

The Feminized Hero

‘... pitee renneth soone in gentil herte.’

(*Knight's Tale* 1761)

It is nowadays a commonplace that the meaning of a term is not fixed in isolation, but only in relation to the cultural or linguistic structure of which it forms part. So the value assigned to ‘woman’ or ‘womanhood’ cannot be fully determined without reference to the values invested in the term ‘man’. To make ‘woman’ into a moral positive is not enough, if she becomes thereby merely the ‘silent bearer of ideology’, as Mary Jacobus puts it (1979, 10) – if, that is, her morality acts only as a salving conscience for the men who are left free to practise the *realpolitik* required for effective action in the world. The question of how Chaucer conceives of men is thus the last and most crucial element in determining the status of women in his writing.

Male heroes are, as I have already noted, few and far between in Chaucer. In the *Canterbury Tales*, the moral high ground is occupied by Constance, Griselda, Cecilia, Prudence, and no man is accorded the central and dominating position in the narrative that they enjoy. It is only in *Troilus* that a single male consciousness becomes the central locus of poetic meaning; whatever the prominence given to Criseyde, the central subject of this poem is the loss of happiness, and it is to *Troilus* and not to Criseyde that this experience belongs. The question raised by this experience – the question of what meaning can be attached to human happiness in a mutable world – has urgency only if we believe that it was a *true* happiness, and also that its loss cannot simply be written down to failings or vices – female fickleness, male inertia – which could be avoided by those wishing for better fortune. Chaucer takes pains, therefore, to present *Troilus* as admirable throughout; he is ‘this ilke noble knyght’ to the last (V 1752). In his final emotional rejection of human love, Chaucer still speaks, not of *Troilus*’s weakness or folly, but of his ‘grete worthynesse’ and his ‘noblesse’ (V 1829, 1831). It is to *Troilus* that we should look first, therefore, for evidence of Chaucer’s conception of a masculine ideal.

It is in *Troilus* that we can first clearly perceive that the male hero in Chaucer is a *feminized* hero. I have shown in Chapter 3 that *Troilus* is divested of the coerciveness characteristic of the ‘active’ male, and that his unreserved surrender to the force of love is for Chaucer not a sign of weakness but of a generous nobility. He is feminized not only in his reverence for woman but

also in his vulnerability and sensitivity of feeling. 'Feminized' is not to be equated with 'effeminate'; Troilus's physical prowess and bravery are carefully established at numerous points in the poem, most notably in the visual image created by the description of his return from the battlefield, watched by the curious Criseyde:

So lik a man of armes and a knyght
 He was to seen, fulfilled of heigh prowesse,
 For bothe he hadde a body and a myght
 To don that thing, as wel as hardynesse;
 And ek to seen hym in his gere hym dresse,
 So fressh, so yong, so weldy semed he,
 It was an heven upon hym for to see. (II 631–7)

Troilus is not lacking in the conventional attributes of 'manhod' (II 676) – courage, strength, dignified self-restraint. It is with 'manhod' that he controls his words and deeds so as not to betray his relationship with Criseyde to anyone (III 428), and 'with mannes herte' that he suppresses his emotions when the exchange of Criseyde for Antenor is being debated in the Trojan parliament (IV 154); similarly when leading her out from Troy, he 'gan his wo ful manly for to hide' (V 30). But the domination implied in this conception of manhood is a domination of self, not a domination of others. It stands in implicit but eloquent contrast to the notion of manhood assumed in Pandarus's impatient advice on how to prevent the loss of Criseyde:

... 'Frend, syn thow hast swych distresse,
 And syn the list myn argumentz to blame,
 Why nylt thiselven helpen don redresse
 And with thy manhod letten al this grame?
 Go ravysshe here! Ne kanstow nat, for shame?
 And other lat here out of towne fare,
 Or hold here stille, and leve thi nyce fare.

Artow in Troie, and hast non hardyment
 To take a womman which that loveth the
 And wolde hireselven ben of thy assent?
 Now is nat this a nyce vanitee?
 Ris up anon, and lat this wepyng be,
 And kith thow art a man; for in this houre
 I wol ben ded, or she shal bleven oure.' (IV 526–39)

Pandarus speaks for the conventional notion of 'manhod' as aggressive egoism; 'showing oneself a man' slides with ease into 'ravishing women'. His protest that 'It is no rape' (596), because Criseyde's willingness can be

presumed¹ – indeed she would probably think Troilus foolish if he did *not* assert himself in this way (598–9) – reincarnates the male assumption of female will-
ingness, and the need to exercise responsibility on her behalf, that we saw illustrated in *Pamphilus* and Peter of Blois's lyric. Like Galatea, she will 'a lite hire greve', but allow herself to be quickly appeased (603–4). The same conception of 'manliness' is evident when Pandarus repeats his advice a little later:

'Forthi tak herte, and thynk right as a knyght:
Thorough love is broken al day every lawe.
Kith now somewhat thi corage and thi myght;
Have mercy on thiself for any awe.
Lat nat this wrecched wo thyn herte gnawe,
But manly sette the world on six and sevene;
And if thow deye a martyr, go to hevene!' (IV 617–23)²

'Manliness', for Pandarus, means acting vigorously in one's own interests and letting the rest of the world go hang. This is the 'mannishness' that is repudiated in the Sultaness and Donegild in the *Man of Law's Tale*; this scene in *Troilus* shows us that it is not only in women that this kind of manliness is to be rejected, but also in men. Chaucer carefully dissociates Troilus from Pandarus's ideas of manliness, locating true manhood instead in Troilus's rejection of 'ravysshynge of wommen' (IV 548),³ and in his 'passive' suppression of self to the interests of others – the people of Troy and Criseyde herself (McAlpine, 1978, 159–62). When Chaucer speaks of Troilus's manhood he habitually pairs it with the 'feminized' characteristics – capacity for feeling or suffering, 'gentillesse' – that cleanse it of aggression: 'his manhod and his pyne', 'manly sorwe', 'gentil herte and manhod' (II 676, III 113, IV 1674).

It is not only in his refusal of coerciveness that Troilus is a 'feminized' hero. It is also in the fact that the story in which he is set casts him in a feminine role in that it assimilates him to the women of Ovid's *Heroides* – abandoned and betrayed by his lover, immobilized, frustrated of action and movement, finding relief only in memory, lamentation and fruitless letter-writing. Roland Barthes writes of the essentially feminine nature of this situation.

Historically, the discourse of absence is carried on by the Woman:
Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, journeys; Woman is faithful (she waits),

¹ In terms of fourteenth-century law, Pandarus is mistaken; the term *raptus* covered cases where the woman consented to her own abduction – i.e., what we would now call elopement (Cannon, 2000).

² The repeated emphasis on 'manhood' and 'being a man' is Chaucer's own development from the single word 'virilmente' in the corresponding speeches in *Filostrato* (IV 64–5, 71–5).

³ This too is Chaucer's addition (cf. *Filostrato* IV 67), as is the crucial condition, 'so it were hire assent' (IV 554), attached to his consideration of the possibility of asking King Priam to grant him Criseyde in marriage.

man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises). It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so; she weaves and she sings; the Spinning Songs express both immobility (by the hum of the Wheel) and absence (far away, rhythms of travel, sea surges, cavalcades). It follows that in any man who utters the other's absence *something feminine* is declared: this man who waits and who suffers from his waiting is miraculously feminized. A man is not feminized because he is inverted but because he is in love. (Myth and utopia: the origins have belonged, the future will belong to the subjects *in whom there is something feminine*.)

(1979, 13–14; cf. Lipking, 1988, xix)

Whether or not this is 'historically' true, the influence of the *Heroides* fixed it as a mental model for the Middle Ages. So Troilus finds himself in the situation of Dido, Ariadne, Penelope, endlessly yearning into a void, imprisoned in inaction and emotional paralysis. The Ovidian lament, after centuries of history, is uttered by a male voice. It is Boccaccio, of course, who earns the credit for first transposing this essentially feminine genre into masculine form, but in the *Filostrato* its function is simply to add lyrical pathos to his appeal to his mistress: 'whenever you find Troilo weeping and grieving over the departure of Criseida, you may understand and recognize my own words, tears, sighs, and torments', he writes to Maria d'Aquino in his Prologue. In Chaucer, it acquires extra significance by being linked with a distinct conception of masculinity which bears the stamp of female experience. If Constance and Griselda are characterized by suffering, so is Troilus; there is no division between active male and suffering female.

This is one final reason for Chaucer to tell a tale of female betrayal: that it enables him to break down the apparently inevitable division between the active male betrayer and the passive female sufferer. That he was conscious of the Ovidian nature of Book V of his poem can be deduced, I think, from a typically bland witticism which he added to Boccaccio's narrative in Book I: Pandarus, affirming his ability to help Troilus even though he himself is unsuccessful in love, quotes from a 'lettre' written by an 'herdesse', Oenone, to Troilus's brother Paris, to the effect that Phoebus, inventor of medicine, was able to cure all complaints except his own love (I 652–65). The 'lettre', as the quotation from it shows, is nothing other than Epistle V of the *Heroides*, here treated as if it were a historical document rather than a product of the imagination – as if, that is, it were a real-life letter that Paris showed to some of his friends and might well have shown to his brother Troilus. In his note on this passage, Barry Windeatt draws attention to its submerged link with Criseyde's vow of fidelity to Troilus in Book IV (when the River Simois flows backwards to its source, then alone will she be untrue: 1548–54), which echoes Paris's vow of fidelity to Oenone, quoted in the same *Heroides* epistle (V 29–30, with Xanthus in place of Simois), and is destined to the same fate as his. The pattern of Troilus's life merges with the pattern of Oenone's life; her 'lettre' ceases to be a mere source of apt simile and becomes instead the mirror that reflects his own experience.

Troilus is not the only Chaucerian hero to find himself in the *Heroides* posture, abandoned and grief-stricken. *The Complaint of Mars* likewise climaxes a narrative of female betrayal with an extended lament by the betrayed male lover. If the narrative in this case is a witty astrological allegory rather than a serious exploration of human love, the complaint itself has a lyrical intensity that makes it a genuine expression of feeling. Here it is not only a male who suffers, but also a god; as in the *Man of Law's Tale*, his power is reinscribed as impotence by the planetary role that separates his heavenly course from that of his beloved Venus. The male sufferer is also the focus of attention in the *Book of the Duchess*, although in this case it is bereavement rather than betrayal that has deprived him of his mistress. Here it is the predicament of the abandoned lover that introduces the spectre of betrayal, which presents itself, as it does in the *Franklin's Tale*, as a possible result of death. To Chaucer's jocular comment that the Black Knight's long rehearsal of his love is a case of 'shryfte withoute repentaunce', the Knight makes passionate reply:

'Repentaunce? Nay, fy!' quod he,
 'Shulde y now repente me
 To love? Nay, certes, than were I wel
 Wers than was Achitofel,
 Or Anthenor, so have I joye,
 The traytor that betrayed Troye,
 Or the false Genelloun,
 He that purchased the tresoun
 Of Rowland and of Olyver.
 Nay, while I am alyve her,
 I nyl foryete hir never moo.' (1115–25)

Forgetting is betrayal, but forgetfulness of the absent is, as Barthes says, 'the condition of survival': 'if I did not forget, I should die' (1979, 14). 'Hit was gret wondre that Nature/Myght suffre any creature/To have such sorwe and be nat ded', as Chaucer says of the Black Knight (467–9). Nature resists the stasis imposed by absence, pressing towards the emotional movement that is the condition of life.

Like Troilus, the Black Knight is condemned to stasis by his 'trouthe', perennially arrested by fidelity to a past that is forever sundered from the living movement of the present. Like Troilus – and like Griselda, for whom likewise the only way out of stasis is betrayal, not only of the beloved but also of the self. Chaucer's heroes share the same experiences as his heroines; the only 'active' males in the early poems are the villains of the *Legend of Good Women*, who inflict suffering without feeling it.

The *Canterbury Tales* lacks male heroes in the sense of central figures in the narrative, but it is not entirely lacking in examples of admirable male behaviour, as we have already seen in Arveragus, Aurelius, Alla, Melibee. It is

however the figure of Theseus in the *Knight's Tale* that represents the fullest development of an ideal of feminized masculinity. Displaced as he is from the hero's central position by the younger knights Palamon and Arcite (whose pairing debars each of them likewise from a central heroic role), it is nevertheless to Theseus that it falls to voice and to embody the values that constitute the wisest response to their experiences. And the key element in these values is the womanly quality of pity.

At the opening of the tale Theseus, antagonist and conqueror of 'Femenye', the Amazonian land of women, seems to represent a masculinity sharply opposed to women and womanliness. But the conquest culminates not in enslavement, but in a marriage. It is the *separateness* of 'Femenye', its severance from the masculine world that is resisted; the marriage of Theseus and Hippolyta signals its reintegration. Even more important, the marriage symbolizes the union of masculinity and femininity in each partner. Hippolyta is 'The faire, hardy queene of Scithia' (882); her physical bravery is not rejected as 'unwomanly', but is as admirable as her beauty. And in Theseus, as the first scene of the narrative action makes clear, masculine prowess is infused with feminine 'pitee'. As he returns to Athens to celebrate his victory and his wedding, he is confronted by a double line of kneeling women, wailing and begging for his pity. Their leader, having first swooned so that 'it was routhe for to seen and heere' (913–14), asks for his 'mercy and socour' (918).

'Have mercy on oure wo and oure distresse!
Som drope of pitee, thurgh thy gentillesse,
Upon us wrecched wommen lat thou falle.' (919–21)

They are, she explains, the widows of the Argive leaders who fought against Creon at Thebes; Creon, 'Fulfilde of ire and of iniquitee', has decreed 'for despit and for his tyrannye' that their husbands' bodies should lie unburied and be eaten by dogs (934–47). Falling prostrate, she and her companions cry 'pitously':

'Have on us wrecched wommen som mercy,
And lat oure sorwe synken in thyn herte.' (950–1)

As in the *Man of Law's Tale*, piteousness metamorphoses itself into pity:

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. (952–8)

Here again the dual meaning of the word 'pitous' – 'pitiable' and 'pitying' – manifests the dynamic quality of pity: cause instantaneously re-creates itself as effect. And once again it manifests the levelling, unifying nature of pity, its power to overturn and obliterate the relationship between conqueror and suppliant. Boccaccio's Teseo remains in his chariot throughout this scene (*Teseida* II 22–5, 42–3); Chaucer places his Theseus on horseback and makes him instantly dismount under his 'pitous' impulse, so as to illustrate dramatically the levelling of conqueror with victims, the abandonment of his triumph for identification with their grief (cf. Crampton, 1974, 56–8).

The carefully arranged iconography of the scene – the formal lines of kneeling women confronting the mounted conqueror – emphasizes the subjection to 'pitee' as a subjection to women. The womanliness of pity is assumed in Theseus's final appeal to Emily to show Palamon her 'wommanly pitee' (3083) by taking him for her husband. The connection between women and pity is a notion we have already seen in the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Man of Law's Tale*, and it is apposite to cite here another instance of it in the *Squire's Tale* which has a special connection with the presentation of Theseus in the *Knight's Tale*. The female falcon betrayed by her lover praises Canacee for the womanly compassion she shows in her grief:

'That pitee renneth soone in gentil herte,
Feelynge his similitude in peynes smerte,
Is preved alday, as men may it see,
As wel by werk as by auctoritee;
For gentil herte kitheth gentillesse.
I se wel that ye han of my distresse
Compassion, my faire Canacee,
Of verray wommanly benignytee
That Nature in youre principles hath set.' (479–87)

'Pitee renneth soone in gentil herte' is an oft-repeated maxim in Chaucer's poetry, and it is applied to Theseus in the scene where he and his retinue come upon Palamon and Arcite fighting in the grove. Theseus's first response to the discovery of their identities is angrily to condemn them to death, but he is persuaded to forgive them by the intercessory pleas of the queen and all the ladies with her.

The queene anon, for verray wommanhede,
Gan for to wepe, and so dide Emelye,
And alle the ladyes in the compaignye.
Greet pitee was it, as it thoughte hem alle,
That evere swich a chaunce sholde falle,
For gentil men they were of greet estaat,
And no thyng but for love was this debaat;
And saugh hir bloody woundes wyde and soore,

And alle crieden, bothe lasse and moore,
 'Have mercy, Lord, upon us wommen alle!'
 And on hir bare knees adoun they falle
 And wolde have kist his feet ther as he stood. (1748–59)

It is Chaucer who introduces this second set of kneeling women into the narrative; Boccaccio's Teseo feels only a momentary anger that passes of its own accord (V 88), so that there is no need for the women to intervene. Again the visual image points up the feminine nature of pity, the 'verray wommanhede' that prompts it. And again Theseus's submission to pity is a submission to women:

Til at the laste aslaked was his mood,
 For pitee renneth soone in gentil herte.
 And though he first for ire quook and sterte,
 He hath considered shortly, in a clause,
 The trespass of hem bothe, and eek the cause,
 And although that his ire hir gilt accused,
 Yet in his resoun he hem bothe excused,
 As thus: he thoghte wel that every man
 Wol helpe hymself in love, if that he kan,
 And eek delivere hymself out of prisoun.
 And eek his herte hadde compassioun
 Of wommen, for they wepen evere in oon. (1760–71)

The 'compassioun' Theseus feels for women is itself a womanly quality implanted in him. It feminizes him without rendering him effeminate; so far from being contradictory to his role as lord, he recognizes it (as Alceste teaches the God of Love to recognize it) as an essential part of that role ('Fy/ Upon a lord that wol have no mercy': 1773–81). 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 'ire', though rejected, nevertheless plays an essential role in this scene. As already noted, Chaucer diverges from his Boccaccian source in making Theseus's initial anger a much more serious and violent matter than Teseo's. Teseo's irritation subsides almost immediately, and he treats Palemone and Arcita with conciliatory courtesy; Theseus, in contrast, shakes with rage ('he first for ire quook and sterte': 1762), and summarily condemns the two Theban knights to death. Theseus's anger shows, first of all, that his capacity for 'pitee' is not the result of a constitutional lethargy or softness; the 'pitous' hero is as fiery and peremptory as other men. But even more important, it shows the dynamic power of 'pitee', its capacity to effect *change*. The importance of showing us Theseus as first violently angry, and then yielding to pity, is that it shows us Theseus changing his mind along with his mood. 'Pitee', that is, represents not only a willingness to sympathize and forgive, it also

represents an openness to change – change of heart, change of plans. Having seen Palamon and Arcite as deadly enemies, Theseus looks on them with new eyes as suitors for the hand of his sister-in-law – as potential allies and kinsmen.

In the opening episode with the widow ladies as in this scene in the grove, 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 (Boccaccio's Teseo is already there when he meets the ladies), and does not rest so much as half a day, but at once sets out for Thebes (965–70). This readiness to change, to drop one set of plans or conceptions or attitudes, characterizes Theseus throughout the tale. To the two important instances already discussed, others can be added. Having decreed that Palamon and Arcite shall be perpetually imprisoned without possibility of ransom, Theseus nevertheless reverses this decree and yields to Perotheus's request for Arcite's release. Chaucer again increases the vehement implacability of Theseus's original decision in order to emphasize the change entailed by its reversal. Having determined that Emily shall marry the winner of the tournament, he has to accept the frustration of this plan by Arcite's death, and make a new plan to deal with the new situation. At the beginning of the tale he declares war on Thebes; at its end he forges a new alliance with the city. Throughout the tale, he is ready to respond to events, rather than attempting to force them into the mould of his own will. He does not arrogate to himself the decision of who shall marry Emily, but allows it to be settled by chance ('aventure'), contenting himself with providing the ordered framework of the tournament within which the random activity of chance may be invested with a determining significance. Following Charles Muscatine's brilliant study of the tale (1957, 175–90), many critics have seen Theseus as a representative of civilized order,⁴ but some have suggested that his role is seriously undermined by the impossibility of maintaining this order in the face of the anarchic intrusions of chance.⁵ Such a view is an almost complete reversal of the truth: Theseus's heroism consists not in his attempts to impose an ordered stasis on the flux of existence, but rather in his readiness to move with the course of events, to match their change with his own.

Chaucer's attempt to identify knightly heroism with 'suffraunce' rather than 'hardynesse' runs counter, as Alcuin Blamires (1979) has shown, to the prevailing assumptions in late medieval society and in a substantial part of its literature. But he was not alone in seeing pity as the supreme virtue of the male hero, nor

⁴ References are given in Aers (1980, 228, n. 1).

⁵ See Salter, 1962, 9–36. Aers (1980, Ch. 7) argues that Chaucer reveals the 'order' represented by Theseus as no more than legalized violence.

in his conception of the adaptability and responsiveness that lies at its heart. Dante, in the *Convivio*, praises 'pietà' as the greatest of all virtues, and defines it in a way that illuminates what I have been suggesting about Chaucerian 'pitee':

pity makes every other virtue shine with its own light. Wherefore Vergil, in speaking of Aeneas, as the height of his praise calls him 'piteous' [pietoso]; and pity is not what common people think it to be – that is, feeling grief at another's harm – rather, that is one of its special consequences, which is called misericord, and it is an emotion [passione]. Pity, however, is not an emotion, but a noble disposition of spirit [animo], ready to receive love, misericord, and other beneficent feelings. (II.x)

'Ready to receive ...'; it is this receptivity that Chaucer sees in the 'gentil herte', its quickness to take impression from outer influences. He would have found a similar idea of nobility in Ovid's *Tristia*, in lines that read like a gloss on Theseus's behaviour in the grove.

Quo quis enim major, magis est placabilis irae;
Et faciles motus mens generosa capit. (III.v.31–2)

The greater anyone is, the more easily is his anger appeased; a noble mind is open to easy movements.

The *pietas* of Aeneas, which for Vergil implied his duty and affection towards family, country and gods, has by Dante's time been redefined by a shift in the meaning of the word; in medieval Latin, its primary sense was 'gentleness, mildness, mercy'.⁶ For Dante, Aeneas's heroism lies not only in his military prowess, but even more in his susceptibility to tender feelings. 'Wommanly pitee' does not mark a division between female and male; it is the highest virtue of the male hero. So in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the crowning virtue among the five represented on Gawain's pentangle is 'pitē þat passez alle poyntez' (654). The prominence given to pity here has caused some puzzlement, since the exercise of compassion for the weak and afflicted does not play a part in Gawain's adventures in this story. What the poet means by 'pitē', I think, is rather what Dante means by 'pietà': the responsiveness, the willingness to subordinate the self to outer pressures, that characterizes Gawain as it does Theseus. Aeneas is the model for the heroes of medieval romance in this respect also. His voyage, the site of his new city, his bride, are chosen for him. He 'follows his destiny', journeying 'where fate calls him', not as he determines.⁷ Just so does the romance hero surrender to the

⁶ The effects of this shift on medieval interpretations of Vergil's epic are discussed by Colin Burrow (1993).

⁷ Such phrases are frequent in the *Aeneid*: see I 382, 'data fata secutus'; III 7, 'incerti quo fata ferant, ubi sistere detur'; III 494, 'nos alia ex aliis in fata vocamur'; and cf. IV 340; X 472; XI 97, 112.

claims of 'aventure', putting himself at the disposal of chance (Mann, 1994). Like the golden bough that will yield itself effortlessly to Aeneas's hand 'if fate summons you' ('si te fata vocant': VI 147), the sword in the stone can be removed only by the hero whose destiny it seals. The romance hero does not choose his heroic task; it is imposed upon him – often by women. His journeyings are led by the path, not by direction towards an identified goal. Often, and most characteristically, he fights without armour, or with one hand tied behind his back; he yields his sword to his enemy or his neck to the axe of a monster. The narrative images that express his heroism are the perilous bed and the rudderless boat – not images of aggressive action, but of passive suffering, the courage to abandon the self to danger without resistance or evasion. 'Pitee' is not merely the extension of succour to the weak by the strong, it is a willingness to submerge strength in weakness in an act of imaginative identification. It is, as Robin Kirkpatrick puts it, 'the ability to respond with all one's being to another being' (1983, 248). And this responsiveness encompasses not only human beings but also events, the 'aventures' which the romance hero allows to dictate the pattern of his life, accepting the destiny they forge.⁸

Theseus's constant refashioning of his plans is thus a sign of strength rather than a betrayal of weakness. If Criseyde's 'pitee' leads to a tragic pattern of events, Theseus's 'pitee' works constantly in the opposite direction, towards justice and harmony. The difference does not lie in an act of will, but in the dual potentiality implicit in the random contingencies that can shape themselves into malign or beneficent patterns. Pity, like patience, is not an insurance policy that will guarantee happiness, but like patience it is founded on a recognition of changeability as fundamental to human existence, and meets that changeability with its own. Pity works to channel changeability in positive directions, to provide a release from the static deadlock of misery. In the *Knight's Tale*, it acts in partnership with chance as a dynamic force in the narrative, moving it forward when it seems to have ground inexorably to a halt. We can see this in the very opening of the tale, which reads like the 'happy ever after' ending to a story rather than the initiation of a developing action.

⁸ Space does not allow me to trace the development of this new heroic ideal in the works of Chrétien de Troyes, but I may cite, for example, the lecture delivered by King Baudemagus on the 'dolçor' and 'pitié' that are the signs of 'boens cuers' in a knightly hero (*Chevalier de la Charrete* 6308–15), and the 'pitiez' that instinctively summons Yvain to rescue the lion which becomes his grateful servant (*Yvain* 3373). Burnley, in an invaluable study of the vocabulary which articulates and defines a Christianized Stoic ethos in Middle English texts (1979), has demonstrated the central role of pity and the associated concepts of patience and 'suffraunce' in this ethos. The preference for the active hero, characterized by anger, rather than the passive hero, characterized by pity, appears to be a Renaissance creation. Crampton contrasts Chaucer and Spenser: 'Chaucer seems to place value on suffering and Spenser seems to place value on action' (1974, 180). Burrow (see note 6 above) sees the crucial divide as falling between Ariosto and Tasso, and attributes the shift from pity to anger as the defining heroic trait to the influence of the latter.

It is Theseus's pity for the widow ladies that breaks away from the finality of his celebrations and sets the action going again with the campaign against Thebes. This campaign successfully concluded, and Palamon and Arcite having been condemned to perpetual imprisonment, the story seems to have immobilized itself again; their falling in love with Emily provides a potential narrative development, but it needs Perotheus's chance arrival and Theseus's change of heart in respect of Arcite to bring about his release and a change in the status quo. With Arcite's return to serve Emily in disguise, the narrative falls into another lull, broken by Palamon's chance escape from prison. Chance likewise brings Theseus on the scene while Palamon and Arcite are engaged in combat, and it is here that the narrative threatens to be terminated once and for all by the anger that decrees their death. It is Theseus's 'pitee', as we have seen, that releases the narrative potential in the love of the two knights for Emily, and allows that potential to be realized. The death of Arcite seems to deny this potential and bring the action to a standstill once again; it is Theseus's patient acceptance of his death that leads him to see the possibility of making 'vertu of necessitee' (3042) – that is, of shaping the scattered fragments created by the blow of chance into a new and positive form. Emily's 'wommanly pitee' is the instrument for moving forward from narrative stasis and creating new possibilities for happiness out of misery.

Time and chance provide the material of change; it is pity and patience that give change a positive form. Theseus's final speech does not try to deny change by imposing order on it; on the contrary, recognition of change is the premise on which this speech is based. The tree falls, the stone wears away, the river runs dry, man dies. Nothing is odder, for Theseus, than the human blindness to these inevitable 'successiouns' of mutable things. That a man should die is not strange; what is strange is that we are always so *surprised* when a man dies. Theseus's pity and his patience embody a deep acknowledgement of the 'successiouns' of mutable things, and a willingness to move with them that is not shared by the static rigour of 'ire' and 'tirannye'. The 'happy ending' of the *Knight's Tale* is no more final than the 'happy ending' with which it began; as this story stops, another will start. It is because they embody the flexibility necessary to respond to the ceaseless movement of life that pity and patience are heroic virtues.

Emily's role in the *Knight's Tale* is a minor one, but it is nevertheless shaped in such a way as to make clear that the masculine ideal represented in Theseus does not relegate a feminine ideal to second place, but is on the contrary derived from it. The ending of the tale, as we have already seen, reaffirms the 'pitee' that characterizes Theseus as a preeminently 'wommanly' quality. It is in the description of Diana's temple, and the scene when Emily visits it, that Chaucer attaches this concept of womanliness to female experience.

The description of Diana's temple is another of Chaucer's additions to his source; Boccaccio devotes all his descriptive efforts to the temples of Mars and Venus (which are in any case conceived as the celestial destinations of

the prayers of Arcita and Palemone, rather than the earthly buildings in which those prayers are uttered). In Chaucer, the three temples are incorporated into the lists where the tournament is to be fought, and each is given equivalent importance; he is therefore obliged to invent a description for Diana's temple that will match those provided for the other two. The painted images of Diana which he first describes show her in her most familiar role as goddess 'Of huntynge and of shamefast chastitee' (2055). But there is nothing soft and vulnerable about her virginal purity; prominently featured in the wall-paintings is Acteon, metamorphosed into a stag and torn to pieces by his own hounds 'For vengeance that he saugh Diane al naked' (2066). The story makes Diana's hunting the manifestation of an aggressive, Amazonian quality in her chastity, a vindictive rejection of masculinity. Yet Diana is not only the defender of chastity, but also, in her role as Lucina, the protectress of women in childbirth. At the foot of her statue there is represented a woman struggling in the throes of birth:

A womman travaillynge was hire biforn;
But for hir child so longe was unborn,
Ful pitously Lucyna gan she calle
And seyde, 'Help, for thou mayst best of alle!' (2083–6)

When Emily visits the temple, her prayer to Diana recalls these two contradictory images of womanhood. As an Amazon, Emily identifies passionately with the first and shrinks from the second:

'Chaste goddesse, wel wostow that I
Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,
Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf.
I am, thow woost, yet of thy compaignye,
A mayde, and love huntynge and venerye,
And for to walken in the wodes wilde,
And noght to ben a wyf *and be with childe*.
Noght wol I knowe compaignye of man.'

(2304–11; my italics)

'[T]o ben a wyf and be with childe': Emily's resistance to marriage is also a resistance to childbirth, a clinging to the virginal separateness that stands aloof from suffering, reacting to male intrusion with the 'vengeance' and 'ire' that Diana turned on Acteon. Childbirth leads in the opposite direction – towards patience ('Lerneth to suffre') and away from ire.

Yet Emily already in her prayer shows an openness to pity for the 'bisy torment' of Palamon and Arcite (2320) that testifies to her capacity for wifhood, and she acknowledges that her destiny may 'be shapen so' that she must accept one of them as her husband (2323–4). And indeed the goddess declares that this is so, and that the fires on the altar will symbolically reveal to her her

'aventure of love' before she leaves the temple (2357). Emily's response echoes the patient submissions of the *Melibee*:

'I putte me in thy proteccioun,
Dyane, and in thy disposicioun.' (2363–4)

Emily's submission to marriage and child-bearing is a submission to 'aventure'; it parallels and re-enacts the knight's readiness to 'take his aventure' (1186), making male and female experience a mirror for each other. Here as in the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Clerk's Tale*, childbirth is the quintessence of patience, of the suffering-as-allowing that finds strength in responding rather than dictating. So the male hero is 'feminized' not just in respect of the culturally developed identification of certain qualities – flexibility, responsiveness, tenderness of feeling – as 'feminine', but also, and ultimately, in respect of the determining difference of childbirth, the fundamental 'necessitee' that persists through cultural variation. Minimal as Chaucer's references to childbirth are, their careful deliberateness suggests that it is the crucially female experience from which he develops and validates his conception of womanhood.

Of course, the image of childbirth as powerful suffering is as much a cultural construct imposed on biology as the stereotypes of feminine weakness and helplessness. Its significance is that it is a construct that aims to break down the ancient dichotomies between active/strong/male and passive/weak/female. Chaucer's writings dissolve these dichotomies not merely by the obvious route of showing the strength in women or the tender feelings in men, but more importantly, by identifying the strength in the apparently passive role of acceptance, and by insisting on this as the truly heroic role for men and women alike. The Boethian heroism exemplified in Constance and Griselda cannot be reduced to a convenient ideal for women and social inferiors; its first and most important model is in Boethius himself, who fits neither category. Chaucer's rooting of the ideal in 'womanhood' does not marginalize woman, but centralizes her, making her experience the exemplar for male heroism. Hers is the 'triumph of patience', the power that takes its origin in a calm acknowledgment of ultimate powerlessness. The male hero learns from her the renunciation of the self-directed activity that realizes itself as 'oppressioun', 'ire' and 'tirannye', moulding himself to her patience and her pity as the qualities that follow the onward movement of life itself.

The difficulty of finding terms to talk about the Chaucerian concept of 'active suffering' is a measure of how thoroughly this concept has been discarded, and how firmly fixed the division between 'active' and 'passive' has become. The result for feminism is something like an impasse, for women can identify neither with the 'passivity' that colludes with oppression, nor with the 'activity' that mimics male dominance. Feminist readings of Chaucer (such as Delany's interpretation of the *Man of Law's Tale* quoted in Chapter 4) customarily reject 'passivity' as a female role without noticing that this involves concurring in the

male definition of 'activity' as inherently superior. Thus, in an often illuminating discussion of Criseyde's 'socialization as woman', David Aers attributes her refusal of Troilus's suggestion that they elope together to her internalisation of the (masculine) social values that 'subordinate human relations and Eros to power structures and militaristic glory' (1980, 128); her social training teaches her 'to *accommodate* to an antagonistic reality rather than rebel' (135), and the role of 'stoical "reason" and "patience"' is merely to 'confirm her resignation' to her fate (134). The corollary of this is Aers's approval of Troilus's 'active and independent' proposal of elopement, which is seen as a potential act of rebellion against 'the crippling social reality' that will eventually destroy their love (134). This interpretation is an ingenious way of deflecting criticism from Criseyde to society's expectations of women, but it ignores Chaucer's careful comparison between the proposed elopement and the 'ravysshynge of women' that brought about this 'male-instigated war' (133); it was just such an 'act of rebellion' against social conventions on Paris's part that led to the 'long and totally destructive' conflict of which Aers disapproves (134). And if it is objected that it was not Paris's abduction of Helen, but Menelaus's insistence on his marital rights that led to the Trojan war, then the logical conclusion of this is that the Trojans are fighting in *defence* of Eros (embodied in Paris's liaison with Helen) against Menelaus's definition of women as property.

More important than these excursions into the imagined hinterland of the text, however, is the fact that Aers's reading creates a series of contradictions and paradoxes which it fails to confront. On this reading, Criseyde becomes the mouthpiece of male values from which Troilus, though a man, is mysteriously exempt. And if it is male ideology that trains him in his 'active and independent role', then it is male ideology that trains him to rebel against male values. Masculine ideology is both rejected by Aers (the exaltation of militarism) and approved (active and independent resistance). Meanwhile the *real* innovation in this scene – that a woman insists on taking charge of her own destiny, and her male lover acquiesces in this – is lost to view, as is Chaucer's careful discrimination between the masculinity that expresses itself in easy action, and the masculinity that expresses itself in the far harder act of control (see above, pp. 130–1).

I cite this discussion not as an egregious example of misreading – Aers's fundamental emphasis on the very real 'social pressures, repressions and fears' (128) against which the mutual love of Troilus and Criseyde must be achieved is genuinely illuminating – but because it shows the confusions created by the modern stereotyping of activity and passivity, and by the automatic preference for the former. The commitment to activity is, indeed, implicit in criticism itself, the critic's duty being so often conceived as the pinpointing of where and why things go wrong, and identification of the way disaster could be avoided by the more prudent reader. So it is necessary to insist again that Criseyde's exchange does not make her betrayal inevitable; any of the possibilities she hypothesizes as likely to bring about her return to Troy could have realized itself (IV 1345–414). Her betrayal is due neither to masculine

ideology nor to feminine weakness (though these may have a role to play in the contingencies that create the conditions for it), but to the human propensity to change with changing circumstances. 'Activity' cannot solve the problem, because it cannot eradicate change, it can only realize it in a different form. Elopement might have ensured Criseyde's fidelity, or it might simply have led to a different betrayal. At any rate, it cannot eradicate the possibility of betrayal – and it is the knowledge of this *possibility*, the knowledge that stability is not to be found in human affairs, that the experience of the poem brings home to us, and that lies at the heart of its tragedy.

That Criseyde's Boethian resignation creates the circumstances for her betrayal is not an indictment of it, but a bitter irony that gives emotional depth to the tragedy. Chaucer's commitment to Boethian philosophy, that is, embraces the recognition that no philosophy can outrun the reach of human tragedy. But the irony derives its power precisely from his commitment to the axioms with which Criseyde persuades Troilus to accept her departure and so lays the grounds for his own unhappiness.

'And forthi sle with resoun al this hete!
Men seyn, "The suffrant overcomith," parde;
Ek "Whoso wol han lief, he lief moot lete."
Thus maketh vertu of necessite
By pacience, and thynk that lord is he
Of Fortune ay that naught wole of hire recche,
And she ne daunteth no wight but a wrecche.' (IV 1583–9)

It is in the *Franklin's Tale* and the *Knight's Tale* that we see the positive face worn by these maxims – that we see patience conquering and Theseus making virtue out of necessity. The active power of passivity is there released, whereas in the tragic action of *Troilus* it is thwarted in Troilus and debased in the dishonest compromise of Criseyde. The *Knight's Tale* and the *Franklin's Tale* embrace the possibility of such tragedy as potential aspects of their own narratives, but they evade these potentialities by harnessing change to the rhythms of patience and pity, not denying it as 'activity' would, but channelling it into a creative role as the agent of a responsiveness that merges actant and patient into one.

A feminist reading of Chaucer needs, not to perpetuate the sterile antitheses between active and passive, to stigmatize female passivity only to find that the obverse of this is approval of male activity, but rather to recuperate Chaucer's careful integration of activity and passivity into a fully human ideal that erases male/female role-divisions. To do so is to enrich the range of twentieth-century gender models, limited as it is to shuffling the 'active' and 'passive' counters back and forth between the male and female ends of the board. And it is also to see that Chaucer's contribution is not least the contribution of an ideal for *men*. The question 'are women good or bad?' is relentlessly turned back on the sex that produces it, and transforms itself into the question 'what makes a good man?' And to that question women both give and *are* the answer.

FEMINIZING CHAUCER

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