

evaluation of its dual nature, at once a necessary and a destructive force in human affairs. In contrast to scholastic writings on anger, Chaucer's tale imagines an anger both less easy to control and more desirable to encourage than scholastic thinkers tend to suggest.

Because anger is not traditionally regarded as a Chaucerian topic or as an organizing principle for the Canterbury project as whole, critical attention has focused largely on either the negative consequences of anger or on the virtue of patience exhibited in the tales. Indeed, if we add Griselda and Custance to the list of patient and merciful figures featuring Emelye, Prudence, and Mary, we have the core of what Jill Mann persuasively argues is the ethical ideal of *pietas* at the heart of Chaucer's work:

[T]he *Canterbury Tales*, for all its rich variety of mode and genre, contains not a single example of the story-type that embodies its ideals in the central figure of a male hero. Instead, the tales that mediate serious ideals are focused on a series of women: Constance, Griselda, Prudence, Cecilia. The male hero enters only in the burlesque form of *Sir Thopas*, to be unceremoniously bundled out of the way in favour of the tale that celebrates the idealized wisdom of a woman, Chaucer's tale of *Melibee*. (*Feminizing Chaucer* 3)

One might argue that Theseus, outside the "feminine" virtues he exhibits, represents a "masculine" political ideal in the Knight's Tale, and my discussion of the tale will suggest that there is a positive as well as negative dimension to his anger. But I am less interested in the debate occasioned by Mann's work regarding Chaucer's attitude toward gender, than in the implication our reading of Chaucer's female characters has for our understanding of his attitude toward anger.²

For all his reservations about the way in which people like the Friar justify their actions by aligning themselves with God's divine anger, Chaucer also recognized anger as a necessary and inevitable principle. While it is true that in the tales of anger and society such as the Knight's Tale or the Tale of Melibee Chaucer generally depicts anger as undesirable, he takes pains to underscore its inevitability, at least in the human world. My reading of Theseus, then, does not challenge the notion of Chaucer's feminine ideal (or of his hope that this will reinvent the masculine ideal), as much as expand our understanding of the context in which these ideals function. Chaucerian ideals of patience and mercy exist against the backdrop of an angry world, but not just as solutions or reme-

dies for anger. The relation is more subtle because Chaucer's text is aware of the potential failure of such ideals, outside of an exemplary narrative, to conquer the anger they respond to. Chaucer's tales beg the question of whether, despite being ideals, they are desirable. They ask us to consider whether a world without anger is a state in which the human imagination can be entirely comfortable.

It is for this reason that anger rises to the level of a Chaucerian subject in its own right and is, I believe, a central principle governing the Canterbury project as a whole. This is not to suggest that it functions in the same organizational way as the topic of patience or pity. But if *pietas* is the deliberate thematic strand running through the work, anger is an irrepressible preoccupation of Chaucer's shadowing that strand.

The center of a preoccupation is, structurally speaking, difficult to identify. It is not clear that the tales or any subgroup of tales was intentionally organized around the topic of anger. There is no "anger group" equivalent to the much discussed "marriage group." While the issue of divine anger is not exclusive to the Friar's Tale, the story of the summoner's road to hell is a focal point for analysis. The focus for a discussion of anger and society is less clear. Though Prudence's endeavor to restrain Melibee's desire for revenge stands out—not least because it is told by the pilgrim Chaucer—its analysis of anger can only be privileged to a point. Melibee seems more in keeping with Chaucer's overall ethical perspective and emphasis on patience, but the tale is not an end in itself any more than, say, the Knight's Tale. Because the Canterbury project's treatment of anger resists having a center, the *Tales* become a meditation on the problem rather than a treatise, a narrative thought experiment rather than an organized lesson on anger for its audience. This essay considers the Knight's Tale and its concern over the consequences of an individual's anger for his community, but does not assume one tale rewrites another or should be—ethically speaking—privileged over another.

I. The Anger of the "gentil duc": The Ambivalent Critical Reception of Chaucer's Theseus

No one in the pilgrim audience openly criticizes the Knight or the hero of his tale, though the narrator observes that the "gentils" in particular praised the Knight's story. One suspects that Theseus may have been received less than favorably by some of the other pilgrims, and Lee Patterson sees the Miller's Tale as a direct critique of Theseus and the Knight.³

By modern critics, too, Theseus has been variously assessed. J. D. Burnley (26) and A. J. Minnis (8) identify in Theseus Chaucer's celebration of a virtuous pagan and of a cautious, just administrator. For David Aers, however, the detailed account of the cost of Theseus' campaigns in blood and suffering suggests that "Chaucer's imagination had great sympathy with the growing criticism of war (the lust for conquest and its economic foundations) among late medieval writers" (176).⁴ Responding to those readers uncomfortable with the ethics of Theseus' politics (and who question the extent to which Chaucer shared Theseus' or the Knight's sanguine view of war), John Pratt defends Theseus' moral and political choices in light of what he argues would be Chaucer's late-medieval conception of a necessary and just war.⁵

Daniel Kempton describes Theseus' ambivalent critical reception as the product of two traditions: the French tradition (embodied in Muscatine's work) which sees the Knight's Tale as a celebration of the romantic-heroic values of chivalry, with Theseus as the embodiment of those values; and the English tradition which views those values with skepticism, identifying in Theseus' order the potential for chaos (238). I think, however, the division among critics also has its origins in our uncertainty about how to value Theseus' private and public anger, not just his militarism. In a sense, by focusing on the political and military aspects of the tale, modern readers undervalue Chaucer's careful portrayal of Theseus, the knights, and even Emelye, as angry individuals. By looking closely at the eruptions of Theseus' anger, I want to suggest that anger is an explicit concern of the tale. The issue for Chaucer is not just the violence of Theseus' policies or the consequences of militarism for Ricardian society, but the anger which shapes both public and private conduct.

To observe Chaucer's interest in anger as a moral and social, rather than specifically political, problem is to return to what might be thought of as a "traditional" reading of the Knight's Tale and the Tale of Melibee, by observing them as stories about moral behavior independent of the politics, if not the culture, of the period.⁶ It is to focus on the way in which Theseus's interaction with the other characters uncovers the qualities of mercy and generosity at the core of his ethical world view:

As he was ready to combat 'ire' and 'tirannye' in Creon, Theseus is ready to combat them in himself, and it is through his 'womanly' qualities that he conquers them Theseus's heroism consists not in his attempt to impose an ordered stasis on the flux of existence, but rather in his readi-

ness to move with the course of events, to match their change with his own. (Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* 136-37)

In revisiting this concept of Theseus as the exemplar of pity, I want to rethink the place anger has in the tale, and to test the notion that anger is indeed "conquered" in the Knight's Tale. While I believe some readers (Aers, Olsson) exaggerate Theseus' faults, this first section of the essay questions the accuracy of the Knight's positive assessment of Theseus, not to denigrate the duke's persisting anger, but to track and evaluate its practical, especially social, consequences. This is, in part, also to question how open to the effects of pity Theseus actually is. In reexamining the extent to which the "pitee" Theseus demonstrates is a remedy for his anger, we observe the extent to which Chaucer sees anger as a formidable challenge for even the virtue of *pietas*.

II. The Case for Theseus as Anger Management Specialist: The Ambiguous Success of the Amphitheater

The case for Theseus' victory over anger finds its best support in Theseus' response to the two knights dueling in the grove; and in his decision not to execute them for defying his authority, but to create an amphitheater in which their dispute can be settled by law:

The queene anon, for verray wommanhede,
Gan for to wepe, and so dide Emelye,
And alle the ladyes in the compaignye
Til at the laste aslaked was his mood,
For pitee renneth soone in gentil herte.
And though he first for ire quook and sterte . . .
Yet in his reson he hem bothe excused. (1748-66)

And forthy I yow putte in this degree,
That ech of yow shal have his destynnee
As hym is shape, and herkneth in what wyse;
Lo, heere youre ende of that I shal devyse
The lystes shal I maken in this place,
And God so wisly on my soule rewe
As I shal even juge been and trewe. (1841-64)

I would agree that, at first, it does seem that Theseus achieves a measure of success and asserts a degree of control, at least with respect to his own angry behavior.⁷ Theseus draws strength from the community of people around him. The weeping of the queen captures Theseus' attention which, from his first angry outburst upon discovering the knights, had been focused on the knights and himself, on his authority and their death. The queen reorients Theseus to the rest of the community and initiates his thoughts about the nature of the knights' offense, the responsibilities of a prince, and how the community as a whole might deal with the situation in other ways. The group places limits on the individual's ability to indulge anger and desire for revenge, and in this case the presence of the women proves pivotal. And as Theseus' anger is contained by an exterior force (he is, as Mann says, "feminized" from without), so he attempts to work a similar change upon the two knights. The women bring public pressure to bear on Theseus and the amphitheater exerts a similar pressure. It does not "feminize" the knights, but does "civilize" them in the narrow sense of forcing them to submit to Theseus' decree (representative of the will of the community) and to express their anger in a limited venue sanctioned by the community.

I would argue, however, that Theseus' victory over anger is something of an illusion, in part because the change of heart involves a change of plan that reconfigures anger into new yet equally destructive forms. Throughout the tales, Chaucer repeatedly underscores that while the social pressure of a community can be effective in containing anger, it also has limits. At the end of the Pardoner's Tale we observe, for example, the way in which the Knight's intervention in the Host-Pardoner quarrel revisits this issue of anger and containment in a daily-life setting, outside the ideal romance setting that the Knight seems to take for granted in his own tale. For the moment, I will note that Theseus' strategy of containment also proves less than successful, and not just because the vagaries of fortune affect the tournament. Such "containment" of anger still involves a redirection of Theseus' own aggressive energies, an extension and an expansion of the feud between the two knights, and a sanctioning of a tournament the violence of which contributes to the death of Arcite, an event which invites an even more powerful and widespread anger. To the extent that Theseus' solution is really about the reassertion of power, his anger is not so much "rejected" (in Mann's phrase) as it is mollified when he dictates to others how the situation will be resolved in his own terms ("youre ende . . . I shal devyse"; "the lystes shal . . . I maken"; "I shal . . .

judge been"). The Queen's intervention in the Knight's Tale simply forces Theseus' aggression along a different path.⁸

This new path leads to the construction of the amphitheater, which is built upon the very space of the grove. It is as if Theseus attempts to reconfigure both the space and the angry emotions generated within that space by replacing them with his carefully designed theater.⁹ However, Theseus' attempt to contain anger through the architecture of the amphitheater appears less successful than, say, that of his prototype, Boccaccio's Teseo. The images of anger inscribed on the walls of Theseus's amphitheater are telling:

Ther saugh I first the derke ymaginyng
 Of Felonye, and al the compassyng;
 The cruell Ire, reed as any gleede;
 The pykepurs, and eek the pale Drede;
 The smylere with the knyf under the cloke;
 The shepne brennyng with the blake smoke;
 The tresoun of the mordryng in the bedde;
 The open werre, with woundes al bibledde;
 Contek, with bloody knyf and sharp manace.
 Al ful of chirkyng was that sory place.
 The sleere of hymself yet saugh I ther—
 His herte-blood hath bathed al his heer—
 The nayl ydryven in the shode anyght;
 The colde deeth, with mouth gapyng upright.
 Amyddes of the temple sat Meschaunce,
 With disconfort and sory contenaunce.
 Yet saugh I Woodnesse, laughyng in his rage,
 Armed Compleint, Outhees, and fiers Outrage;
 The careyne in the busk, with throte ycorve;
 A thousand slayn, and nat of qualm ystorve;
 The tiraunt, with the pray by force yraft;
 The toun destroyed, ther was no thyng laft.
 Yet saugh I brent the shippes hoppesteres;
 The hunte strangled with the wilde beres;
 The sowe fretten the child right in the cradel;
 The cook yscalded, for al his long ladel.
 Noght was foryeten by the infortune of Marte.
 The cartere overryden with his carte—

Under the wheel ful lowe he lay adoun.
 Ther were also, of Martes divisioun,
 The barbour, and the bocher, and the smyth,
 That forgeth sharpe swerdes on his synth.
 And al above, depeynted in a tour,
 Saugh I Conquest, sittynge in greet honour,
 With sharpe swerd over his heed
 Hangynge by a soutil twynes threed.
 Depeynted was the slaughtre of Julius,
 Of grete Nero, and of Antonius . . . (1995-2032)

Many of these images are present in Boccaccio's text as well. However, in Boccaccio's version, it is the personified prayer of Arcite which directly witnesses such images as it rises to heaven and visits the palace of Mars. In Chaucer's version, the portraits become a physical part of Theseus' architecture, reminders of the anger that filled the grove before the construction of the theater and prescient images of the violent emotions that will persist after the theater is torn down to make room for Arcite's funeral pyre.¹⁰

Compared to the images in Boccaccio's unworldly temple, the violent scenes in Chaucer's earthly temple are also more specific and depict in more detail the violence of the everyday human world. Where Boccaccio's images emphasize the suffering of the individual in time of war, Chaucer calls attention to the thief, the murderer, and the arsonist unconnected to acts of war. Chaucer's images also evoke the human anger generated by circumstances, not just by the actions of other human beings: the carter trapped under his cart, the sailor shipwrecked on the sea, and the child threatened in its own cradle figure as prominently as the townspeople whose homes are destroyed by the tyrant.¹¹ These changes to his source text suggest Chaucer believes that anger, in response to the damage other men do and to the pain God allows the accidents of Fortune to inflict, is both more integral to human affairs and more difficult to contain than Boccaccio does.

In pardoning the knights and constructing the amphitheater, Theseus experiences (and the Knight narrator indulges in) a manner of wish-fulfillment, of the kind we observe in the French fabliau of the Butcher of Abbeville and in the Friar's exemplum of the widow and the summoner. Theseus can "reject" anger because he has the power to reassert his authority after an affront to that authority, as the Butcher of

Abbeville has the power, through his vengeful joke, to reassert his pride after it is wounded. That power is limited for most of Chaucer's characters. The anger of the Friar and the Summoner is never resolved entirely because neither has the power Theseus does to impose his will on events and on the community. At the beginning of the *Canterbury Tales* Chaucer offers us this ideal, but we see throughout the rest of the book its limitations, and the difficulty of applying it in everyday life. And for those who do have such power, the consequences may be less than ideal for everyone else, if we hesitate, as Elizabeth Fowler suggests Chaucer does, to embrace the ethics of Theseus' authoritarian rule by conquest.

The Knight's Tale, like the Prioress' Tale, seems concerned that enfolding the individual's anger into public justice merely introduces the potential for many more angers to surface, for the angry individual to be replaced by an angry community. In the Prioress' Tale, the escalation and multiplication of anger is more evident, but such expansion lurks at the edges of the Knight's Tale. We see it in the vicarious participation of the audience in the combat of the two knights (which is extended to a hundred more knights on each side), and in the frustration and resentment Theseus' decision inspires in Emily (an individual sacrificed in the interest of public order). Because one anger exists in relation to others, to "conquer" anger as Jill Mann suggests is at best a pyrrhic victory. The idea of "conquering" anger is, I argue in the next section, a Thomist ideal critiqued by Chaucer throughout the Knight's Tale.

III. Anger and Change: Thomist Theory of the Passions and the Knight's Tale

Expanding on Mary Carruthers' analysis of the link between architecture and emotional expression in medieval culture, Elizabeth Fowler's study of passion and social discourse in the Knight's Tale observes Chaucer's use of ritual forms to express and to contain the passions of grief, anger, and desire. Chaucer is aware, as Fowler demonstrates, of the relation between the passions and social forms, but also, I think, of the way in which anger in particular resists containment by ritual and social forms. Unlike the scholastic approaches to anger, which look to reason and logic as antidotes for anger, Chaucer's response to the threat posed by anger to human fellowship does not depend merely on rationally crafting the proper social ritual for anger. Instead, Chaucer's narratives feature acceptance of anger as an inevitable part of social life and countenance

(even encourage) anger's movement among its many forms.

This interest in the movement and the pervasion of anger in human affairs is, I argue, in part what distinguishes Chaucer's treatment of anger from other more scholastic approaches. Aquinas' thoughts on anger serve as a touchstone. Chaucer shares with Aquinas certain basic cultural assumptions about the passions, but his tales depict a different pattern of movement for anger, and thus point to a different way of thinking about the place of anger in human society.¹²

The scholastic tradition assigns a positive value to "rational" anger. The justice of God is tempered with such anger. In hell the pilgrim Dante initially questions the logic of divine anger, but the purpose of his journey is in part to come to an understanding of the nature of God's justice. He learns even to embrace and imitate such anger as he hardens himself against the suffering of sinners. If an individual's rational anger is not satisfied in this world because a sinner goes unpunished, it is because of a flaw in the human justice system, not because the anger is undeserving of justice.¹³ Aquinas, too, observes that just anger is not the province of God alone (*On Evil* q.12, a. 2, reply to 14; and q.12, a. 3, reply to 5). Human anger can be just; it is judged according to its degree and its motive. For Aquinas, capital punishment may be the clearest example of rational anger and its expression; the anger directed at the criminal is an objective one expressed by a legally empowered magistrate on behalf of a community. To avoid the problem inherent in Dante's condemnation of Filippo Argenti (Canto VIII), in which there is a danger of confusing the individual's sinful anger with objective rational anger, Aquinas tends to emphasize the importance of law and the role of magistrates: anger must avoid seeking "to punish one who does not deserve it, or more than he deserves, or not according to the legitimate process of law" (*ST* II-II, q. 158, a. 2, resp.).¹⁴ Chaucer's texts, however, sensitive to the individual's claim to his own anger, expose the problem of a doctrine which attempts to limit or to ignore the anger of the average person. Where the scholastic sermon tradition discourages the average individual from expressing anger, Chaucer explores the potential utility of permitting anger—possibly even immoderate and highly subjective or personal anger—to move between average individuals in daily life.

Even in the tales of the Knight, the pilgrim Chaucer, and the Prioress—each of which is largely concerned with the negative impact of anger on the community—Chaucer's poetry runs counter to the principles of scholastic thought on anger. Chaucer's deviation from scholastic writ-

ers stems, in part, from the fact that Aquinas' writing on anger has its roots in Gregory's metaphor of righteous anger as "the handmaid" to reason (*On Evil* q.12, a. 1, resp.).

Aquinas is acutely aware that anger often operates outside the control of reason, contributing to anger's prominent place among the deadly sins. But in Aquinas' logical outline of the nature of anger, as in Aristotle's, there is the assumption that anger *can* be regulated by reason. The scholastic solution to the problem of anger is to be aware of its potential surfacing and to subject it repeatedly to the pre-emptive analysis of reason; or to attempt to out-think an anger which has surfaced. We hear in Aquinas the confidence of Aristotle, particularly in statements regarding the dissipation of anger. "If vengeance is actually enjoyed, the satisfaction is complete and the distress totally eliminated. This quiets the angry urge [*et per hoc quietat motum irae*]" (*ST* I-II q. 48, a. 1, resp.). Over time "the motive for anger is gradually weakened until it is dissipated [*Et ideo causa irae per tempus paulatim diminuitur quousque totaliter tollatur*]" (*ST* I-II q. 48, a. 2, ad 2). Anger is, argues Aquinas, a fire which has consumed its materials. Why, he asks, are we not angry with the dead? Because "they seem already to have met the ultimate evil. This is why we cease to be angry with men who have been seriously injured, with the thought that their misfortune has more than satisfied retributive justice" (*ST* I-II, q. 47, a. 4, ad 2). These ideas derive from the Aristotelian epigrams on anger often quoted by Aquinas: "punishment appeases the thrust of anger, replacing sadness with satisfaction"; and "time quiets anger" (*ST* I-II, q. 48, a. 1, obj. 2; and *ST* I-II, q. 48, a. 2, obj. 2).

Aquinas assigns less value than Chaucer to the free movement of anger in society, though the relationship between anger and movement is, from the medieval point of view, a logical one. Aquinas' medieval discourse on the passions, derived from Aristotle, depends on the word *motus* or *mutationus*, and describes the effect of a stimulus on the soul in terms of movement or change (*ST* I-II, q. 22, a. 1-3; and *ST* I-II, q. 23, a. 2, resp.). Both anger and pity are classified as passions; thus both are indicative of the movements or changes registered by the soul's encounter with a stimulus outside itself. Medieval metaphysics describes the *interior* movement of anger within the soul (or rather the angry movement of the soul in reaction to an exterior stimulus).

Chaucer presumably shares his culture's understanding of the relation between anger (the passion) and conceptions of movement and change,

though he is more concerned with social and ethical than with metaphysical analysis. The abstractions of interior spiritual motion Chaucer renders with more concrete images of *exterior*, physical, movement and change; or with pointed images of lack of movement and change as we observed in Theseus' architectural use of the grove. As we will see in the next section, in the episode of the Argive widows Chaucer measures the personal and social effects of anger by changes in behavior, location, or perspective. At the center of Chaucer's vision of the human world is concern for the moral, spiritual, and ethical spaces to which an individual can be transported. His work explores the liminal character of anger which tests the ability of the individual and the community to change and to move forward.

As I suggested at the end of the last section, Chaucer depicts anger as a resurfacing force—partly a consequence, I think, of describing the human passions in concrete terms. In the abstractions of metaphysics, the interior movement of the spirit can be imagined to have a definite beginning and an end. Because it is an abstraction, the movement of the “angry” soul is defined by such terminal points. Such points are not always as obvious in Chaucer's narrative descriptions of anger, and it proves more difficult to locate the source or the final effect in his tales. Narrative is especially suitable for Chaucer's exploration of anger because narrative has a potential for irresolution and uncertainty which Chaucer exploits to express his own ambivalent attitude toward anger. In contrast, the completion and finality of Aquinas' carefully reasoned propositions of point, counterpoint, and synthesis reflect the confident assumption which underpins his analysis—the belief that, whatever the threat posed by anger to human reason, anger can ultimately be subdued or extinguished.

Recent critics have found less reason to be confident of the resolution of events in the Knight's Tale. Barbara Nolan writes:

Chaucer replaces Boccaccio's Aristotelian system with the less optimistic Ciceronian and Senecan system that had, until the mid-thirteenth century, typically informed medieval treatises on virtue as well as guidebooks for princes. Within this system, the moral virtues are specifically intended to counter not their opposing vices but the power of ‘Fortune and hire false wheel, / That noon estaat assureth to be weel’ (I.925-26) [The] English poet systematically reworked the character of Boccaccio's Teseo, deliberately replacing his Aristotelian virtues with the moral virtues outlined in Stoic and pseudo-Stoic treatises and

with a generally Stoic view of the moral world as the domain of Fortune, time, passionate desire, pain, and *aventure*. The battle between the virtues and Fortune in the pagan world of the *Knight's Tale*, unlike the battle between the Aristotelian virtues and vices in the *Teseida*, does not issue in the unequivocal triumph of human perfection. While Theseus does achieve a somber, rational, social harmony at the end of Chaucer's poem, it is a tenuous harmony, always subject to further change, further *aventure*. (250-51)

I have framed my discussion of Chaucer and anger in relation to Aquinas and Dante, more so than in relation to Aristotle and Boccaccio, in part because, among late medieval writers, Aquinas and Dante address the subject of both human and divine anger with as much directness and concern as, I argue, does Chaucer. There is, I think, more to be said about Boccaccio and anger, particularly the relation between narrative and anger in the *Decameron* (as in the *Canterbury Tales*), though I am not certain anger is as central a preoccupation for Boccaccio as it is for Chaucer. Nonetheless, whether we speak in terms of Aristotle or Aquinas, Boccaccio or Dante, the point is that Chaucer's work carves a space for itself outside of and in dialogue with the scholastic and Aristotelian tradition. Anger, I argue, is an especially important topic for Chaucer because it attaches itself to the “pessimism” of his world view. The concept of “aventure” itself gives rise to existential anger at a universe organized in this uncertain way (an anger in evidence, I argue below, at the end of the Knight's Tale). And in such a view there can be little confidence that anger can be vanquished.

Chaucer's interest is less in establishing anger as a morally acceptable state, than in understanding the role which anger plays in human communities. Because he is less certain about the power of reason to either prevent or contain anger, he devotes more attention than the scholastic tradition to the presence of anger in human life, and is more willing to consider how to make use of that presence. Moral or not, good for the soul or not, anger is an inevitable part of the human condition and of human society which Chaucer's tales describe. In order to preserve community, Chaucer's characters must engage with anger in order to move it forward.¹⁵ Because anger generally *cannot* be avoided—either because human beings lack the power of reason or because the power of reason is insufficient—they must risk a liminal moment (becoming immobilized in a state of perpetual anger) if they are to engage with it in a positive way.

IV. Shifting Passions: Pity and Anger in the Opening Sequence of the Knight's Tale

It is in Theseus' encounter with the Argive widows that Chaucer presents us, at the opening of the first of the *Canterbury Tales*, with an image of such risk:

This duc, of whom I make mencion,
 Whan he was come almoost unto the toun,
 In al his wele and in his mooste pride,
 He was war, as he caste his eye aside,
 Where that ther kneled in the heighe weye
 A compaignye of ladyes, tweye and tweye,
 Ech after oother, clad in clothes blake;
 But swich a cry and swich a wo they make
 That in this world nys creature lyvyng
 That herde swich another waymentyng;
 And of this cry they nolde nevere stenten
 Til they the reynes of his brydel henten.
 "What folk been ye, that at myn homcomyng
 Perturben so my feste with cryng?"
 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 been clothed thus in blak." (893-911)

Initially, Theseus' actions toward the widows seem again to offer the possibility of successful management and containment of anger. Theseus may be a man of sudden passions, but those shifts in passion are accompanied by shifts in perspective and self-awareness. In a moment, his whole point of view is inverted. (The "or" at line 909 underscores the either/or character of the divide, his movement from one possible view to another). Initially he asks who the widows are only in relation to his world (to, he says, "myn homcomyng," "myn feste," "myn honour"), but then his narrative gives way to theirs, and he becomes their audience ("Telleth me").

Such positive change is effected by his willingness to listen to others' stories and, adopting the perspective of the speaker, to be moved by them:

This gentil duc doun from his courser sterte
 With herte pitous, whan he herde hem speke.
 Hym thoughte 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 conforteth in ful good entente (952-58)

It is the widows' story, its content and nature, which affects Theseus, but also the very act of listening itself: "whan he herde hem speke." For Chaucer, the act of listening requires a certain curtailing of self-interest, a willingness to move out of one's own perspective. Listening is important because it establishes the initial conditions under which a story is received. It does not, of course, guarantee a reception devoid of anger (as we see in the case of the Friar and Summoner), but it does allow for dialogue, or at least a period in which anger may be suspended.

In addition to the virtue of listening, one can point to more fundamental virtues which contribute to the change in Theseus. David Anderson sees the opening scene with the Argive widows—absent from Statius and not as prominent in Boccaccio—as the product of Chaucer's decision to foreground the virtue of *clementia*, or mercy (123). Jill Mann explains the change in Theseus in terms of the *pietas* at the heart of his character, exemplified in his willingness to be open to change:

In the opening episode with widow ladies Theseus's openness to 'pitee' was equally an openness to change, a willingness to respond and adapt to 'aventure', the unforeseen and arbitrary interventions of chance. In granting the request of the widow ladies, Theseus abandons his plans for triumph and celebration, allowing their grief to replace his own rejoicings. Having just concluded one war and turned his mind to feasting, he finds he must start all over again, leave his bride, and go to war again. His acceptance of this change in his plans is, as Chaucer emphasizes, total and immediate: he goes not a foot further towards Athens . . . , and does not rest so much as half a day, but at once sets out for Thebes. This readiness to change, to drop one set of plans and conceptions or attitudes, characterizes Theseus throughout the tale. (*Feminizing Chaucer* 137-38)¹⁶

I would agree that the importance of the scene with the widows lies, in part, in its promise of relief and transformation beyond anger. For with

the intrusion upon the individual's perspective comes the opportunity for patience and for fellowship. Chaucer sees contained within the disruption itself the possibility of the healing moment when Theseus descends from his horse and embraces the widows—arguably a better man (in ethical and Christian terms) than he was upon his horse, content to be the returning hero-conqueror.

However, thinking about the Knight's Tale as a tale of anger rather than a tale of pity allows us to think further about Chaucer's understanding of the relation between anger and pity, and of the complicated role anger plays in human society. We should observe that anger has a necessary and positive role here, beyond any Stoic claim for "just" anger in a "just" war against Creon. In the scholastic theory of the passions, anger is characterized by an interior movement of the soul. Extreme anger is often negatively associated with the end of physical movement, as the summoner in the Friar's Tale discovers that the logic of divine anger imagines hell as a space beyond which no further movement is possible (Bloomfield). Yet at the opening of the Knight's Tale, though the interruption of the widows puts an end to Theseus' progression toward Athens, it brings too the possibility for new movement. Engaging Theseus' anger actually prevents stagnation by creating movement and sending Theseus in a direction which, ethically speaking, is arguably more progressive. Breaking into Theseus' world, risking his anger, is necessary for the widows to be helped and for Theseus to break out of his self-involved celebration.

There is thus a *felix-culpa* logic to the scene. Perhaps the power of Chaucer's *felix-culpa* lies in the fact that it is an accessible and easily imagined scene—more so, for example, than the *felix-culpa* scenario which underpins the trajectory of Christian history from Adam to Christ, or the *felix-culpa* spirit of Christian eschatology, where death brings life. Theseus' embrace of the widows is a concrete and tangible image of compassion and healing after death. The scene effectively illustrates the possibility of transformation in a human situation, as Chaucer fleshes out the theories of scholastics and preachers without appealing to abstractions alone. And at the heart of that transformative potential, in addition to the virtue of *pietas* indicative of a willingness to consider alternatives, is a willingness to engage with anger.

If the story of Theseus and the widows ended with the embrace, it would have a satisfying closure, and work well as an exemplum in a sermon on patience (or on *felix-culpa* theology). But Chaucer's placement of the episode in a larger narrative—while it permits analysis of the episode

as an independent scene—does not allow for a self-contained conclusion, not without doing exegetical violence to the tale as a whole. Such is the cost of using complex narrative in place of the self-contained abstractions and parables of the philosophical and sermon tradition. Chaucerian narrative often allows for the possibility of such a satisfying ending, but, having highlighted the possibility, generally moves on to imagine other more complicated possibilities which depend on the initial event and extend its consequences. The passage has a larger context and, to do it justice, should be quoted with the lines that follow:

This gentil duc don from his courser sterte
With herte pitous, whan he herde hem speke.
Hym thoughte 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 conforteth 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 deeth ful wel deserved. (952-64)

The transition at lines 958-959 makes all the difference: "And hem conforteth in ful good entent, / And swoor his ooth . . ." Instead of merely comforting the widows, Theseus interprets their supplication as a call for vengeance, and so couples his oath to avenge them with the personal sympathy he extends. As in the grove scene, here an anger which seems defeated gives way to a new and more powerful form.

One explanation for such an emotional shift is that the Knight's Tale represents Chaucer's celebration of Stoic virtues, which demand righteous anger from Theseus. Barbara Nolan argues that Chaucer makes a distinction "between Theseus' form of compassionate justice and another less high-minded kind of *pities*. This latter, weaker form of pity the widows' bitter tears seem to represent . . . But Theseus does not fall into tears. Instead, he prepares himself for action to right a patent wrong." Senecan or Stoic justice, Nolan explains (266, 264), has multiple elements including *clementia* or *misericordia* (figured as Theseus' sympathy

for the widows) and *severitas* or *vindicatio* (figured as Theseus' just anger and war against Creon).

I am wary of explaining Theseus' anger and the ensuing war only in terms of the Stoic values which permeate the tale. Although the Stoic connection between pity, justice, and war does provide us a logical explanation for Theseus' actions, it is notable that Chaucer's economic handling of the transition makes Theseus' movement here seem to be as much about emotion and energy as about logic or rational principles. He *immediately* turns to Thebes and establishes himself as the principal force of his and his subordinates' destinies. Virtually no "story-time" elapses between the embrace and the beginning of war; the poetry itself fuses the action into a few brief lines. The aggressive energy which seems magically to dissipate in the exchange with the widows, reappears with a vengeance in the war with Thebes. As the amphitheater serves to reconfigure the aggressive energy roused when the knights initially flout Theseus' authority, so in a sense does the war provide an outlet for the unvented frustration roused by the widows when they interrupt Theseus' victory march.

Elizabeth Fowler describes this transformation in terms of political and cultural ritual:

[R]hetorical forms throughout the Knight's Tale provide a lens through which the reader can see conflicts between human passions and the ceremonies of social life. The contrast between the triumph and the lament enacts a breach in decorum that provokes Theseus to the ritual of war. Theseus's pity, an apparent index of his character's suitability for rule, is quickly converted to avenging anger. These passions result in the funeral the widows wanted . . . , but also in the gruesome ransacking and pillaging of Thebes. Only when Thebes is leveled does Theseus complete his triumph. (61)

Fowler refers here to the "triumph" as the ritual—the formal procession and the attendant celebrations—which expresses joy. The cultural ritual is the "mold," as she says, into which the passions were poured in medieval culture. Funerals are the ritual of grief, and war the ritual of anger. One of Chaucer's goals in the Knight's Tale, she argues, is to explore the sometimes problematic relation between the feelings that the individual experiences and the social forms invented to contain those feelings. One

problem with Theseus' triumph, for example, is that it results in considerable lamentation and woe for Arcite and Palamon (Fowler 66, 61).

Given this essay's interest in movement and in perspective, the concept of "converting" one passion into another is worth pondering. In Fowler's description of the shift from the widow scene to the war scene, pity is "converted" to avenging anger, as one passion (and thus one cultural ritual) supercedes another. The change from one passion to another does not necessarily mean the extinction of another: Theseus' joy is interrupted by pity and anger, though it returns again after the war. The same I would argue is true of his anger, which appears initially when the widows arrest his progress (though it does not last long enough to find expression in a public ritual), and then resurfaces after he sets out for the war against Thebes. The question that Chaucer obscures (deliberately, I think) is whether or not there is a positive ethical connection between the "avenging anger" and the pity from which it is "converted."

On the one hand, one could argue that the quick narrative shift from the pity Theseus displays before the widows to the violence of the Theban war merely reflects a close relation between twin virtues of *pietas* and righteous anger. For Jill Mann, there is a degree of virtue in the immediacy of Theseus' departure for Thebes: "His acceptance of this change in his plans is, as Chaucer emphasizes, total and immediate: he goes not a foot further towards Athens . . . , and does not rest so much as half a day, but at once sets out for Thebes" (*Feminizing Chaucer* 137):

And right anon, withouten moore abood,
His baner he displayeth, and forth rood
To Thebes-ward, and al his hoost biside.
No neer Atthenes wolde he go ne ride,
Ne take his ese fully half a day,
But onward on his wey that nyght he lay,
And sente anon Ypolita the queene,
And Emelye, hir yonge suster sheene,
Unto the toun of Atthenes to dwelle,
And forth he rit; ther is namoore to telle. (965-74)

For Theseus (as for the Knight) there is "namoore to tell," because Theseus' instant action preempts debate. Ypolita, an Amazon warrior herself, proves to be no Prudence in advising or restraining her husband. Any advice she or Emily might offer (as they do later when he is angry with

Palamon and Arcite) goes unheard because he sends the women to Athens immediately (and “No neer Atthenes wolde he go ne ride”). The Knight takes great pains to underscore Theseus’ resolve, presumably because the Knight sees such strength of action as evidence of Theseus being a “trewe knight” (959): “right anoon, withouten moore abood”; “forth rood / To Thebe-ward”; “Ne take his ese”; “But Onward”; “And forth he rit.” Ten lines are devoted to reiterating Theseus’ decision, and there is a heroic feel to his negative statements (he would not rest, he would not go to Athens even for half a day, he would say no more), negating the temptations of rest, of family, of comfort; and to the repetition of his purpose which marks his continued forward movement toward his goal, Thebes.

Yet in the description of Theseus’ approach toward Thebes, we find Chaucer undercutting the images of movement and perspective to suggest a disconnect between the Theseus who embraces the widows and the Theseus who assaults Thebes. Although Theseus is constantly moving toward Thebes with each iteration that he chooses to ride rather than hesitate, such physical progress is marked by a lack of formal and imaginative progress. The five couplets make the same basic point again and again, and introduce no new idea because Theseus has no new idea, as he never considers the wisdom or the justness of invading Thebes. So though he makes progress along a linear line in geographical terms, his anger keeps in a static loop as far as reason and imagination are concerned. Distant as Thebes is, he travels no further and makes no greater progress toward defeating his anger than when he later chooses to keep rebuilding upon the same ground within the garden grove. The heroism is evident mainly from within the non-reflective perspective of Theseus himself. From the point of view of the Knight’s audience and creator, the repetition may seem a little stale, even comic.

With this joke about Theseus’ simultaneous progression and lack of progression, Chaucer implies that Theseus, after his encounter with the widows, has changed for the better and yet has not changed. Theseus demonstrates his inclination toward pity, and yet is still driven by anger. That anger is not just the righteous anger converted from the noble pity, as his Stoic principles advise him, but also the anger remaining from having his celebration interrupted. Such anger, as Fowler’s discussion intimates, results from the fact that “the contrast between the triumph and the lament enacts a breach in decorum that provokes Theseus to the ritual of war.” That it is difficult to untangle these different angers is, I think, Chaucer’s point. Anger not only serves many functions but the various

angers often become intermingled. This is, I suggest in the next section, a subject which preoccupies Chaucer at the end of the Knight’s Tale.

V. Lingering Anger at the End of Knight’s Tale: The Failure of Ritual and of Justice

There is one other issue implied by Fowler’s description of the passions important to note here. Though each passion—pity, joy, anger—has its ritual, the anger in the widow scene is special in that it results from an interruption of or an insufficiency of another passion; it is an expression of the failure of other rituals. Again we see that where Aquinas might find resolution, Chaucer introduces instability and continuation. The seizure of Theseus’ bridle—this first disruption in the first of the *Canterbury Tales*—is a moment to bracket. It illustrates the type of situation which so often disturbs characters and pilgrims in Chaucer’s work—the breaking in of the universe upon the individual, an interruption of perspective, assumption, hope, ambition, or feeling which angers the individual who believes he has achieved some measure of stability.

This kind of frustration, what we might call existential anger, surfaces again at the end of the Knight’s Tale, and characterizes a Chaucerian world beyond the reach of Aquinas’ logic. That Aquinas assumes anger can be dissipated is significant, as it allows him to make a distinction between anger which recedes and hatred which persists: “Anger seeks evil only by way of just revenge; when the evil inflicted exceeds the measure of justice, as he sees it, the angry man [unlike the hateful man] will relent” (*ST* I-II, q. 46, a. 6, ad 1). This distinction by Aquinas is most relevant to the tales of the Prioress and the Man of Law, which seem to broach the issue of cultural hatred. But with respect to Theseus in the Knight’s Tale, and to Chaucer’s angry characters in general, the distinction is important because it compels us to consider whether Chaucer’s angry characters, when their anger does abate, have in fact found justice “as they see it.” Aquinas confidently suggests anger finds resolution in justice, but the Knight’s Tale establishes right at the outset of the *Canterbury* project that Chaucer is less certain that the forms of justice his characters find will in fact extinguish their anger.

The prospect that Theseus’ justice involves a wholly rational anger—an anger which will obey the boundaries established by an individual or a community seeking Aquinas’ rational justness—dissolves when we consider the narrative outcome of Theseus’ solution. Even if we find