.) And the basic structure of medieval literary genres is an offshoot