

**“A beest may al his lust fulfill”: Naturalizing Chivalric Violence in
Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale”**

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From Nazi attempts at “naturalizing” the state of warfare to modern marketers’ penchant for associating products with the “purity” and “simplicity” of nature, individuals and groups have tried to link their actions, products, or ideologies with the natural world. To find a parallel in the natural world (or, at least, to convince an audience that such a parallel exists) is highly advantageous for, as Neil Evernden has argued, “Once we can say, and believe, that a thing is natural, it is beyond reproach: it is now in the realm of the absolute.”¹ Evernden goes on to assert: “Attributing to any notion a connection with nature provides ‘an immediate certificate of legitimacy; its credentials need not be further scrutinized.’”² In this “certificate of legitimacy” lies the appeal for everyone from vegetarians to carnivores, and from homophobes to gay rights activists, to find a counterpart in the animal and vegetable realms for their beliefs regarding proper human behavior.³

In this essay, I argue that in “The Knight’s Tale” the professional military class of Geoffrey Chaucer’s time is exposed as similarly indulging in ideological appropriations of nature. But it is an appropriation rife with contradiction. As we will see, our Knight-narrator repeatedly traffics in animal metaphors that suggest he yearns to see warriors like himself being as free as animals to discharge at will their power and violence. But Chaucer exposes such

metaphors as self-contradictory, for even as they construct animals as avatars of complete freedom and natural dominance, the rest of “The Knight’s Tale” shows warriors actively distorting, through restraint and subjugation, those allegedly natural, eternal qualities of animals. Consequently, Chaucer reveals that those qualities were never immutable to begin with. Furthermore, Chaucer, I affirm, is deeply critical of the ways in which the chivalric class attempts to naturalize their violence by affirming essentialist connections between themselves and animals, while simultaneously marginalizing animals and governing them as a resource..

According to Dorothy Yamamoto’s influential discussion of animal imagery in “The Knight’s Tale,” Chaucer is very much a thinker of his time in that he perceives human identity as porously interacting with animal identity.⁴ Thus, the effect of Chaucer’s comparisons of Palamon and Arcite to wolves or boars and of more minor characters such as Lygurge and Emetreus to bears or lions is an implicit assertion that the knights “remain ‘in the gap’ [between human and animal],” and that “their identities [are] deeply complicit with the animals to which they have previously been compared.”⁵ Collapsing Chaucer the poet into his Knight-narrator, Yamamoto suggests that the poet personally perceives deep connections between animals and humans.

In contrast to Yamamoto, I wish to examine the tension between, on the one hand, the ways in which the poem depicts how the warrior class constructs its identity through a sense of identification with the animal world, and, on the other hand, the ways in which Chaucer reveals how the chivalric class cuts itself off from materially existing animals by subjugating and dominating them. The sense of kinship, in other words, is a one-way street. Even though a character such as the Knight-narrator conveys at times a desire for warriors to become more “animal-like,” the knights in the poem never appear willing to give up the subjugation that Karl

Steel claims “draw[s] the boundaries...between humans and animals,” for this “[s]ubjugation resolves the various, shifting boundaries between humans and nonhumans into a single line separating humans from all other living things.”⁶

An early speech in “The Knight’s Tale” gestures towards the tension between the warriors’ yearning for an identification with animals and their repeated enactments of the subjugation that Steel identifies as the crucial divider of human and animal identities. After Arcite has been released from prison, Palamon wails to the gods:

What is mankynde moore unto you holde
Than is the sheep that rouketh in the folde?
For slayn is man right as another beest,
And dwelleth eek in prison and arreest,
And hath siknesse and greet adversitee,
And ofte tymes giltelees, pardee. (1307-12)⁷

Here we glimpse Palamon deploring the fact that humans are slain by the gods “just like another beast,” while simultaneously and paradoxically acknowledging humans are, in fact, “another beast.” Palamon then articulates another quality that he thinks divides humans and animals: animals’ alleged total and complete freedom to fulfill their every desire.

What governance is in this prescience,
That giltelees tormenteth innocence?
And yet encresseth this al my penaunce,
That man is bounden to his observaunce,
For Goddes sake, to letten of his wille,
Ther as a beest may al his lust fulfille. (1315-18)

At the same time that Palamon asserts a fundamental distinction between humans and animals, we catch him articulating the desire of humans to become more animal-like due to a belief that animals, unlike humans, live fully liberated lives in which they “may al [their] lust fulfille.” In short, we glimpse Palamon in this speech vacillating back and forth between the following points: rejecting connections between humans and animals, affirming similarities between them, and coveting possession of more animal-like qualities.

However, even though Palamon portrays animals as free to fulfill their every desire surely Chaucer does not want us to lose sight of a fundamental fallacy in Palamon’s view of animals. This fallacy appears in several later scenes which reveal Chaucer as well aware that the military class’s encounters with animals often directly contribute to animals dwelling “in prison and arreest” and in “greet adversitee” as well, even though Palamon’s prison lament suggests only humans live such constricted lives. Palamon performs in his prison lament a standard maneuver, popular even in our own time, of romanticizing and whitewashing the often harsh lives of animals. Significantly, the poem recognizes elsewhere that chivalric actions are directly responsible for thwarting and negating the desires of animals. For, as Chaucer knows and as Steel contends, in “this active, ongoing, and violent relationship [between humans and animals] the human cannot abandon the subjugation of animals without abandoning itself.”⁸ As I show below in my discussion of the characters of Lygurge and Emetreus, and as we see elsewhere in the poem’s depiction of horses and woodland animals (discussed near the end of this essay), lack of complete freedom and animal life go hand-in-hand in the tale’s depiction of materially existing animals.

A key moment in the poem that weakens Palamon’s assertion that animals live unimpeded existences of perfect freedom is the introduction of Lygurge and Emetreus, the two

kings who come to support Palamon and Arcite in the tournament. As Charles Muscatine long ago noted: “many passages [in “The Knight’s Tale”] appear to be irrelevant and detachable. To take a well-known instance, we have sixty-one lines of description of Emetreus and Lygurge; yet so far as the action of the poem is concerned, these two worthies do practically nothing.”⁹

Muscatine goes on to claim that although those two kings serve little function in the plot, they do exemplify the Knight’s overall concern with “the general tenor of the noble life, the pomp and ceremony, the dignity and power [of nobility].”¹⁰ I would argue, however, that the text places the most emphasis on the two kings’ role as embodiments of *power* rather than those other components of nobility in Muscatine’s list. Yamamoto herself recognizes that Emetreus and Lygurge do not assert benign kinship between human and animal; rather, they signal the warrior class’s role as “*rulers*, as wielders of power through their ascendancy over the animal kingdom.”¹¹

When Lygurge, “the gret kyng of Trace,” arrives to support Palamon, his lavish entourage includes “foure white boles in the trays” (2139) pulling his chariot, as well as a personal collection of hunting dogs consisting of “white alauntz, / Twenty or mo” (2148-49). Arcite’s ally, a certain “kyng of Inde” named Emetreus, can count among his personal traveling menagerie an “egle tame” (2178) and “many a tame leon and leopard” (2186) which scurry about him on every side. Emetreus also rides upon “a steede bay trapped in steel” (2157), a phrase which should give us pause in order to consider the semantic range of its main verb “trapped.” The *Middle English Dictionary* tells us it can mean to provide an animal such as a horse with ceremonial or military regalia, but it can also mean to ensnare an animal.¹² In a passage containing several images of animals under the duress of humans, Chaucer likely wants us to think of that second, more menacing, meaning of the verb “trappen” as well in this line.

Clearly these creatures' lives are a far cry from Palamon's claim about them. Instead of animals as embodiments of emancipated Freudian Id (or the animal counterpart thereof), we see images of animals that are shackled, domesticated, and coerced into the service of fulfilling *human* "lust," not their own. Therefore, this throng of various species within the processions of Emetreus and Lygurge contrasts with Haraway's vision of "[humans and animals] in a knot of species coshaping one another in layers of reciprocating complexity all the way down. Response and respect are possible only in those knots, with actual animals and people looking back at each other, sticky with all their muddled histories."¹³ Instead of the reciprocal looking Haraway advocates, animals in the poem appear reduced to the status of mere objects for Palamon, the Knight-narrator, and (consequently) the reader's gaze. Hence, with the arrival of Emetreus and Lygurge, the fallacy of Palamon's perception in his prison lament of animals as embodying freedom becomes clear. .

To quickly sum up the argument hitherto, "The Knight's Tale" shows that human subjugation has invalidated the conception of animal nature that Palamon holds. Palamon, that is, misrepresents the reality of animals' condition because he ignores the ways humans distort that condition. Animals may in the abstract be free to pursue their every desire and be unfettered by moral law, but they are certainly, for the most part, constrained by human actions in the poem. It is thus ironic that the chivalric class continues (as I will now discuss) to ground key aspects of its identity on that very conception of animals posited as unalterably "natural." The attempt of the military class to naturalize its own violence in this way appears most tellingly in the Knight-narrator's metaphors that link chivalric and animal identities.

For example, the Knight gives us extended metaphors involving Palamon and Arcite morphing into animals during combat in the famous comparisons occurring in lines 1655-1660 in

which the two warriors are said to fight like “wild boores” and a “cruel tigre” during their battle in the grove. It is here that the military class’s appropriation of animals in order to “naturalize” such violence as an unavoidable act of biological necessity bursts into full display. Put simply, when we see Palamon behaving like a “wood leon” during his bloody brawl with Arcite, we see him as the Knight wants us to see other members of his own warrior class. Although these comparisons to animals might seem unflattering metaphors on the Knight’s part, for human associations with animals were often negative in the Middle Ages,¹⁴ we will see below that the Knight repeats these animal metaphors during the tournament battle organized by Theseus, but there the animal metaphors are slightly altered from their source in Boccaccio in order to take on more reverent overtones.

In his study of Chaucer’s engagement in “The Knight’s Tale” with the Theban tradition, Dominique Battles argues that Chaucer investigates whether the violence, aggression, and self-destructive character of Thebes is a product of nature or of nurture. Chaucer, Battles asserts, “allows us to observe the evolution of a Theban-style conflict from conception to maturity in the same way that we might observe wild animals living and breeding in captivity...Arcite and Palamon instinctively turn to conflict even once they are removed from their native conflict-ridden home.”¹⁵ For Battles, Chaucer demonstrates that Palamon and Arcite could not escape the Theban urge for destruction and fratricide. However, I would argue that by having the Knight-narrator repeatedly reference Palamon and Arcite’s similarity to wild beasts, Chaucer instead demonstrates that warriors ideologically “naturalize” their violence, presenting it as no less unavoidable than an animal’s urge to hunt. Chaucer’s recognition of a problematic distance between an animal’s instinctual urge to fight and a human “Theban-caused” urge to fight is most

apparent in the following, over-the-top lines by the Knight describing the tournament combat between Palamon and Arcite:

Ther nas no tygre in the vale of Galogopheye,
 Whan that hir whelp is stole whan it is lite,
 So crueel on the hunte as is Arcite
 For jelous herte upon this Palamon.
 Ne in Belmarye ther nys so fell leon,
 That hunted is, or for his hunger wood,
 Ne of his praye desireth so the blood,
 As Palamon to sleen his foo Arcite. (2626-33)

Jeffrey Helterman has interpreted these lines as demonstrating Palamon and Arcite's ability to become "more cruel and unreasonable than the most savage beast."¹⁶ But I think the Knight wants us to see something very different in this passage. The way the Knight constructs his analogies by means of negations in the above passage ("The *nas* no tygre in the vale") suggests that, in the Knight-narrator's eyes, the two warriors in their moment of intense combat have achieved a state of instinctual purity that *exceeds and surpasses* that of an animal engaged in its most irreproachable behavior, such as killing in order to eat. Put simply, the Knight is suggesting that during combat Palamon and Arcite out-animal the animals.

As a member of the same cult of chivalry as his main characters, the Knight tries to situate his class's monopoly on, and penchant for, violence within the realm of the moral absolute by connecting such violence to the animal world. Again, as Evernden has argued: "When something is 'natural' it is 'the norm,' 'the way,' 'the given.'...[O]nce something is perceived as lying in the realm of nature rather than in the realm of society or history, it seems

beyond criticism.”¹⁷ But the Knight’s hyperbolic connection between, for example, a tigress defending her cub and Arcite with “jelous herte” defending his claim over Emeyle suggests that Chaucer could not see possibly both actions as equally “natural.” The elaborate setting and formal procedures for Palamon and Arcite’s combat distinguish their human, all too human, reasons for feuding from motives such as defending one’s offspring or killing prey in order to acquire life-sustaining food, although the Knight slyly attempts to condition us to see his warriors’ feud in just such a way. I thus disagree with Battles that Chaucer depicts the violence in “The Knight’s Tale” as endemically Theban, for such a depiction would appear to be an ideologically contrived defense of an aggression that is more a product of nurture (chivalric culture) than of nature (Theban genetics).

I would like to point out here that the comparisons mentioned above between animals defending their young or killing prey and human warriors are not unique to Chaucer. They are found as well in the source for Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale,” Boccaccio’s *Teseida delle Nozze d’Emilia*, but with some telling divergences. In Book 8 of the *Teseida*, Boccaccio, rather than describe his characters Palaemon or Arcita as being like a tiger attempting to recover stolen whelps or like a lion hunting to stave off maddening hunger, instead describes much more peripheral characters, Diomedes and Peleus, in such a way.¹⁸ Chaucer, that is, has transplanted to Palamon and Arcite these metaphors that ideologically “naturalize” human violence in strikingly amoral ways, and applied them anew to his warriors fighting over the coveted love-object Emelye. Another noteworthy alteration Chaucer makes to Boccaccio’s original metaphors is that whereas the lion in Boccaccio’s comparison is described as standing alone covered with blood, yet still craving for cattle (“E quale, degli armenti ancor bramoso, / sol pien di sangue rimane il leone”¹⁹), Chaucer’s metaphor depicts a lion that is simply insane with hunger, not one bloody

from a recent kill yet still craving more prey. Without the suggestion of excess or greed in Boccaccio's metaphor, the Knight's version of the metaphor is better designed to legitimize the chivalric violence that his tale describes.

When we turn to the closing of "The Knight's Tale," we see Chaucer's most memorable display of the discrepancy between chivalric culture's own representations of animals and the reality of chivalric warfare's effects upon them. Before the tournament between Palamon and Arcite (and their respective bands of warriors), several of the main characters enter the temples of Venus, Mars, and Diana in order to pray for victory to their patron deities. During Arcite's visit to the temple of Mars, the Knight tells us of a building inscribed with what John Finlayson describes as "a catalogue of malign violence and ghastly, undignified death," a catalogue lacking any "image of heroic, martial death."²⁰ But most importantly for our interests here, the description of the temple of Mars includes several striking images of animals, some of which align with Palamon's fantasy of animals as those beings which can "al [their] lust fulfillle."

Depicted on the walls of Mars' temple are frightful images such as the "hunte strangled with the wilde beres; / The sowe freten the child right in the cradel" (2018-19).²¹ And the overall depiction of Mars ends with: "A wolf ther stood biforn hym at his [Mars'] feet / With eyen rede, and of a man he eet" (2046-48). In this temple we have a horrific fulfillment of Palamon's perception of animals as creatures that can freely indulge in their every desire, even such desires as the consuming of human babies or of the corpses of grown men. But to reiterate, the depiction of materially existing animals elsewhere in the poem problematizes these images in Mars' temple that grant such agency and potency to animals. As I have been arguing, the poem instead depicts warriors constraining flesh-and-blood animals.

We see further examples of the constraining of animals, other than those we saw with Emetreus and Lygurge, with the “steede dryven forth with staves” (2727) and “fomy steedes on the golden brydel/ Gnawyngge” (2506-07) in *pars quarta* of the poem. The bridle may here be golden, and hence quite luxurious, but it is still an instrument of control on which the horses may well be gnawing in discomfort, rather than in pleasant expectation of the battle to come. And in the extravagantly orchestrated pageantry of Arcite’s funeral, we hear of how “Duc Theseus leet forth thre steeds bryngge, / That trapped were in steel al gliteryngge, / And covered with the armes of daun Arcite” (lines 2889-91). As Kathleen A. Blake has pointed out, the funeral as designed by Theseus is an extremely regulated affair, with the three horses “each carrying a rider with a separate piece of Arcite’s armor...the whole procession riding three times round in one direction, three times round in the other.”²² In these images of horses bridled, “trapped,” and driven forth, we see them treated only as “a piece of equipment expertly bred, trained, and managed to enhance the knight’s capacities” and not also, as Susan Crane argues horses are often additionally portrayed in medieval texts, as “a servant and companion, sharing qualities such as courage and loyalty with the knight.”²³

After Arcite’s famously unchivalric death due to injuries sustained by a throw from his horse, the dead warrior is memorialized by an epic funeral pyre. And after the detailed catalogue of deforestation²⁴ that went into the building of the pyre (2919-24), we are told of the adverse effects upon the other living creatures caught up in this display of chivalric glory:

...the goddes ronnen up and doun,
 Disinherited of hire habitacioun,
 In which they woneden in reste and pees,
 Nymphes, fawnes and amadrides;

...the beestes and the brides all

Fledden for fere, whan the wode was falle. (2925-30)

If Theseus' intervention in the rivalry between Palamon and Arcite is supposed to represent the apogee of chivalry's ability to temper the raw violence which the military class inflicts on its own members, this funeral ceremony and its preparations represent the apogee of chivalry's chronic infliction of mastery over the lives of nonhuman creatures.²⁵ As Robert Emmett Finnegan states it: "the violence and destruction [by Theseus of the grove of trees] are of such magnitude that the putative order gained is out of all balance with the means used to secure it."²⁶ Arcite's funeral shows us, in short, that animals have much more to fear from the warrior class than warriors have to fear from animals (despite what the images on the walls of the temple of Mars tell us).

The lavish spectacle of Arcite's funeral brings us back to the paradox at the core of the tale's constructions of animal identity. Even though Palamon (and the Knight vicariously) construct animals in a way that makes it appear such beings are masters of their own fate, the frantic running for cover of "the beestes and the brides all" in the above passage show that these animals are perhaps more often than not at the mercy of chivalric forces imposing their sense of design and order upon the world. For as Blake remarks: "The *Knight's Tale* reveals that order may be created out of nothing, for no all-encompassing, rational purpose, *but out of gratuitous impulses of will.*"²⁷ It is this contradictory view of the natural world that lurks behind Theseus' invitation in his famous "First Mover" speech for his audience to "Loo the ook, that hath so long a norisshynge / ...And hath so long a lif, as we may see, / Yet at the laste wasted is the tree" (3017-20). In a speech exhorting its audience to accept the inevitability and naturalness of death through the example of a tree which "at laste wasted is," it is, of course, ironic that Theseus has

just personally been responsible (a mere hundred lines earlier) for a most uninevitable and unnatural destruction of a whole multitude of trees.

It is this kind of contradictory appropriation in the tale by warriors of nature (particularly, of animals) for ideological reasons, while at the same time showing materially existing nature to be altered in such a way that these ideological constructions are revealed as patently false and mutable, that I have been highlighting throughout this essay. Just as Theseus needs his audience to believe that trees “just naturally” live and die in order to make his point about the tragic death of Arcite, so do Palamon and the Knight-narrator need animals to be perceived as completely free and liberated creatures, so that the Knight can then perform his maneuver of connecting up chivalric violence to the amoral, irreproachable freedom of animals. But as Chaucer deftly shows us in “The Knight’s Tale,” the lives of animals and oaks are anything but free to follow a path unregulated by chivalric power and control.

Notes

¹ Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 24.

² Evernden, *Social Creation*, p. 25. The second half of Evernden's quotation here includes part of Evernden's own quoting from Arthur Lovejoy and George Boa's *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*.

³ A particularly useful example of how opposing ideologies try to connect their views up with nature—while even simultaneously referring to the same animal—is the way penguins have been imported into recent debates on sexual morality, particularly after the documentary *March of the Penguins* was released in 2005. For more discussion, see Noel Sturgeon, “Penguin Family Values: The Nature of Planetary Environment Reproductive Justice” in *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, eds. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 102-133.

⁴ See Dorothy Yamamoto, *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 140. By “thinker of his time,” I am referring here to one of main arguments made by Joyce E. Salisbury in *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 1994). The overarching argument found there is that, by the late Middle Ages, the explosion of texts depicting unsettling human-animal hybrids provides evidence, Salisbury argues, of a growing sense of anxiety that perhaps human and animal identities are not as distinct as was once widely believed.

⁵ For a discussion of the different animals Palamon and Arcite are equated with, see Yamamoto, *Boundaries*, p. 139; for a discussion of minor characters such as Lygurge and Emetreus being equated with animals, see Yamamoto, *Boundaries*, p. 135.

⁶ Karl Steel, "How to Make a Human," *Exemplaria* 20:1 (2008): 7 [3-27].

⁷ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). All subsequent references to line numbers from *The Knight's Tale* will be from this edition.

⁸ Steel, "How to Make a Human," 9.

⁹ Charles Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*," *PMLA* 65:5 (1950): 917 [911-29].

¹⁰ Muscatine, "Form, Texture, and Meaning," 919.

¹¹ Yamamoto, *Boundaries*, p. 137 (emphasis in the original).

¹² See *Middle English Dictionary*, definitions (1) and (2), s.v. "trappen."

¹³ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 42.

¹⁴ I'll refer to one example of such negativity here: the humiliation of criminals by riding them backwards on an animal or tied down onto the animal in such a way that the criminal's face is at the tail end (i.e. close to its anus). See Ruth Mellinkoff, "Riding Backwards: Theme of Humiliation and Symbol of Evil," *Viator* 4 (1973): 153-76.

¹⁵ Dominique Battles, *The Medieval Tradition of Thebes: History and Narrative in the OF Roman de Thèbes, Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Lydgate* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 112.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Helterman, "The Dehumanizing Metamorphoses of *The Knight's Tale*," *Journal of English Literary History* 38 (1971): 499 [493-511].

¹⁷ Evernden, *Social Creation*, p. 22, p. 24.

¹⁸ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Teseida* (Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1938), Book 8, stanzas 26 and 49.

¹⁹ Boccaccio, *Teseida*, 8.49.

²⁰ John Finlayson, "The Knight's Tale: The Dialogue of Romance, Epic, and Philosophy," *Chaucer Review* 27:2 (1992): 137 [126-49].

²¹ One scholar has suggested that Chaucer may have gotten the idea for the gruesome detail of the "sowe freten the child" from an animal trial that occurred in a Norman town, one in which a sow was put to death for having killed a three-month-old baby. See Edward Wheatley, "Murderous Sows in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* and Late Fourteenth-Century France," *Chaucer Review* 44:2 (2009): 224-26.

²² Kathleen A. Blake, "Order and the Noble Life in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*?" *Modern Language Quarterly* 34 (1973):16 [3-19].

²³ Crane, "Chivalry and Pre/Postmodern," p. 75.

²⁴ On exactly what category of natural landscape Chaucer is giving us here in "The Knight's Tale" (grove, wood, forest, etc.), see Robert Emmett Finnegan, "A Curious Condition of Being: the City and the Grove in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*," *Studies in Philology* 106: 3 (2009): 190-92 [285-298].

²⁵ For an ecocritical reading of Theseus' act of deforestation, see Gillian Rudd, *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), pp. 61-67.

²⁶ Finnegan, "Curious Condition of Being," 293.

²⁷ Blake, "Order and the Noble Life," 17, emphasis mine.