

REPRESENTING REBELLION: THE ENDING OF CHAUCER'S
KNIGHT'S TALE AND THE CASTRATION OF SATURN¹

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ABSTRACT

Previous scholars of the *Knight's Tale* have expressed some difficulty when pagan Theseus, at the end, strangely attributes authority for the resolution of the dramatic conflict among Palamon, Arcite, and Emelye to the "First Mover," Jupiter, who is equivocal with the One God (2987). Further, in terms of the narrative order it appears that the first and fourth petitions to the gods – of Palamon to Venus, goddess of love, and of Venus to her father, Saturn – have been displaced by the second and third petitions, of Arcite to Mars, god of war, and of Emelye to Diana, the moon (and by what might be termed the fifth, of Theseus to Jupiter at the end). Why should planetary god Mars (higher than Venus but lower in the cosmic hierarchy than Saturn) triumph over more powerful planetary god Saturn? And what does Chaucer mean by this strange slippage, this displacement of Saturn by Jupiter at the end, with the sixth planetary god triumphing over the higher, seventh, planetary god?

In one classical myth found at the beginning of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, popular in the Middle Ages through its use in the thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose* of Jean de Meun, Saturn is displaced by his son Jupiter when he is castrated and sent into exile, which leads to a disorder in the world that cannot be undone by the power and efficacy of Venus (love). If Jupiter succeeds Saturn to the throne, which leads disastrously to a time of misfortune and civil disorder and the subversion of authority, how then can Theseus in the *Knight's Tale* imagine that Jupiter operates

¹ This essay (in addition to its presentation at the Margaret Schlauch Memorial Conference in 2002) has been delivered in varying forms elsewhere as a semiplenary and plenary lecture: as "Fabulizing subjectivity in the 'Literature of dissent': The classical gods in late medieval France and England", Fourth Annual Meeting of the International Society for Classical Studies, University of Tübingen, Tübingen, Germany, August 2, 1998; and as "The castration of Saturn and the abuse of kingship in Chaucer", for "Six centuries after the deaths of Chaucer and Richard II", Tenth Annual Congress of the Texas Medieval Association, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, September 9, 2000. It has also been delivered as a Guest Lecture, "The castration of Saturn: Kingship and the abuse of power in Chaucer", Medieval Studies Dept., University of Tennessee-Knoxville, October 5, 2000.

as an agent of *stability* and *eternity* in his role as the "Prince"? Why has Chaucer omitted the significant fact (or metaphor) of Saturn's castration both in "The Former Age" and in the *Knight's Tale*?

The castration and imprisonment of Saturn, I would argue, are key to understanding the *Knight's Tale*, explained by the elision of his power within the text when his son Jupiter, through the agency of Theseus, takes the credit for Saturn's decisive judgment about the superiority of Love to War. If we read the slippage by invoking the various traditions – Ovidian, mythographic, and astrological – that explain this myth, the *Knight's Tale* can be read as a much darker story, the story of Chaucer's teller, the Knight himself, who identifies with Duke Theseus as an exponent of aristocracy and privilege. This identification is both personal and political, in that the Knight's nostalgia for the type of order argued by Theseus sentimentalizes and thereby justifies the political situation at the time of Chaucer's writing, a dark time in which Jupiter's lechery, doubleness, and treason substitute for the Golden Age of Saturn. I would argue that Saturn in the tale is in fact associated with disorder and suffering, but the disorder and suffering of the rabble, not the serenity of royalty or the powerful. Chaucer uses the structure of the myth of Saturn's castration as an analogue for the oppression of the Commons by means of royal and parliamentary actions preceding and following the Peasants' Revolt.

Previous scholars of the *Knight's Tale* have expressed some difficulty when Theseus, at the end, strangely attributes authority for the resolution of the dramatic conflict to the First Mover, Jupiter, who seems equivocal to the One God. "The First Mover" is a catalyst that medieval Christian poets and classical stoic and Christian philosophers have conventionally identified with "Jupiter" as a name for God, equivocal with Jove, from the time of the stoics through late medieval Christianity. In a passage indebted to Boethius² and added to Chaucer's source in Boccaccio's *Teseida*, Jupiter is equated by Theseus with "The Firste Moevere of the cause above,/ Whan he first made the faire cheyne of love" (2987-8), identified as a "Prince" (2994) both "stable" and "eterne" (3004) – in other words, the celestial principle and Oneness beyond the translunary spheres of the planets.

Wel wiste he why, and what thereof he mente,
 For with that faire cheyne of love he bond
 The fyr, the eyr, the water, and the lond
 In certeyn boundes, that they may nat flee ... (2987-93)

Further, it is the grace of Jupiter – as Christian God – that Theseus acknowledges in the last words of the tale when he says, "What may I conclude of this longe serye,/ But after wo I rede us to be merye/ And thanken *Juppiter* of al his grace?" (3067-69, my emphasis). Theseus's appeal to Jupiter as the one

² Chaucer adds the Boethian speech of Theseus at the end (1.2987-3089) "by moving some of the platitudinous comments of Teseo's later speech (12.6) to Aegeus (1.2843-49) and by emphasizing the consolation that such remarks of Aegeus bring about" (according to Vincent DiMarco's note on the *Knight's Tale* in Benson (1987: 2837, n.52)). All references to Chaucer come from this edition.

God at the end echoes that final plea of Arcita on his deathbed for help in the afterlife, "And Juppiter so wys my soule gye" (2786) and "So Juppiter have of my soule part" (2792). In accord with Jupiter's guidance, before Arcita dies, Arcita reconciles with his cousin, Palamon. Thereafter, Palamon will literally unite in marriage with Emelye, Arcite's prize, promptly bringing the tale to conclusion.

Despite this convincing closure for the tale, Chaucer scholar Elizabeth Salter has declared that the First Mover's activities "cannot be reconciled with those of Venus, Mars, and Saturn, and that Chaucer seems here to have posed questions he could not himself answer" (see Salter 1962: 9-36). The problem derives not only from a battle between Christian theology and pagan cosmology but more particularly from the disruption of the astrological (planetary) sequence in the Ptolemaic cosmology: if the earth is the center of the universe, the sphere next in place belongs to that of the moon, followed by Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter – and then Saturn. In the *Knight's Tale*, however, the petitioners in the cosmic theatre of the gods turn first to Venus, then to Mars, finally to Diana (the moon); Venus steps out of place in the planetary hierarchy to trump these two gods by appealing to her father Saturn, after which Theseus steps in to thank Jupiter, also out of place.

Further, in terms of the narrative order it appears that the first and fourth petitions to the gods – of Palamon to Venus, goddess of love, and of Venus to her father Saturn – have been displaced, by the second and third petitions, of Arcite to Mars, god of war, and of Emelye to Diana, the moon (and by what might be termed the fifth, of Theseus to Jupiter at the end). That is, Arcite first wins the contest between Palamon and himself (this victory had been his specific wish, suggesting his petition has been granted by Mars). But why should planetary god Mars (higher than Venus but lower in the cosmic hierarchy than Saturn) triumph over more powerful planetary god Saturn? And what does Chaucer mean by this strange slippage, this displacement of Saturn by Jupiter at the end, with the sixth planetary god triumphing over the higher, seventh, planetary god? Accompanying this triumph is the restoration of the Christian over the pagan ("Jove" the one True God as displacer of "Saturn", the pagan figure for time and mutability), or the recognition of the Providential order that encompasses the mutable and catastrophic, which is satisfying theologically but not astrologically, philosophically, or cosmologically.

Indeed, as outermost planet, with the widest course, at the end of part 3, Chaucer's Saturn, farthest from the dense and material earth, must "stynten strif and drede" (line 2450) among the planets and planetary gods Diana-Luna, Mars, and Venus (lines 2338-2480). Depicted as an old man, the planet Saturn mythographically often represents *sapientia* or *prudencia*, as in John Ridewall's

commentary on Fulgentius, the *Fulgentius metaforalis*.³ Presumably this *in bono* interpretation of Saturn rests on the myth of his castration (in that when castrated he can engender no more progeny to be devoured, in order to forestall a prophecy of displacement by his son – that is, he will be cut off from his own sexuality, from his own material connection with nature – therefore he represents melancholy or prudence, passion restrained and inhibited). The interpretation may also have derived from the Ovidian myth of the Fall – the Golden Age of Saturn succeeded by the Silver Age of Jupiter after Saturn’s castration and exile.

From a medieval literary and aesthetic perspective, however, the myth of son Jupiter’s castration of his father Saturn is specifically cited as an example of a “monstrosity” in Macrobius’s commentary on the *Somnium Scipionis* of Cicero – a base matter in the presentation of plot unworthy of the gods and, therefore, to be disregarded by most prudent philosophers in construction of fabulous narrative. Indeed, Macrobius’s concrete and graphic example of “Saturn cutting off the privy parts of his father Caelus and himself thrown into chains by son and successor” is for Macrobius the opposite of the philosophical type of fabulous narrative, in which holy truths and respectable characters appear “beneath a modest veil of allegory”.⁴

Nevertheless, the myth of Saturn’s castration in the thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose* has been termed by John V. Fleming “a major idea” in Jean de Meun’s continuation, and, according to David F. Hult, the ugliness of the “body dis-membered” in the myth is said to be made beautiful “through the story re-membered” (literally, ‘put back together’), meaning the discarded material parts, or language itself (Hult 1992: 126). Jean’s point is that the power and efficacy of Venus (love) cannot undo the damage caused by the castration of the First Ruler, her father Saturn, and the disorder resulting from this “Fall of Man”.

Jean’s myth of Saturn’s castration is introduced at the end of the opening debate between Reason and the Lover about which is the greater, Justice or Love, and serves to illustrate the superiority of Love (Venus, the consequence of Saturn’s castration) over Justice (the representation of the Golden Age associated with Saturn as first ruler, given the present-day situation of injustice and deceit: “Se Joustice iert toujours gisanz” [If Justice were always asleep], says Reason, “Si serait Amour soufisanz/ A mener bele vie e bone,/ Senz jousticier nule persone;/ Mais senz Amour Joustice non” [still Love would be enough to lead a

³ See also the figure of Saturn (Prudence) devouring his children and being castrated by Jupiter, while Venus is born from his genitals, in John Ridewall, “Fulgentius metaforalis”, Vatican MS Palat. Lat. 1066, fol. 226r.

⁴ See Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* (trans. by William Harris Stahl (1952: vol. 1, 2, §11)).

good and pure life, without judging anyone. But Justice without Love? No] (vv. 5527-29), (Dahlberg 1971: 113).⁵ The exemplum is itself told dramatically in Jean:

Joustice, qui jadis regnot,
 Ou tens que Saturnus regne ot,
 Cui Jupiter copa les coilles,
 Ses filz, con se fussent andoilles,
 (mout ot ci dur fill et amer),
 Puis les gita dedenz la mer,
 Don Venus la deesse issi,
 Car li livres le dit issi,
 S’ele iert en terre revenue,
 E fust autresinc bien tenue
 Au jour d’ui come ele estait lores,
 Si serait il mestiers encores
 Aus genz entr’aus qu’il s’entramassent,
 Combien que Joustice gardassent,
 Car, puis qu’Amour s’en voudrait fuire,
 Joustice en ferait trop destruire;
 Mais, se les genz bien s’entramaient,
 Jamais ne s’entreforferaient;
 E puis que Forfaiz s’en irait,
 Joustice de quei servirait?

(vv. 5535-54)

[If Justice, who reigned formerly at the time when Saturn held power – Saturn, whose testicles Jupiter, the hard and bitter son, cut off as though they were sausages and threw into the sea, thus giving birth to Venus, as the book tells – if Justice, I say, were to return to earth and were as well esteemed today as she was then, there would still be need for men to love each other, no matter how they maintained Justice; for, from the time that Love might wish to flee, Justice would cause great destruction. But if men loved, they would never harm each other; and since Transgression would leave, what end would Justice serve?]

asks Reason (Dahlberg 1971: 113). Because the Lover doesn’t know the answer, Reason replies politically that

⁵ For the original see Lecoy (1965-70), cited by verse number(s) within the text.

Bien t'en crei, car paisible e quei
 Trestuit cil dou monde vivraient,
 Jamais rei ne prince n'avraient;
 Ne serait baillis ne prevoz,
 Tant vivrait li peuples devoz;
 Jamais juiges n'orraient clamour:
 Donc di je que meuz vaut Amour
 Simplement que ne fait Joustice,
 Tout aille ele contre Malice,
 Qui fu mere des seignouries,
 Don les franchises sont peries,
 Car, se ne fust maus e pechiez,
 Don li mondes est entechiez,
 L'en n'eüst onques rei veü
 Ne juige en terre queneü.
 Si se preuvent il malement,
 Qu'il deüssent prumierement
 Aus meïsmes justifier,
 Puis qu'en se veaut en aus fier,
 E leiaus estre e diligenz,
 Non pas lasches e negligenz,
 Ne couveiteus, faus ne feintis,
 Pour faire dreiture aus plaintis;
 Mais or vendent les juigemenz
 E bestournent les erremenz,
 E taillent e content e raient,
 E les povres genz trestout paient:
 Tuit s'efforcent de l'autrui prendre.
 Teus juiges fait le larron pendre
 Qui meuz deüst ester penduz,
 Se jugement li fust renduz
 Des rapines e des torz faiz
 Qu'il a par son poeir forfaiz.

(vv. 5556-88)

[Everyone in the world would then live peacefully and tranquilly, and they would never have a king or prince; there would be neither bailiff nor provost as long as people lived honestly. Justices would never hear any clamor. So I say that Love by itself is worth more than Justice, even though the latter works against Malice, the mother of lordships, by which freedom has perished; for if there had been no evil or sin to stain the world, man would never have seen a king nor known a judge on earth. Judges judge evilly where they ought first to make themselves just, since men want to trust in them. In order

to do right by the complainants, they should observe law, be diligent, not lazy and negligent, nor covetous, false, and feigning. But now they sell their decisions, and turn the elements of the legal process upside down; they tally, they count, they erase, and poor men all pay. Each strives to take from the other. Such a judge makes a robber hang when he himself ought rather to be hanged, if a judgment were rendered against him for the rapines and the wrongs that he has committed through his power.]

(Dahlberg 1971: 113)

Jean de Meun seems to be anticipating Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, in which the judicial process – by which the judge Saturn decrees that Venus (Love), not Mars (conflict and war), will win, is overturned and disrupted by some invisible agent (his son Jupiter, representative of Duc Theseus), to whom is attributed order and universal harmony. But Chaucer's debate also reflects the illustration of Ovid's opening fable in the *Metamorphoses* and the stages in the Fall of Man at the time Chaucer was writing the *Knight's Tale*.

Chaucer was aware of the significance of another interpretation of the rule of Saturn as the Golden Age that was followed by a lesser Silver Age (Jupiter's Rule) resulting from Jupiter's castration, and by two Ages lesser still, Bronze and Iron – a classical version of the Fall of Man, as we can see in several figures found in an illustrated fifteenth-century manuscript of the first book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.⁶ That Chaucer intended this myth of the Four Ages as a politicized overlay in the *Knight's Tale* is strengthened by its use in conjunction with the fall of Saturn and the rise of Jupiter in his short poem, "The Former Age", written around the same time as the *Knight's Tale* (between 1377 and 1388), or at least after his second trip to Italy, in 1378, when he is believed by scholars to have obtained a copy of his chief source, *Il Teseida*.⁷

The very plausibility of the temporal connection between the two poems, however, simultaneously deepens the contradictions in Chaucer's use of the myth in the *Knight's Tale* and the meaning of its principal god, Saturn. If Jupiter

⁶ See especially the figure for the Golden Age, in which semi-nude men and women pick the fruits of the earth during eternal spring, from Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, (after 1531, Book 1, fol. 10), French translation, in Oxford, Bodleian MS Douce 117, detail upper left. For the Silver Age, a man plows a field with oxen; another finds shelter in a house; a third talks to a naked child (fol. 10, detail upper right). For the Bronze Age, men fight one another: two men wrestle; two fight with swords; two fight with staves; a seventh holds helmet and sling (fol. 10, detail lower left). In the last Age, Justice has left the earth: a man attacks another with a sword; a man digs in the earth; a fourth stabs himself; a sailing ship appears in the water (fol. 10, detail lower right). The *Knight's Tale* has been interpreted in the light of the Four Ages of Man with various characters representing the humors, see Brooks and Flowler (1970: 123-146).

⁷ The *Knight's Tale*, according to Vincent J. DiMarco, was written sometime before the composition of the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* (1386-88) (Benson 1987: 826).

succeeds Saturn to the throne, which leads disastrously to a time of misfortune and civil disorder and the subversion of authority, how then can Theseus in the *Knight's Tale* imagine that Jupiter operates as an agent of *stability* and *eternity* in his role as the "Prince"? Why has Chaucer omitted the significant fact (or metaphor) of Saturn's castration both in "The Former Age" and in the *Knight's Tale*? Certainly Chaucer does not shy from a grim recitation of baneful effects associated with Saturn or any other god in this tale. And if the castration – symbolic or otherwise – is key to understanding the myth in the *Knight's Tale*, why does Chaucer not introduce that feature explicitly? Or why is Chaucer's use of Saturn's castration so illogical, so concealed?

The castration and imprisonment of Saturn, I would argue, is key to understanding the *Knight's Tale*, explained by the elision of his power within the text when his son Jupiter, through the agency of Theseus, takes the credit for Saturn's decisive judgment about the superiority of Love to War. If we read the slippage by invoking the various traditions, Ovidian, mythographic, and astrological, that explain this myth, the *Knight's Tale* can be read as a much darker story, the story of Chaucer's teller, the Knight himself, who identifies with Duke Theseus as an exponent of aristocracy and privilege. This identification is both personal and political, in that the Knight's nostalgia for the type of order argued by Theseus sentimentalizes and thereby justifies the political situation at the time of Chaucer's writing, a dark time in which Jupiter's lechery, doubleness, and treason substitute for the Golden Age of Saturn – as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. But as we shall see, Chaucer was not necessarily identifying his own position as author with that of Duc Theseus (who mythographically conveys often negative associations through his aiding of his friend Pirithous – a character in the *Knight's Tale* who rescues and sides with Arcite – in the attempted rape of Proserpina, as can be seen in an illustration found in Christine's *Epistre Othea*).⁸ Nor (as we shall see) was Chaucer unsympathetic to the problems of the Commons.

The *Knight's Tale* contains more allusions to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* than any other Chaucerian tale.⁹ Within the tradition of Ovid commentary in the Middle

⁸ See the depiction of Theseus and Pirithous (after the attempted rape of Proserpina) being rescued from Cerberus, guardian of hell, by Hercules, in Christine de Pizan, "Epistre Othea" (French, ca. 1454), in Oxford, Bodleian MS Laud Miscellaneus, fol. 30r.

⁹ For Chaucer in the *Knight's Tale*, as has been well documented, for example, in the words of Richard Hoffman (1966: 39), "There are several explanations to account for the striking fact that, while the *Knight's Tale* is based upon [Boccaccio's] *Teseida*, it contains more allusions or parallels to Ovidian passages than any other of the *Tales*", especially mythological passages. From the twelfth century through the sixteenth centuries, glossation on the *Metamorphoses* transformed mythography by shifting attention to the much more ambiguous mythological mutations in these sexually focused stories.

Ages, the *Ovidius moralizatus* of fourteenth-century scholar Pierre Bersuire¹⁰ is specifically responsible for iconographical details in the descriptions of the statues of Venus, Mars, and Diana in the *Knight's Tale* and for its Ovidian catalogues of the victims of love, of discord and war, and of hunting and chastity. For Bersuire the myth of castration becomes a paradigm of how human sexuality should be fabulized and then explained, as a metaphor for abusive kingship or clerical power – the abuse of the body politic by the father(s). Bersuire interprets Saturn, king of Crete, either *in malo*, as a tyrant, or *in bono*, as a good prelate who is himself tyrannized.¹¹ The myth opens with the prophecy of Saturn's brother Tithonus that Saturn's son will take away his power, with the result that Saturn begins to devour his own sons. In Bersuire's *in malo* reading of Saturn, the god is a tyrant, old (= evil) and bent (= turned away from the true faith or down to the earthly through avarice), and the sons he devours, his poor subjects whom he traumatizes by means of taxes. Saturn may be a tyrant whose violence or stealth allows him to dominate over cities; such a tyrant always believes that he will be toppled from power by his own sons (= subjects) so "[d]e consilio parentum & amicorum suorum isti filios suos i. subditos, universaliter deprimunt, devorant & devastant" [on the advice of his own father and friends

¹⁰ Bersuire, author of the biblical dictionary *Repertorium morale*, the monumental moralized encyclopedia of *Reductorium morale*, and a French translation of Livy, among other works, was best known for the fifteenth book of his moralized biblical encyclopedia, the *Ovidius moralizatus*. His first, and most influential, chapter, *De formis figurisque deorum*, allegorizes the gods in the manner of Fulgentius and the Third Vatican Mythographer (Albericus of London), among them the planetary gods Saturn, Mars, Apollo, Venus, Mercury, and Diana (the moon), as well as Juno, Cybele, Neptune, Pan, Bacchus, Pluto and the underworld, and the Fates. Chapters Two to Sixteen allegorize the fifteen books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the manner of Arnulf of Orleans. After publishing an edition of the *Ovidius* in Avignon in 1340, Bersuire read the vernacular *Ovide moralisé* and John Ridewall's *Fulgentius metaforalis* and revised his commentary in Paris in the 1350's. Thereafter, his first chapter, *De formis*, was translated into French and used in the condensed version of the Third Vatican Mythography, the *Libellus de imaginibus deorum* and as the prologue to the verse *Ovide moralisé*; this first chapter came to be published independently and was very influential in Italy, where Boccaccio used it in his *Genealogia deorum*. Treating secular fable in the manner of Sacred Scripture, Bersuire opens the door for later poets to employ mythological imagery as does Petrarch, in his catalogue of gods in *L'Africa*.

¹¹ For the four verbal and scholastic levels of exegesis, literal, natural, historical, and spiritual, see Pierre Bersuire, *De formis figurisque deorum, Reductorium morale, liber XV, cap. 1: Ovidius moralizatus* (Engels 1966: 5-10; trans. Reynolds 1971: 37-46). What Bersuire calls the "natural" explanation – the stoic physical explanation – is merely an abstraction gleaned from the literal details mentioned above. Saturn is time with four children, the elements; Jupiter castrates him in that fire or heat consumes all the fruits produced by time. Saturn has a sickle because time is curved back on itself, and he has a snake because just as the snake is rolled back on itself and its end is joined to its beginning one year rolls into another. Saturn's organs are thrown into the sea to illustrate the idea that the generational power of time is linked with water and humors.

he will weigh down, devour, and devastate his sons (that is, his subjects)] (*De formis*, p. 8; trans., p. 42). As a consequence,

“[v]erum[p]tamen sepe accidit quod finaliter Iupiter i. unus ipsorum filiorum & subditorum ceteris sollercior & audacior, contra istum malum patrem insurgit & ad regem, papam seu alios superiores ipsum trahit, & ipsum a virtute propria castrat, qui tam diu contra eum pugnat & irruiat quod de regno, prelatura, officio vel iudiciatura ipsum detrahit & deponit, dicens illud Ysa. XIII: Quomodo cecidisti Lucifer, qui mane oriebaris; corruisti in terram, qui vulnerabas gentes”

[it happens that Jupiter – that is one of their sons or subjects more clever and more daring than the others – rises up against a wicked father, takes him to the king, the pope, or some other superior, cuts him off from his power, and fights against him so long that he deposes him from kingship, prelateship, office, or judgeship, saying the words of Isaias 14:12, “How are you fallen from heaven, Lucifer, who rose in the morning? How are you fallen to the earth, who wounded the nations?”]

(*De formis*, p. 7; trans., p. 40)

Bersuire adds that, even when Saturn tries to protect against the prophecy by eating his sons, there is always one son he is not guarding against who will “ipsos quandoque eicit & castrat, & loco eorum imperat atque regnat” [castrate {him} and rule in {his} place] (*De formis*, p. 8; trans., p. 42). Bersuire adds here an anecdote drawn from contemporary Italian history in which a miller in Lodi appropriates a tyrant’s place (trans., pp. 42-43).

Yet Bersuire adds to this reading an *in bono* reading of Saturn’s castration that better fits Chaucer’s usage, a reading bolstered by a line from Ezechiel 5:10: “Patres comed[e]nt filios in medio tui & filii comedent patres suos” [Therefore, the fathers will eat the sons in your midst, and the sons shall eat their fathers] (*De formis*, p. 7; trans., pp. 40-1). Bersuire notes in this interpretation that “potest significare aliquem pium & iustum prelatum in saturando alios occupatum, qui s. audet malos filios & subditos devorare per correctionem, et qui habet Opem in uxorem i. pietatem & compassionem, que s. pauperes nutrit per elemosinam & subvencionem” [{Saturn} is also able to signify a pious and just prelate, busy about satisfying others, who dares to devour bad sons and subjects through correction and who has as his wife Ops – that is piety and compassion – who nourishes the poor by pity and assistance] (*De formis*, p. 8; trans., p. 41). Such men are often most attacked by subordinates (such as Jupiter) who long for their power: “Boni enim prelati & iudices pro eo quod malos filios suos devorant & castigant, ab aliis malis subditis odiuntur, & hoc quia timent quod per eos similiter devorentur, et ideo isti nituntur tales patres suos, s. bonos prelatos, castrare & eos de regno suo & prelatura deponere ut loco eorum valeant imperare” [Because they devour and castigate their {bad} sons, good

prelates and judges are hated by evil subjects who fear that they will be devoured in like manner. Therefore, these subjects seek to castrate their own fathers — that is the good prelates — and to depose them from office in order to rule in their place] (*De formis*, p. 8; trans., p. 42.) The hurling of Saturn’s sex organs into the sea represents the seizure of property. Bersuire scoffs, “[Q]uia revera ballivi & officiales virilia i. bona talium, quando deponuntur & propter iniquitatem quam in officiis suis gesserunt, castrantur & puniantur, solent rapere, in eis que luxuriari & gaudere” [Their various subordinates are accustomed to seize the sex organs of such men — that is to confiscate and enjoy their property — after they have been deposed and castrated for the evils they committed while in office] (*De formis*, p. 7; trans., p. 41).¹² This act of castration for Bersuire signifies pleasure transformed to bitterness, specifically, of “virilitas & potestas in mare tribulacionis & in paupertatis amaritudinem convertatur” [virility and power changed into the sea of tribulation and the bitterness of poverty] (*De formis*, p. 7; trans., p. 40).

From Bersuire’s deconstructive ideology and theory of leadership in his exegesis of the Saturn myth, Chaucer borrows poetic mythological images to define in his Canterbury tale the failure of the old Knight (and the aristocracy from which he derives), a point argued from different evidence by Lee Patterson and Terry Jones.¹³ In this analogue old Saturn is displaced by his castrating son Jupiter at the end, just as the aged, distinguished Knight is displaced by a drunken, lewd, obstreperous Miller, who relays his own scatalogical tale (as I have noted elsewhere). According to the characterization of the principals in the Saturn myth, the castrator in the *Canterbury Tales* should be the Knight’s young jovial son, the Squire, whose tale might well have followed his father’s. But within the narrative sequence of the *Knight’s Tale*, the castrator in fact is the idealized Duke Theseus, who identifies with Jupiter, the Prime Mover, and who as speaker, or author, of the philosophical “castration” denies Saturn his power by attributing the resolution of the narrative conflict in the Knight’s Tale instead to Jupiter. By means of this narrative displacement of power, the Knight is surely nostalgic in his glimpse of a ruling aristocracy that can bring political, social, and cosmic order back into a discordant world like that of Chaucer’s contemporary England. If this analogy was intended by Chaucer, as I think it was, then what does the displaced Saturn represent for him?

¹²Actually the wrongs of both Saturn and Jupiter are explained through a citation from Ecclesiasticus 14:4: “Qui acervat ex animo iniuste congregat aliis, & in bonis ipsius alius luxuriabitur” [He who gathers together by wronging his own soul, gathers for others; and another will squander away his goods in rioting] (*De formis*, 7; trans. 41).

¹³See Patterson (1991: 165-230), especially Chapter Three, “*The Knight’s Tale* and the crisis of chivalric identity”, and Jones (1980).

I would argue that Saturn in the tale is in fact associated with disorder and suffering, but the disorder and suffering of the rabble, not the serenity of royalty or the powerful. In this regard, note the depiction of the planetary god Saturn as a villain in a late medieval astrological tract contemporary with Chaucer: in the late medieval "Calendarius" preceding the "Astrologia Ypocratis" in Vatican MS Lat. 1398, fol. 10v, Saturn is a barefoot peasant, with keys and scythe, as the other gods are planets, personalized according to different vocations to represent their respective faculties. Jupiter is depicted as a Magister, reading, with students; Mars, as a knight; Sol (Apollo), as a king; Venus, as a nursemaid/mother; Mercury, as a merchant; Luna (Diana), as a veiled nun; and so forth. If Saturn represents the villein in the world of misfortune and mishap that governs the lives of peasants in late fourteenth-century England (as he does here) or, more historically, the violent disorder occasioned by the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, then Jupiter and his advocate Theseus can only represent the privileged aristocrat, the self-indulgent greedy tyrant who exploited the commons in order to pay for the war with France and against whom the commons rebelled. (In this same illustration note the depiction of the god of war, Mars, as a knight – and also note, in a Flemish late fifteenth-century moralized Ovid in French Prose [Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Thottske MS 399, fol. 6va], Mars dressed as a knight riding in a cart. The latter depiction of Mars is negative in that he is being led away in the cart reserved for criminals – an indictment of a warlike and criminal aristocracy).

In this case Chaucer would be using the structure of the myth of Saturn's castration as an analogue for the oppression of the Commons by means of royal and parliamentary actions preceding and following the Peasants' Revolt. Just as the Knight believes he is returning his narrative world to order by Theseus's judicial actions and his attribution of resolution to Jupiter, so also the harsh punishments and strict controls instituted by the king and others in power after the Peasants' Revolt were intended to prevent a recurrence of rebellion. Such an historical interpretation follows for several reasons relating to the characterization of Theseus, here and elsewhere, and the historical context of the Peasants' Revolt and Chaucer's own position within that context.

First, Theseus's role in the *Knight's Tale* is constructed as more rosy and positive than in fact he appears to be within the mythographic and iconographic tradition from which he derives, an idea that has been argued by Melvin Storm (Storm 1990: 215-231). In the mythographic tradition Theseus is a vexed and ambiguous figure sometimes portrayed as the just ruler (Robertson Jr. 1969: 260-266), and the opposite of the tyrant (Burnley 1979: 11-28) or, given his involvement in situations involving rape and persecution, as we have seen above, sometimes as a cruel tyrant and conqueror and potential rapist (see, for example, Webb 1947: 289-296). In the *Knight's Tale* his power over all the principal char-

acters casts him in the role of a god, and he is in fact described as if a god sitting on the throne in lines 2528-29: "Duc Theseus was at a wyndow set,/ Arrayed right as he were a god in trone". Not only does Theseus invoke and identify with Jupiter as God omnipotent,¹⁴ "maximus deorum" (in Holkot's words, equivalent to God's Providence, or God Himself, according to Bersuire, "Deum, ipsi[u]s celi principem & magistrum" [God, lord and ruler of heaven itself], he dominates all the other characters because he is their conqueror – he has defeated every one of them directly or indirectly in battle and in war, whether the Amazons Hippolyta and Emelye (the first of whom he marries) or the Theban royal cousins Palamon and Arcite (whom he imprisons). It is no accident that Chaucer draws attention to his role as conquering hero by inscribing the Latin line from Statius's *Thebaid* 12.519 as an epigraph for the tale, "Iamque domos patrias, Scithice post aspera gentis/Prelia, laurigero, &c." [And now (Theseus drawing nigh his) native land in laurelled car after fiercely battling with the Scythian folk, etc.]. This line is followed in the original Latin – deleted here by Chaucer – by a description of his reception: he "is heralded by glad applause and the heaven-flung shout of the populace and the merry trump of warfare ended". Although this line appears in many manuscripts and therefore may have been added by either his scribe or Chaucer himself (see Di Marco's note in Benson (1987: 828)), it is strange for Chaucer to cite the Latin – the father tongue – in a longer work that celebrates the vernacular, especially as English had taken over as the language of choice around the time/shortly before the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. Further, even if Theseus as war hero restores order to the community, the passage occurs ironically, at a point in the epic immediately prior to the first appearance of the subjugated Amazons, including Hippolyta.

Secondly, the Knight's use of the title of "duke" to describe Theseus's signal position as ruler of Athens would surely bring to mind among auditors of the tale the important duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt, uncle of Richard II and father of Henry Bolingbroke, earl of Derby, who took Richard's place, as Henry IV, after his deposition.¹⁵ Gaunt played an influential part in the events leading

¹⁴ Theseus identifies himself with Jupiter, it is made clear, by the end of the tale. It is Jupiter as "maximus deorum", in Holkot's words, equivalent to God's Providence, or God Himself [see Robert Holkot, "In librum duodecim prophetas", fols. 128v-29r, cited in Allen (1963: 339)], and, according to Bersuire, "Deum, ipsi[u]s celi principem & magistrum" [God, lord and ruler of heaven itself], whom Theseus invokes (Bersuire, "De formis", in *Ovidius*, 11; trans., 46). For a different approach to the same evidence, see Chance (1996: Chapter 6, "Feminizing Theseus in *The Knight's Tale*", 184-213), for the view that Theseus's identification demonstrates that he has been educated into civility by the end of the romance.

¹⁵ In the aftermath, the poll tax was "effectively killed" as an "instrument of taxation", according to Dobson (1980: 28); Richard may have been lulled into thinking their faith in him was absolute.

up to as well as those following the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.¹⁶ John of Gaunt presided over the parliament between 27 January and 23 February 1377 that granted the First Poll Tax, largely responsible for catalyzing the Peasants' Revolt, and because of his signal presence it was believed he was the author of this tax.¹⁷ This tax was followed by a second, in 1379, and a third, in 1381, that may have precipitated the events of the actual rebellion. This duke, rather than the fourteen-year old king Richard II, along with Simon Sudbury, Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Hales, treasurer of the kingdom, and John Leg, a Franciscan friar who was a familiar of John of Gaunt, were the ultimate focus of hostility by the insurgents in the Peasants' Revolt, as is clear from the consequences – the burning of Gaunt's palace, Savoy, in the march on London in 13-15 June 1381, and the beheading of Sudbury and the others (Dobson 1980: 23).

John of Gaunt was from the perspective of the Commons a traitor to king and kingdom. Thomas of Walsingham in *Historia Anglicana* notes that on Corpus Christi Day, the rebels speak with the "simple commons" of London "about the acquiring of liberty and the seizure of traitors, especially the duke of Lancaster whom they hated most of all; and in a short time easily persuaded all the poorer citizens to support them in their conspiracy" (Thomas Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana* 1.323-4, in Dobson (1980: 169)). When they burn Savoy, "the residence of the duke of Lancaster, unrivalled in splendour and nobility within England, which they then set to the flames", Walsingham explains that "This was done in defiance of the duke whom they called a traitor and to inspire fear among the other traitors. This news so delighted the common people of London that, thinking it particularly shameful for others to harm and injure the duke before themselves, they immediately ran there like madmen, set fire to the place on all sides and so destroyed it" (Dobson 1980: 169). In the *Anonimalle Chronicle*, it is noted that when 60,000 people were raised to march on London, "They did much damage in Kent, notably to Thomas de Heseldene, servant of the duke of Lancaster, because of their hatred for the said duke. For this reason they cast his manors and houses to the ground and sold his live-stock ... and all sorts of corn at a cheap price. Every day the commons was eager to have his head along

¹⁶ As early as October 7, 1381, a mason, John Cote, confessed that "pilgrims who had come out of the north country to the town of Canterbury, related in the said county of Kent that John, duke of Lancaster, had made all his natives free, in the different counties of England; whereupon, the foresaid malefactors wished to have sent messengers to the foresaid duke, if it were so or not: and if it were so, then the said malefactors consented one and all, to have sent to the said duke, and him, by their own power (*per realem potestatem suam*) to have made their lord and king of England" (*John Cote's confession*, in Dobson (1980: 323)).

¹⁷ "Here it was agreed there that a groat, or four pence, be taken from each person older than fourteen, regardless of circumstances" (Thomas Walsingham, *Historia Anglicana* 1.323-4, excerpted in Dobson 1980: 103).

with that of Sir Thomas Orgrave, clerk of the Receipt and sub-Treasurer of England" (Dobson 1980: 128). After the fourteen-year old king Richard offered to meet with the commons of Kent in Blackheath on the evening of Corpus Christi Day (12 June), to settle their injustices and was then warned not to go by the Chancellor and Treasurer, the commons of Kent petitioned for the "heads of the duke of Lancaster and fifteen other lords" (*Anonimalle Chronicle*, Dobson 1980: 130). Thomas Walsingham notes it was because of the hatred of the men of Kent for John of Gaunt – the nobleman who "called himself 'King of Castile' because of his marriage to the daughter and heiress of Peter, king of Castile", that they "blocked all the pilgrimage routes to Canterbury, stopped all pilgrims of whatever condition and forced them to swear, first, that they would be faithful to King Richard and the commons and that they would accept no king who was called John" (*Anonimalle Chronicle*, Dobson 1980: 133).

That the pilgrims are being prevented from moving on to Canterbury reminds us of the vexed situation of Chaucer's Knight as a character who himself arrives on the pilgrimage still dressed in the clothing of the military expedition, whose spiritual commitment is ambiguous, and whose relationship with his son the Squire is ambivalent. Further, the commons on this pilgrimage – the Miller, Reeve, and others – also "stop" the Knight, stop the orderly progression of tale tellers, stop the emphasis upon the aristocratic and privileged, by means of their interruptions. Within the drama of the larger narrative, Chaucer seems to suggest his characters are out of control and have overthrown even the Knight's claim to authority and authorship. But in addition the very terms of insurrection and betrayal are borrowed from the Peasants' Revolt. The drunken Miller cries out, in the voice of insurrection and rebellion, emphasizing arms and blood, that he can match or revenge the Knight's storytelling: "But in *Pilates voys* he gan to crie,/ And swoor, *By armes, and by blood* and bones,/ I kan a noble tale for the nones,/ With which I wol now quite the Knyghtes tale" (lines 3125-7; my emphasis). The Miller cries in "Pilates voice" – voice of judgment and of traitor to Christ. The Miller's tale will be "Of Goddes pryvetee", "An housbonde shal nat been inquisityf/ Of Goddes pryvetee" (lines 3163-5), in exact counter to the *Knight's Tale*, of reassurance that he knows God's "pryvetee". Chaucer twice declares that the Miller is a "cherl" (lines 3169, 3182) telling a cherl's tale, that is, a that he is a serf, or member of the Commons.

Chaucer may have witnessed the Peasant's Revolt outside his windows at Aldgate when the crowd entered the gates of London and burned Gaunt's palace. Chaucer, bound to the political power behind the English throne, first, through his youthful service as page within the household of the Countess of Ulster, wife of Prince Lionel, and then through his marriage to Philippa Pan', who also served in the households of the Countess, Queen Philippa, and John of Gaunt, held an ambivalent relationship with Gaunt. Philippa Pan' was the sister

of Katherine Swynford, aunt to Swynford's son by Gaunt (?1373), and if she had not died (1396) would have been sister-in-law to Gaunt. Gaunt may have been responsible for Chaucer's court and government positions as controller of customs, the throne's emissary to France on missions of peace and marriage, justice of the peace, clerk of King's Works, and subforester of North Petherton, and therefore also for his income and annuities. Yet Chaucer rendered his sympathy for the Commons, rather than the privileged aristocracy and church, through the idealized figures of the Plowman and the Parson in the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*.

Against Gaunt Chaucer may have harbored some resentment for a number of reasons. There is no satisfactory explanation for the fact that Chaucer's alleged son Thomas, born around 1373, four years after Philippa entered the household of Gaunt and one year after Gaunt granted her an annuity, was knighted and inherited property at Woodstock, the royal estate, except that Gaunt's brother was named Thomas of Woodstock and might have served as his godfather.

What we might conclude from this vertical interpretation of the *Knight's Tale* – from Ovidian mythography read politically – is that, in some situations common both to commentary and court poetry, classical myth becomes the vehicle for fabulizing subjectivity, whether in the satiric Ovid commentary of a Pierre Bersuire or the Ovidianized descriptions of the gods in Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* used to characterize the human principals. In both kinds of texts, the dissenting subject conceals underneath the cover of mythological fable a range of private, self-authorized perspectives, often politicized, sexual, or heretical. The challenge of and to authority becomes imbedded within representation of the gods itself nontraditional and innovative. Recovering the subject therefore depends upon deconstructing the heterodox and differentiating the institutional from the personal. Following Bersuire, who invests his moralized Ovid with his own story and gendered values as a satirical protest against ecclesiastical tyranny, as I have argued elsewhere (Chance 2000: Chapter Seven, 320-376, 442-448), Chaucer similarly criticizes a crumbling aristocratic and ecclesiastical authority that has dominated even his own life. The future, as Chaucer rightly recognized, holds the promise (or threat) of democracy and gender equity for the society controlled by the aristocracy to which the Knight belongs. By making mythology personal and historical, experientially real, Chaucer injects his poetry with his own observance and his own subjectivity. Both writers share, finally, an understanding of mythography as personalizing and politicized, individualistic, reflective of subject position in a larger context we today might identify as astonishingly postmodern.

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