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# The Postcolonial "Knight's Tale": A Social Commentary on Post-Norman Invasion England

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The Postcolonial “Knight’s Tale”: A Social Commentary on Post-Norman Invasion  
England

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

Every author injects a purpose into his or her works; in Chaucer's case, he scribed *The Canterbury Tales*, which tackles and successfully demonstrates various aspects to fourteenth-century English society and culture. "The Knight's Tale" is no different; the tale is almost identical, plot-wise, to Giovanni Boccaccio's *Teseida*, and yet Chaucer weaves a tale that is distinctive. The tale reflects Chaucer's views on his society, in particular post-Norman attitudes. By examining the text with a post-colonial theoretical approach, Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" is a subaltern commentary on the colonization of England after the Norman Conquest.

## INTRODUCTION

Along with Shakespeare and Milton, Geoffrey Chaucer is one of the most easily recognized names of the early English canon. His works – especially *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde* – attract students and scholars alike, and continually offer new insights into both his literary artistry and literary context, yielding 600 years of criticism. And, despite occasional challenges to the very notion of a literary canon, the works of Geoffrey Chaucer appear on both high school and college reading lists.

*The Canterbury Tales* is typically considered Chaucer's finest piece. Within one text, Chaucer explores various aspects of his society, and as Helen Phillips notes, “offers great diversity of styles, moods and genres: from epic and religious lyric to parody” (1). Chaucer also manages to unite all three social estates in a believable manner—a pilgrimage to Canterbury to pay homage to St. Thomas à Beckett—and illustrates the interactions that may take place between them. From this context, a variety of vivid and diverse characters emerge, passing the time by telling tales to one another as they travel. As each pilgrim steps forward to tell his or her story, Chaucer unveils a unique individual, characterized by his or her own rhetoric and moral values. This moral diversity creates a challenge for the modern reader: the multiple perspectives presented by Chaucer's narrators make it difficult, if not outright impossible, to ascribe any one position to the author. For example, a reader can walk away from “The Wife of Bath's Tale” convinced that Chaucer sympathized with women; that same reader can read “The Clerk's Tale” as an outright attack on women. What *is* Chaucer's attitude toward women? In his tales he presents them as passive princesses (“The Knight's Tale”), lecherous housewives (“The Miller's Tale”), economic objects (“The Reeve's Tale”), political pawns (“The Man of Law's Tale”), wise hags (“The Wife of Bath's Tale”), pathetic doormats (“The Clerk's Tale”), and manipulative

adulteresses (“The Shipman’s Tale”), and so forth. That no one tale can convey Chaucer’s actual attitude toward women is not in itself striking—this is the case with many authors; what is striking is that one author can so convincingly address a topic from this many perspectives. In the end, one cannot determine where Chaucer stands on such a relatively obvious example as women, much less other important issues of his (and our) day: politics, religion, justice, marriage, and so forth.

Responding to the challenges posed by Chaucer’s narrative style, Helen Phillips invokes several modern literary theories:

At times the narrative itself acts out multiple reader-response, by showing the pilgrims divided in their reactions or expectations concerning the tales they tell and hear....From his mixed band of pilgrims, varied in both their social status and their levels of morality, who are both the fictional narrators of his tales and a fictional audience, Chaucer creates a many-voiced narrative which lacks both the limitations and the safety of a single focalization....Chaucer’s decision to paint his pilgrim company as a socially variegated group, full of rivalry and internal tensions has several different effects; it creates narratological complexities which intrigue the critic; it also raises deep questions about the text’s overall moral standpoint; and it could also be an image of Chaucer’s social awareness of his own late fourteenth-century context as a society of rapid economic and political change and movement, bringing classes into new relationships of rivalry and conflict, with challenges to established authority. (1-2)

Thus, in order to fully understand the text at hand, one must approach *The Canterbury Tales* in a fashion that addresses each of these effects: the social commentary, the morality of the text, and the narratological aspects.

This thesis will focus on the first tale told by a pilgrim, “The Knight’s Tale.” The Knight, a member of the upper echelon, wins the straw draw and proceeds to tell a romance about two noblemen of Thebes, Arcite and Palamon, who are both determined to win the heart of Emelye, the sister-in-law of the Duke of Athens. The tale is almost identical, plot-wise, to Giovanni Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, and yet Chaucer weaves a tale that is distinctive. The themes and character of Theseus, the Duke of Athens, vary considerably, although drawn from Boccaccio’s work, as well as *The Thebaid* by Publius Papinius Statius. The Theseus in the previous two texts is heroic and has few faults, while Chaucer’s Theseus is flawed and can be considered an imperialist based upon his treatment of those surrounding him. Statius’s and Boccaccio’s Dukes of Athens utilize rhetoric and reason to clarify their decisions when conquering their opponents; the Theseus present in “The Knight’s Tale” displays imperialistic tendencies through his pursuit of gain. While Theseus essentially *does the same things* in Statius, Boccaccio, and Chaucer, his actions in Chaucer are significantly more aggressive because that is how the narrator Knight—and arguably Chaucer—describes them. This key distinction can be better understood when examined through the critical lens of postcolonial theory, an approach that is predicated on understanding four key terms: colonialism, imperialism, post-colonialism and the subaltern.

*Colonialism*, according to Ania Loomba, can be quite simply defined as “the conquest and control of other people’s lands and goods” (8). The idea of colonialism has existed in every stage of history, from Neanderthal society to the modern day struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan. Loomba continues, explaining it “was not an identical process in different parts of the world but

everywhere it locked the original inhabitants and the newcomers into the most complex and traumatic relationships in human history” (7-8). Those who invaded wished to bestow their ‘superior’ value system upon the ‘inferior’ native culture—the use of quotations, here, is to emphasize that the sentiment was not always shared by the natives, nor was it always necessarily true; “national development” rarely allowed for native beliefs and cultures to remain even partially, viewing them as “mysterious, superstitious, uncivilized, backwards” (Loomba 14-5). These mindsets typically produced many communication failures that led to opposition, rebellion, and bloodshed, and the colonizer, because of more innovative technological advancements in many cases, generally came out the victor.

*Imperialism* is a branch of colonialism: those colonial powers who invaded for financial gain are generally referred to as imperialists. However, imperialism “is best understood not by trying to pin it down to a single semantic meaning but by relating its shifting meanings to historical processes” (Loomba 10). As Nicholas Harrison explains, “imperialists’ arguments for imperialism included the economic, of course, but were not limited to that sphere” (17). Loomba cites E. Boehmer who explains that imperialism “stretches back to a pre-capitalist past . . . . Some commentators in fact place imperialism as prior to colonialism” (10). For instance, many who were considered to be imperialists were from empires or royalty that were already well established financially, thus revealing an interest in wider cultural and social ventures, such as Britain under Queen Elizabeth I’s reign where the New World was used as a trading base which then led to the establishment of colonies (Loomba 10). In this and many other cases, imperialism gives way to colonialism and thus a mentality among the invaders that their culture is superior to native traditions. While colonialists believe they are improving the native well-being, imperialists go a step further and wish to gain something from the endeavor.

*Postcolonialism*, then, is the cultural reaction of a colonized people once colonialism and imperialism has taken root. Not surprisingly, colonized peoples resisted their colonizers both actively and passively. As Robert J. C. Young observes:

It was only towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, that such resistance developed into coherent political movements: for the peoples of most of the earth, much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century involved the long struggle and eventual triumph against colonial rule, often at enormous cost of life and resources....When national sovereignty had finally been achieved, each state moved from colonial to autonomous, postcolonial status. Independence! (3)

Young recognizes that the process of achieving independence is a complex one and emphasizes this point with a well-placed pun: “in many ways this represented only a beginning, a relatively minor move from direct to indirect rule, a shift from colonial rule and domination to a position not so much of independence as of being in-dependence” (3). Instead of achieving a divorce from the colonial mindset, many cultures are still dependent upon their colonizers, or at least upon the system that had replaced their native one. He is quick to point out, however, that throwing off a colonial power “remains an extraordinary achievement” and defines postcolonialism as “a politics and philosophy of activism that contests that disparity, and so continues in a new way the anti-colonial struggles of the past” (3-4). Native peoples, to regain their traditions and identity, can resist the colonizers and fight the inequality that accompanies colonialism and imperialism.

As stated above, colonialism and imperialism have occurred throughout the ages. Loomba explains that colonialism and imperialism are “not merely the expansion of various European powers into Asia, Africa or the Americas from the sixteenth century onwards; it has

been a recurrent and widespread feature of human history” (8). Loomba continues, illustrating examples of these concepts throughout history, including the conquering of the Middle East and China by the Mongols under Genghis Khan, the Aztec Empire’s vast expansion over Mexico from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, and the spread of the Ottoman Empire from western Turkey to the Balkans (8). These examples demonstrate the existence of colonialism and imperialism throughout history, and thus imply that peoples have been colonized and imperialized over time. One important concept of postcolonialism is the subaltern.

The term *subaltern* refers to the natives of a colonized land. Young draws on the work of Frantz Fanon when discussing a hybrid split existence, or “trying to live as two different, incompatible people at once. The negotiation between different identities, between the layers of different value systems...is part of the process of becoming white, changing your race and your class by assimilating the dominant culture. Except that, though you may assimilate white values, you never quite can become white enough” (23). The idea of “becoming white” is rhetorical. Encouraged to take on the values of the colonizing forces, the natives attempt to fit in with the dominant culture; however, because of their birth, they will never encompass the colonizer’s society entirely. Subaltern literature is particularly important as it explores these concepts and gives a voice to the colonized, illustrating the hardships and tribulations presented to those who are forced to fit in but are punished because they cannot by nature.

Postcolonialism, although seemingly a strange and modern approach to “The Knight’s Tale,” is applicable because of the social context in which it was written and the narrative content. The tale is a romance about fraternal strife over the desired affections of a woman. However, all of this occurs in a context where Theseus, Duke of Athens, invades and conquers several lands, reaping benefits from each conquest. The first instance yields him a wife, the

second fame and glory as well as prisoners of war. These circumstances are a metaphor through which Chaucer is attempting to illuminate England's history to his fourteenth-century reader. England was evolving socially and economically and coming into a new era of identification that was both promising and frustrating for many. This social evolution was critical for England, though; the country had a history of past invaders colonizing, the most recent instance having been the Norman Conquest in 1066, which reshaped the face of England after it had reached some level of identification with the Anglo-Saxon period. Chaucer, it seems, wished to draw attention to this historical event within the context of the tale. The purpose of this thesis is to explore how and why Chaucer would have been motivated to present "The Knight's Tale" in such a fashion.

The first chapter will consist of a detailed history of England. Through this history, I intend to focus on the instances of colonization of England, focusing on the Romans, the invasion of various tribes that produced the Anglo-Saxons, and finally the Norman Conquest. Each conquest will be accompanied with an explanation of its evident colonialism and yet why Chaucer decided to focus on the Norman Conquest as the inspiration behind the application of the concept. The second chapter will contain a close reading of both Statius' *The Thebaid* and Boccaccio's *Teseida*. The character of Theseus will be examined in relation to his rhetoric and his reactions to the colonial and imperial opportunities presented to him. The goal is to discern that Chaucer gained influence and inspiration for the plot of "The Knight's Tale" from these texts, but the instances of colonization and imperialism were his chosen emphasis. Finally, the third chapter will relate the instances presented by Chaucer of Theseus colonizing and imperializing both the Amazons and the Theban culture as represented by Arcite and Palamon. There will also be a close examination of the rhetoric utilized to create an imperialist Theseus as

well as an explanation of the Knight as the narrator of this specific tale and Chaucer as a subaltern author.

Every author injects a purpose into his or her works; in Chaucer's case, he scribed *The Canterbury Tales*, which tackles and successfully demonstrates various aspects to fourteenth-century English society and culture. Each tale helps reveal a different part of that culture, whether it is class relations, the treatment of women, or the behavior of ecclesiasts, among many others. "The Knight's Tale" is no different; through an intricate, well-woven web of poetry, Chaucer presents a romance that takes an old tale and makes it a new commentary on the evolution of the English identity as well as the response to this identification. Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" is a subaltern commentary on the colonization of England after the Norman Conquest.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE HISTORY OF ENGLAND IN “THE KNIGHT’S TALE”

Chaucer’s “The Knight’s Tale” displays a postcolonial mindset based upon the historical context of his time. The Normans had invaded several centuries prior to Chaucer and yet fourteenth-century England still exhibited aspects of being colonized. The language of the upper class was still French, while English was the language of the third estate. Chaucer’s decision to write in English was a display of postcolonialism, specifically subaltern resistance. However, Britain had seen several invasions throughout its history. This means, then, that the reader must attempt to decipher the opinions the author had on the historical, cultural, and social environment in which he was writing. “The Knight’s Tale,” then, must be examined through a social-commentary lens; that is, to grasp the overall purpose of the work, readers must undergo an examination of Chaucer’s England and how he may have perceived the social climate in which he lived and wrote *The Canterbury Tales*.

Completely understanding the environment Chaucer was living in would involve delving into England’s history, specifically the late Anglo-Saxon years and the Norman Conquest. These eras helped create the identity of fourteenth-century England. The political and literary shifts that occurred defined late medieval English society and allowed Chaucer to create a work culturally identifiable to his audiences, but at the same time, challenge them to re-examine the world in which they lived. From the Norman Conquest on, France and England took turns acting as colonizers and imperialists toward one another. For Chaucer’s audiences, any literary imperialistic implications would first and foremost be associated with the French. It seems, also, that Chaucer wished to illustrate the effects of what scholars today would consider imperialism and colonization that were present in Britain’s history. However, there were many instances of

this in Britain's past: the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons, and the Normans, each of which provided multiple alterations in politics and literature. This is evident throughout *The Canterbury Tales*; "The Knight's Tale" in particular focuses on the political and literary shifts that redefined England's identity from a tribal culture to a feudal system, then evolving to a multi-class system, familiar to Chaucer's audiences. Therefore, an examination of colonization in England's history, specifically by the Normans, is critical if one is to understand the implications in "The Knight's Tale."

Studying the culture and society before the year 1066 illustrates the extent of the Norman Conquest and colonization of Britain. Prior to this time, England saw a multitude of invasions and culturally altering conquests. As Rebecca Fraser discusses in her book *The Story of England*, the country essentially was formed by invaders. The Neolithic people, who were not very technologically advanced for the time, were followed by the Bronze Age people:

[These] were a stronger, larger race than Neolithic man, though still dark and swarthy, and they swiftly occupied England from the east coast of Yorkshire down to Surrey. This more sophisticated race is sometimes known as the Beaker People because of the drinking vessels found in their graves. They could make tools from bronze; they built Stonehenge; they buried their dead in individual round barrows. (4)

These people invaded and overturned the Neolithic people, establishing a more advanced way of life. However, they were soon to be overturned as well; Fraser continues, describing the next wave of invaders as the Iron Age Celts, Germanic tribes from mainland Europe who were driving east. They were capable of mining iron ore from the ground and traveled quickly by chariot. These Celts also differed from the previous invaders physically, having lighter skin and

eyes, and were generally taller than the Bronze Age people. They also spoke a different language, which split and became two different tongues. These two languages evolved to become modern day Welsh and Gaelic (4).

Since the latter tribes were Germanic, there were ties back to Gaul (Fraser 5). Many of the leaders of Gaul were using Britain as a place of sanctuary to escape Rome's punishment after exerting opposition; their refuge was not unseen by Caesar, though (Fraser 5). Caesar believed "that the Britons' powerful religious leaders, the Druids, were also helping to foment trouble . . . . Making Britannia a province of the Roman Empire would finally break the power of the Belgae, [rebels from what is now Belgium] whom Caesar was determined to destroy" (Fraser 5). Fraser also concludes that Caesar's motives were fueled by the assumption that "it would also usefully add to his reputation as a great man by extending the empire even to the edge of the known world. Expanding the empire's territories, rather than administering them, was how glory and power were won in the uniquely militaristic society of Caesar's Rome" (5). Thus, the Romans launched their first expedition in 55 B.C.E., one of many that established their presence in England (Fraser 5).

Although Julius Caesar first invaded, Britain did not belong to Rome until C.E. 43 when Emperor Claudius "needed a military conquest to secure his shaky throne . . . . By the end of the first century A.D. Britain had been completely integrated into the empire as the province Britannia" (Fraser 8). There was much resistance, at first, from the British Celts, who fought to chase the Romans off of the island; however, because of their lack of organization and disdain for other tribes, the British Celts were unable to unite and chase away the Romans, falling victim to Caesar's 'divide and conquer' method (Fraser 9). As Fraser mentions,

Claudius was careful to establish good relations with many British kings and queens. Another method of pacifying Britannia was immigration. Old soldiers started arriving in Britain from Italy to make a new life; as a reward for their thirty years of service to the Roman Empire they were given grants of British land in what were called “veterans colonies.” This was the traditional Roman way of turning a country into a Roman province. (Fraser 9)

Another example of Rome attempting to convert Britain into a province is provided by Donald R. Dudley and Graham Webster. They state that since the Romans had first landed on the island, “many changes had taken place, but the Romans always considered that the south-eastern part of Britain at least had been conquered. Now they were here to take over and make it into a province of the Empire” (31).

However, many of the Celts opposed the Romans. Although the Romans were superior, “some hope remained among many ancient Britons of re-establishing their independence and throwing the Romans off their island. The extent of the British tribes’ obsession with personal liberty would impress and amaze the sober Romans, who had to crush their many rebellions” (Fraser 8). One Briton who led a strong resistance was Queen Boudicca. In Guy de la Bédoyère’s *Roman Britain*, he discusses that the two Roman historians, Tacitus and Dio, “describe Boudica as the principal leader” of the powerful rebellion (37). John Wachter states that the rebellion was long coming: “strife inside the province was not unknown . . . the pressures which erupted in that year had been growing for some time. An abortive rebellion by the Iceni a decade or so earlier had been caused by [the Britons’] compulsory disarmament, when they clearly considered themselves still a free people” (27). Fraser explains Boudicca’s participation in the rebellion as a reaction to the destruction of her town, rape of her daughters,

and her own personal flogging. She garnered an army of over 100,000 Britons, destroying Roman establishments—including the Temple of Claudius—and marched on London. However, they failed to destroy military targets and were quickly put down by the Romans. Queen Boudicca, though, refused to be taken by the Romans, and committed suicide with her daughters by drinking poison (12-3). Although her troops were defeated, her resistance toward Roman forces indicates a strong sense of British identity, or personal pride, which was not easily destroyed. Unfortunately, “the Boudican revolt offered only chaos and disorder, and, not unnaturally, the bulk of the population found it easy enough to accept an alternative that offered stability, security and economic well-being” (Bédoyère 255).

To say that the Britons did not benefit from the Romans, though, is entirely untrue. Despite insurgences, such as the Boudiccan Rebellion,

By 84, the south had been quiet for a generation. Since the year 60 urban development seems to have been more coordinated, especially under Agricola, whom Tacitus credits with encouraging individual Britons and communities to build temples, forums and houses. Roman goods and coinage started to reach comparatively remote rural establishments. This is an extremely important social change. Before 43 trade was on a small scale, enjoyed by only a few in Britain.

By the 70s and 80s this had altered out of recognition. (Bédoyère 46)

Agriculture and transportation also began to change. Wachter discusses that because urban development was becoming more prominent, many communities were becoming less agriculturally sufficient; food had to be transported in to them (110). The road system was extended and, “coupled with increased use of river transport, beyond the original military needs for arterial routes, linked town and countryside, enabling goods to be more easily brought to the

new consumers” (Wacher 110). Although the original, tribal norm was disrupted by the Roman invasion, many benefits were reaped. However, “Rome’s cultural and military hold on Britain was never total, and in some areas no better than tenuous . . . [T]he end of Roman Britain was no more inevitable than the conquest in the first place. What brought it to a climax were particular events at a particular time, and accidents of fate” (Bédoyère 254). This occurred in 410 C.E., when,

The sack of Rome by Alaric and the Goths obliged Rome for the moment at least to wash her hands of the distant province. Honorius sent a formal letter to the British cities telling them that they could no longer depend on the Romans for their defense against the Picts. Henceforth they must rely on themselves.

Citizens should now carry weapons, which hitherto had been forbidden. Local British rulers sprang into existence to fill the power vacuum left by the collapse of the imperial administration. (Fraser 22-3)

Roman law began to become ignored “because there were no longer Roman officials to enforce them” (Fraser 23). Slowly the country began relapsing, allowing the next wave of invaders, the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Mercians, to easily slip in and impose their will upon the natives.

Although it existed before, this is the first evident display of colonization and imperialism in Britain’s history in which the reaction of the natives is well known. The opinions of the natives prior to this had not been recorded. In fact, this lack of recorded reaction is the definition of colonialism, which Ania Loomba, utilizing the *Oxford English Dictionary*, defines as “a settlement in a new country . . . a body of people who settle in a new locality, forming a community subject to or connected with their parent state; the community so formed, consisting of the original settlers and their descendants and successors, as long as the connection with the

parent state is kept up” (7). She continues, explaining that the definition “avoids any reference to people other than the colonizers, people who might already have been living in those places where colonies were established. Hence [the definition] evacuates the word ‘colonialism’ of any implication of an encounter between peoples, or of conquest and domination” (7). Since there is little to no mention of native reaction, or any intention of capitalistic gain by the colonizers, the waves of invasions prior to the Romans could be considered colonialism as opposed to imperialism. Also, if there were records kept by the natives they have not been uncovered or they have been lost throughout history. As of this point, the only history of this time period was kept by the Romans.

However, because of the insurgencies and revolts against the Romans as well as Caesar’s intent, the term cannot be applied during the time of Roman occupation. Loomba describes the situation as imperialism; although discussing modern instances of this, she states:

If imperialism is defined as a political system in which an imperial centre governs colonized countries, then the granting of political independence signals the end of empire, the collapse of imperialism. However, if imperialism is primarily an economic system of penetration and control of markets, then political changes do not basically affect it, and may even redefine the term as in the case of “American imperialism” which wields enormous military and economic power across the globe but without direct political control. (11)

Rome’s evacuation of Britain did end the colonialism present, but did not signal the end of the empire; rather, it was an indication of a greater concern for the protection of the mother country than a “veteran colony,” as explained by Fraser. This could be considered an imperialistic invasion, then, as Rome attained land to form a retreat for retired soldiers. However, Loomba’s

description of “American imperialism” epitomizes Rome’s economic and military presence in Britain at the time. For Britons at the time, “urban institutions and facilities . . . would have been unthinkable before the invasion . . . their world had now become overrun with forts and roads that carved up the landscape, and transformed it into part of an economic and social system that stretched to Egypt and beyond. . . . The most obscure locations had access to the Roman economic system” (Bédoyère 254). According to Peter Salway, Rome’s empire during the occupation not only stretched to Egypt, but also “embraced the lands of Aquitania, a large and rich region stretching from the lower Loire to the Garonne” (315). They also instilled an economic system in Britain. However, because of the vast Roman presence in many regions across Europe and Northern Africa, “Roman intervention tended to be in terms of punitive expeditions” (Salway 315). Although there was a distinct Roman ideal that invaded its way into Britain, there was minimal political control.

While Rome’s presence does not entirely fit into one of Loomba’s imperialist distinctions, it does dabble in both. The imperialism is especially evident in the narrative that Rome establishes for Britain. For instance, the story of Boudicca “exists only in the Roman record, and we have no idea what the Britons thought of her” (Bédoyère 38). Tacitus recorded much of Rome’s occupancy and provides the “best account . . . supreme among historians from his dramatic qualities” (Dudley and Webster 46). However, his vocalization of events puts Britain’s history in the hands of the colonizers. Leela Gandhi illustrates this argument from both sides of the spectrum. Karl Marx, she states, created an argument for European colonization because “the emergence and spread of European capitalist or bourgeois society [is] the universal precondition for social revolution” (Gandhi 71). His case continues, focusing in particular on the British occupation of India. Gandhi quotes Marx, who states that “England has to fulfill a double

role in India: one destructive, the other regenerative—the annihilation of the Asiatic society and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia” (72). Edward Said, though, disagrees with this statement, suggesting that “Marx follows the insidious logic of the colonial civilizing mission in postulating Europe as the hyperreal master-narrative, which will pronounce the redemption of poor Asia” (Gandhi 72). While seemingly unrelated—as Marx and Said are discussing more modern examples—Rome’s scribing of Britain’s history creates a master-narrative. Although Tacitus’s style was similar to that of the Greek tragedians in that he “did not care for many actors on the stage,” the Britons’ history was being told by a Roman (Dudley and Webster 46). In some instances, pertaining to Boudicca in particular, Dio “expands the arguments found in Tacitus into a forcible-feeble speech of great length, which he puts into the mouth of Boudicca on the occasion of the hosting, adding to his account certain details which must come from other sources. It cannot be said that Dio contributes much to our understanding of the British case” (Dudley and Webster 54). The constructed history of the colonized state is skewed to create a dramatic illustration of events which do not encapsulate fact. Also, this account is not provided by the Britons, but rather by their imperialistic colonizers. In the fourteenth-century, as today, many cultures were literate and capable of scribing their own history. To have an imperial culture create accounts of native history seems odd and unrepresentative in that there is no voice for the natives. Although an important invasion in British history—as it established a history of Britain during this time—Chaucer could not have used it as sole inspiration for “The Knight’s Tale,” although some inspiration was gained from this event. The colonized characters in his tale have a voice and are active characters in the story, as opposed to secondary, given a role by their colonizers. This will be discussed in greater detail later on.

The next instance of invasion in British history occurred following the Roman evacuation. Since the country was left with a power vacuum, “the combined effect of the attacks by the Saxons and the decay of towns meant that the inhabitants of Britain were soon living in a far more primitive fashion than their grandparents had” (Fraser 24). Beginning in 447 C.E.,

Waves of Germanic tribesmen moved over the next fifty years Britain in such numbers that they pushed the Romano-British out of their native lands into the west. Instead of being content with their own small kingdom, these Saxons under their dynamic leaders . . . started seizing more areas of England for themselves . . . . By 527 a new wave of Saxons had gone east of London and called the land they settled the country of the East Saxons – Essex. Meanwhile the Angles . . . seized what would become known as the country of the East Angles, or East Anglia.

(Fraser 24-5)

The Germanic tribesmen swooped in and began taking advantage of the delicate situation in Britain: “by about 460, the deRomanization of Britain had become very noticeable to contemporaries abroad. Much of the country had been entirely taken over by the Saxon tribes, and all feared the worst for its former inhabitants” (Fraser 26). To make matters worse, Janet L. Nelson reveals that when Britain went to Rome for help defending against the Picts, tribesmen from the North, the Romans refused. The Britons turned then to the Saxons, who were considered mercenaries according to Roman sources, for assistance; this ended in disaster, though, when the Saxons sided with the Picts and the Britons fell, becoming victim to the razing of cities and farmland (27).

Hope did begin to blossom when a man of Roman heritage named Ambrosius began to lead the Britons against the Saxons (Nelson 27). According to Bédoyère, in 493 Ambrosius

Aurelianus and his troops gained victory at Mount Badon; this, however, only kept the Saxons at bay for a short time before they started up their conquests of Britain once again (261).

Nelson explains that mass immigration and conquest allowed the continental “barbarians” to dominate the population of the island (28). Bede wrote “that the immigrants were ‘Angles, Saxons, and Jutes’ from north Germany” (Nelson 28). The immigrants from the continent were beginning to inject themselves and their ideologies into the lifestyle of the Britons. So much, in fact, that history finds the Celts vanishing from the forefront. Nelson addresses several assumptions as to how this would have happened:

The hypothesis of extensive Anglo-Saxon intermarriage with Celtic women is another matter; but it would help answer the question of what happened to the Celts, without excluding the possibility of widespread Celtic enslavement. The Anglo-Saxon word for “slave” is *weal*—“Briton.” Given current estimates of the population c.400 at 4-5 million, it seems highly unlikely that Celts could have been erased from the landscape by genocide or whole scale expulsion. Why would relatively small numbers of fifth-century incomers have created a blank slate when they could have maintained a substantial workforce on the land? Anglo-Saxon social dominance could have imposed linguistic change in the long run, leaving Old English, with virtually no Celtic loanwords, the universal language except in Wales and the south-west by the ninth-century. (29)

It appears the Celts were overpowered by the strength of the invading forces and either became enslaved by the Anglo-Saxons, bred in with them, or both.

With the “barbarian” invasions came political establishment in Britain. Many kingdoms were established over England, Scotland and Wales; England was split between the Saxons,

Mercians, and two tribes of Angles. The Saxons also had the Scottish Lowlands and finally conquered Wales in the ninth-century. The southern border of Wales belonged to the West Saxons, thus earning the name Wessex (Fraser 29). Originally, the Anglo-Saxons functioned under a tribal system similar to that of the Celts, but the “political change in the fifth and sixth centuries have postulated very small territorial lordships . . . competing for land and manpower, with the less successful gradually being incorporated in larger, more stable, and more internally differentiated blocs” (Nelson 31). These kingdoms helped establish a more solid foundation for Britain to function upon, despite still being divided.

The unification of the kingdoms started to come when the Vikings launched numerous campaigns in hopes to conquer the island. The Vikings “were Danes from Denmark, whose ancestors had moved into the districts left empty by the Angles when they went to England in the fifth century” (Fraser 55). The first waves were small, but as time passed—and the Danish monarchy collapsed—the size and force of the invasions grew (Fraser 55). Due to civil war in 865, and attempts to pay off the Vikings as opposed to resisting their aggression, the Danes were able to move onto English soil and cause mayhem. R.C. Smail describes the situation, explaining,

The Danish settlement in England was made possible by [military success] in the years which followed its first appearance in 865. During this period that army was on a permanent footing. For this reason it enjoyed an overwhelming advantage against English peoples, who were not able to keep a force continuously in the field, and many of its greatest successes were achieved when there was no effective opposition. (131)

Their intimidating presence had “some aristocrats, and potential ‘kings’, willing to collaborate with them. Some of the ‘army’ leaders, at least hit on the idea of settlement; and the density of Scandinavian place-names in eastern and northern England shows immigrant lords in control of extensive territories and, less certainly, immigrant cultivators on the land” (Nelson 44). The Vikings’ domination tactics allowed them to invade and establish posts on British soil.

In 871 C.E., King Alfred of Wessex ascended the throne, creating a change in success (Nelson 44). Militarily, Alfred had an advantage over the Danes: his kingdom was far enough away from popular Danish invasion spots and establishments that he had time to assemble his forces and strategies (Fraser 45). He was also granted some leniency when “[dynastic problems and civil wars] drew “the great army” . . . across the Channel. In the 880s, Alfred had a breathing-space” (Fraser 45). Alfred and his brother organized such a strong resistance against the Vikings that it has “been called ‘the first clearly recorded campaign in England’ and his reign is certainly the earliest to reveal an English king who appreciated the nature of his military problems, who sought a solution by the intelligent application of his available military resources, and who, when these resources were proved defective, reorganized or modified them” (Smail 130). Another strategy that contributed to Alfred’s success was his fortification; a list was drawn up that provided “a list of fortified *burhs* in Wessex [and] sets out the arrangements for their defense in time of war. The inhabitants of neighbouring districts were responsible for providing members of the garrison on the basis of the number of hides at which each village was assessed” (Smail 131-2). This was one example of how Alfred attempted to unite not only his kingdom but also nearby establishments.

This continued into the next generation as well; F.T. Wainwright explains Alfred’s daughter, Æthelflæd, was married to Ealdorman Æthelred of Mercia in order to solidify the

bonds between Wessex and Mercia (55). When Æthelred died, she took over control of Mercia and was well received by the Mercians as the new leader (Wainwright 56). Smail expounds on this, explaining “with her own lands firmly secured, she was able to co-operate with her brother, Edward the Elder, in his reduction of the Danelaw” (132). Together with her brother Edward, Æthelflæd “planned and worked for the destruction of the independent Danish armies in England, and their collaboration was highly successful . . . building [additional] fortresses to provide bases for operations against the Danes and, at the same time, to protect their territories from sporadic Danish raids” (Wainwright 57). Since she was from Wessex and her husband from Mercia, her marriage was used to unite the kingdoms to create a stronger force against the Vikings. Because of this union, Alfred had some amount of lordship power over the kingdom, though not to the extent of being called their king (Nelson 48).

Rome was considered an imperialistic incident while the Anglo-Saxon invasions are evidence of just colonialism in Britain. As discussed previously, Rome used Britain as a veteran colony for retired soldiers, thus creating a situation in which the natives were influenced by Roman traditions and ideals, but were never conquered in terms of identity. While there were imperialistic overtones, with the land gain, there was still distinction between the two groups. The Anglo-Saxon invasions differ; the Celts were slowly pushed out of existence by intermarriage, enslavement, or both. Will Rea discusses how the use of anthropology helps expose the colonization of a land, the best representation of this being in written form (183). The two most prominent authors writing on the topic of the Anglo-Saxon invasion were Bede and Gildas. Gildas was “the only contemporary ‘source’ [and] wrote invective not history” (Nelson 27). Even then, the earliest he could have been writing was c. 470, making the Saxon settlement as early as c.420. Gildas was not concerned with exact dates, but Bede was “as he struggled in

the 720s to construct a fifth/sixth-century prelude to his story of the English Church. Bede took Gildas to imply a dating of ‘the coming of the Saxons’ to c.450; but Bede had no other or more reliable source against which to check this” (Nelson 28). Since Gildas turned history into a dramatic stage and he was not entirely a contemporary of the invasion, the effects of post-colonialism—that is, according to Robert J.C. Young, “colonized people [contesting] this domination through many forms of active and passive resistance” (3)—are lost from this period. This is because although colonization became more intense with the Anglo-Saxons, literature cannot tell the actual reactions of the Celtic people. The most historians have to go on is assumption; Fraser speculates:

Under the onslaught of the Germanic tribes the only hope for the Romano-British was to abandon their villas and their cities. As the Saxons set fire to their houses and murdered those who fled, some Roman Britons buried their family silver beneath their cellars, thinking that one day when the invaders had been expelled they would be able to come back for it. Some of that silver may now be seen in the British Museum, having been found centuries later, for its original owners never returned. (27)

Archaeology has given a better view on the colonization, but even then it is not a reliable voice for the Celtic people. Rea argues that anthropology “insists upon a double order of relationship, a relationship that oscillates between, on the one hand, a sidedness within the Western academy and, on the other, a practical engagement with the lives and stories of people in other places” (183). In the case of the Anglo-Saxon invasion, events are reported by later historians or the facts are dramatized. Chaucer could not have used this invasion as his basis for “The Knight’s Tale” because there is no response from the colonized side. Although Chaucer more than likely

had access to historical records from this time, there is still a lack in voice from the colonized. The tale reflects the concerns of the subaltern, which does not occur with this invasion. It does not inspire the main plot but as with the Roman Invasion some influences from this historical example are evident in “The Knight’s Tale.”

The next few hundred years of Anglo-Saxon Britain’s existence consisted of holding off Viking attacks and uniting the kingdoms. Several *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entries report increased defeats of the Danes; one from the Parker Chronicle in 894 explains that while many Anglo-Saxon lives were lost, there was a “very great slaughter” of the Danes and the remaining invaders retreated, “saved by flight” (Garmonsway 87-8). However, the pillars of strength established by Alfred the Great began to weaken when Æthelred II was crowned king. Sir Frank Stenton explains that Edward, Æthelred’s half brother, was murdered, leaving Æthelred to “reign in an atmosphere of suspicion which destroyed the prestige of the Crown” (373). Because of this,

[He] behaved like a man who is never sure of himself. His ineffectiveness in war, which is very remarkable in a king of his line, his acts of spasmodic violence, and the air of mistrust which overhangs his relations with his nobles, are signs of trouble which lies deeper than mere incapacity for government. They suggest the reaction of a weak king to the consciousness that he had come to power through what his subjects regarded as the worst crime committed among the English peoples since their first coming to Britain. (Stenton 374)

The kingdom began to weaken, creating a vulnerable country. Aware of this, Æthelred attempted to establish foreign relations with Normandy by marrying his second-wife, Emma of Normandy, although “it is doubtful whether the marriage did much to clarify Anglo-Norman

relations . . . . It was through events which no one could have foreseen in 1002 that the marriage became important in English history. It entitled Æthelred to hospitality in Normandy when at last the Danes had conquered England” (Stenton 379). From 1002 until his death in 1014, the Danish leader Swein launched several campaigns against Anglo-Saxon England (Stenton 386). Fraser explains when Æthelred realized Swein’s intimidating presence was attempting to establish itself in England—and as a weak and non-confrontational king—he fled to Normandy to stay with his wife and two sons. Swein began to establish himself as sole monarch of England, until he died suddenly in 1016, giving England and Denmark to his son Cnut. Æthelred also died in 1016, leaving his son Edmund Ironside to take up his legacy. After several matches with Cnut, the two split the kingdom evenly. However, when Edmund died in late 1016, Cnut was chosen by the ealdormen of Wessex, thus becoming the sole ruler of Britain (76).

It appears as though this example is another incursion worth investigating. Another invasion surely implies colonization and imperialism. However, according to A. Gordon Smith, Cnut had married Emma of Normandy, Æthelred’s widow, who bore him Harthacnut. After Cnut’s death, and confusion as to who would inherit the throne, Harthacnut became King in 1040 (36-8). However, he only ruled two years, taking ill and dying at the age of twenty-four; these two years are haunted by “several minor atrocities,” resulting in the end of the Danish house in England (Smith 38). The short-lived rule of the Danes does not fall under the label of colonialism due to the manner in which England was ruled. Nelson states that “Cnut worked with the Anglo-Saxon aristocracy, and his patronage of Winchester was an adroitly conciliatory gesture. Certainly there were changes of form: ealdormen now were called earls. But late twentieth-century historians tend to see in Cnut’s regime the substantial power of the late Anglo-Saxon state, not its decline” (57-8). Since the colonized are typically forced to take on a new

rule or new identity, Cnut's Invasion does not qualify as a significant example as he worked with the Anglo-Saxons and his Danish dynasty crumbled after his death.

The importance to England's history, however, did not come from the invasion but rather its aftermath. After Harthacnut's death, "the natural successor to the throne of England was Edward, the surviving son of Æthelred and Emma" (Smith 40). Edward the Confessor was "half-Norman by birth and wholly so in upbringing, tastes and predilections, [and] had naturally little affection for the nation which had been content to accept so long the usurping dynasty" (Smith 40). Since he had preference over Norman culture and lifestyle, Edward placed his Norman courtiers in positions of power in England, both in Church and State, which caused jealousy amongst English statesmen (Smith 42). Tensions began to grow between the Norman and English courtiers, especially when Edward "seriously considered Duke William as a potential heir" (Nelson 58). While strain was evident between the Normans and English, one English family rose to power during Edward's rule: the Godwins of Wessex (Nelson 59). Edith, the daughter of Earl Godwin, married Edward and while the Domesday Book "shows that over the kingdom as a whole King Edward's lands were more, and more valuable, than anyone else's . . . the lands of Godwin's sons together were even more extensive and more valuable than the king's" (Nelson 59). Harold Godwinson, Earl Godwin's successor and brother-in-law to Edward, "emerged leading magnate of Edward's last years" (Nelson 60). When King Edward died on January 5, 1066, Harold Godwinson was crowned King a few days later, as Edward, "it is said, had on death-bed signified his wish that Harold should succeed him" (Smith 48).

This infuriated Duke William of Normandy. Smith describes that several years previous to Edward's death Harold was caught in a storm which drove him onto Normandy's shore. William received him with open arms but took the opportunity to make Harold swear that he

would do his best to guarantee William's succession to England's throne in return for the hospitality (46). The problem arose that the "English Crown, as it is often pointed out, was elective, and it was not in the power of Harold, or anyone else, to grant away the succession; on the other hand, William knew well enough the influence which the Earl of Wessex could wield" (Smith 46). Upon hearing about Harold's coronation, William became enraged, and according to David Carpenter, claimed Edward had named him heir in 1051 (68). When this claim was ignored, Carpenter explains that William raised an army and sailed across the Channel, arriving 28 September, and set up base in Hastings, burning and pillaging establishments in hopes to draw Harold's army to the coast. This proved successful and on 14 October, 1066 the Battle of Hastings occurred. The Normans, with their large numbers and superior strategy, conquered Harold and his army (73). To illustrate his determination for the throne,

[When] London Archbishops Stigand and Ealdred, Earls Edwin and Morcar and the townsmen rejected William's demands for submission and nominated Edgar Atheling, who was with them, as king... William began a long circular march round the city burning and pillaging as he went. Edgar was powerless to resist him as he had been earlier to resist Harold. When William reached Wallingford, Stigand came to him and swore allegiance; he was followed at Berkhamstead by Archbishop Ealdred, Bishop Wulfstan of Worcester, and Edgar himself, as well as by Edwin and Morcar, with citizens of London and many others. On Christmas Day, 1066 William was crowned king in Westminster Abbey. (Carpenter 73)

This was only the beginning of the Norman Conquest of England and William the Conqueror's strong and Norman-influenced rule.

Once William was crowned King of England, the country was open to Norman settlers. To the Englishman, while appearing just to be “French”, “beneath the veneer of his acquired culture there still lurked many of the Viking characteristics. The French-speaking Normans had all the warlike vigour as well as the unscrupulous cunning of his ancestor the Norseman” (Smith 61). The English, although also derived from Germanic tribes, had protected their shores from the Vikings for many years. The similar attributes the Normans possessed most likely intimidated the English. However, the Normans injected themselves into English culture. When compared to the conquest of Cnut, Cnut “rewarded his followers with money rather than with land. The Conqueror chose land, perhaps inevitably given Norman expectations, and thus set off the vicious cycle of rebellion and deprivation which ended with the elimination of so many English landholders . . . . The Conquest was, therefore, devastating” (Carpenter 79-80). Most English landowners were “dispossessed, including virtually all the aristocracy” (Carpenter 79). The Normans had begun to colonize and imperialize England. This was particularly evident with the peasant class:

The Normans had come to exploit the peasantry, not replace them. The overwhelming bulk of the English population thus remained in place after the Conquest, if battered down by more exacting lords. The latter, often absentees, strove to get their income in cash rather than in kind . . . . Reorganization of manors also led to a substantial decline in the numbers of sokemen and free peasants. Peasants labored on the new castles and fled or starved to death when a Norman army burnt its way through the countryside. Towns too suffered. Much of York was wrecked in the great rebellions of 1069-70 while elsewhere houses were pulled down to make way for the new castles and cathedrals. There was

some immigration. At York, 145 properties once held by Anglo-Scandinavians were taken over by Frenchmen. There were French quarters too at Norwich and Northampton. But probably the great bulk of the town populations remained English. (Carpenter 78)

This exploitation of peasants helped open and solidify the feudal system in England, described above. William granted the “exacting lords” mentioned by Carpenter *feoda*, which is explained by Margaret Hastings as land, office or “fiefs” “for past and future military service. The result was the creation of the new class of men—a fief-holding or ‘feudal’ class, who neither worked in the fields nor supervised those who did. Their function in society was to fight and to rule those who produced the food and other necessities of existence” (39). However, the system was already there, just in a disorganized fashion. William did not “introduce an entirely new thing into the land, but [established] order and uniformity in what was already there” (Smith 64). By doing this, the Normans were in a position of economic supremacy while the English struggled to maintain some holding of power.

Since the Normans had established their dominance in England, language and literature began to shift. Smith points out that when the Normans established their dominance in the aristocracy, there was “a corresponding change in language. When an Englishman became practically synonymous with a member of a socially inferior class, his language disappeared completely from polite society” (63). While William Calin contests the theory that French was the language of the upper-class for the better part of three centuries, he does not deny that the language did make its way into England. However, he is not convinced:

[F]or the upper classes and educated elites, French was always an acquired language. The influx of continental Francophones throughout the Middle Ages

caused social tensions and political resentment. They also brought native-speaking competence. The exchange of children between courts in a general Francophone ambiance would also contribute to language use . . . . Anglo-Normans apologized for the quality of their French, [and] continental Frenchmen mocked the English. (5)

Regardless, Calin does contest that “whatever the linguistic condition of French in the British Isles, spoken or written, native or acquired, in the twelfth century or the fourteenth, the facts of French literary presence and dominance are unquestionable” (6). This language-differentiation-by-class made things particularly difficult when dealing with the legal system, as discussed by Jonathan Phillips, who states “those presiding over the court spoke French, the legal process was in Latin, and the witnesses and jurors spoke English” (190). Calin recalls an example during the hearings for the canonization of Bishop Thomas Cantilupe after 1300: “of the clerks, one-half testified in Latin, one-half in French; lay people from the town testified one-half in French and one-half in English; lay people from the country testified ninety per cent in English” (5). Although French had infused itself with high culture and was made the language of polite-society it was not the dominant language; English was.

Since French became the language of the higher societal echelon, words began to cross-over into English. As Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable point out, “although this influx of French words was brought about by the victory of the Conqueror and by the political and social consequences of that victory, it was neither sudden nor immediately apparent. Rather it began slowly and continued with varying tempo for a long time” (164). To the Normans, “English, representing a culture that was regarded as inferior, had more to gain from French, and there were other factors involved. The number of French words that poured into English was

unbelievably great. There is nothing comparable to it in the previous or subsequent history of the language” (Baugh and Cable 164). Baugh and Cable also mention that the infusion of French into English came in two waves: before and after 1250. The “borrowings of the first stage differ from those of the second in being much less numerous, in being more likely to show peculiarities of Anglo-Norman phonology, and, especially, in the circumstances that brought about their introduction” (164). The words that appear before 1250, “roughly 900 in number,” relate to nobility, literature, and the church (Baugh and Cable 164). For those that appear after 1250, things shifted:

The conditions under which French words had been making their way into English were supplemented by a new and powerful factor: those who had been accustomed to speak French were turning increasingly to the use of English. Whether to supply deficiencies in the English vocabulary or in their own imperfect command of that vocabulary, or perhaps merely yielding to a natural impulse to use a word long familiar to them and to those they addressed, the upper classes carried over into English an astonishing number of common French words. In changing from French to English they transferred much of their governmental and administrative vocabulary, their ecclesiastical, legal, and military terms, and their familiar words of fashion, food, and social life, the vocabulary of art, learning and medicine. (Baugh and Cable 164-5)

Not only was French invading the land and the culture, but also the language.

The literature also shifted to French. George K. Anderson states that the “years immediately following the Norman Conquest witnessed as a matter of course the triumph of French and Latin literature over vernacular literature” (79). He explains that “nearly all types of

literature of the age were written in England by Frenchmen or by writers in French” (Anderson 79). New genres were introduced to English literature such as the Breton lai, the romance, and the fabliau (Anderson 79-80). A large amount of “French literature [was] being produced in England from the beginning of the twelfth century, addressed to English patrons and directed toward meeting their special tastes and interests” (Baugh and Cable 115). Patronage made these French originated genres popular as opposed to previous English genres such as epics like *Beowulf*.

This example of colonialism and imperialism is different than that of the Romans and the Anglo-Saxons. Although England did shift with the previous invasions, the Norman Conquest was unique in that things changed but to a culture that was similar to what was already in place. Nelson explains that when William conquered England “[he] quite literally took Harold’s place . . . linguistic difference or distinctive haircuts were of relatively small account . . . it explains why William, though he spoke French not English, could realistically hope to be accepted as king of England, and why his *Franci*, in time, would come to think of England as a second home” (60). As aforementioned, the feudal system was essentially intact; the Normans simply organized it to work effectively, by establishing castle systems (Carpenter 78). It seems as though there was very little differentiation between England before the Conquest and England after.

However, the Norman Conquest was imperial based upon the treatment of the economy, the people, and the language. As explained previously, a perfected feudal system was established, thus illustrating a capitalistic intention by the Normans to gain from the invasion. Since the aristocracy shifted to a Norman dominated echelon, the identity of polite society also shifted. David Richards explains that colonialism “has been a major engine driving an accelerated pace of change, forcing different cultures into new forms, ‘unfixing’ what was

thought to be solid, and creating new identities” (19). For instance, Fraser explains that when Cnut was in power, Saxon families had opportunities to come into prominence. He also strove to differentiate himself from other Vikings and embrace English traditions, especially in Christendom (77). The Normans, though similar in many respects, strove to differentiate themselves. Young explains that language under a colonial setting is set in a hierarchy: “the colonial language becomes culturally more powerful, devaluing the native language as it is brought into its domain, domesticated, and accommodated” (140). Susan Bassnett goes on to clarify that:

Languages evolve in different contexts, and each language reflects the world-view of the culture that uses it. Literatures produced in different languages also vary radically from one another, having emerged through diverse sets of norms and expectations. Forms and genres tend to be culture-specific and variable through time, so, in addition to the impossibility of precise linguistic equivalence, there is rarely literary equivalence either, and temporal divides can be as great as geographical ones. (79)

The language and literature of England pre-Conquest altered once the Normans invaded because English was seen as weak and inferior; this was “determined by factors that are essentially political rather than aesthetic, just as perceptions of languages as major and minor are also ideologically determined. Power relationships are at the root of such perceptions and central to any discussion of culture and power is the role of language” (Bassnett 81-2). The only reason French was superior to English was because it was the language of the King.

Even though English was not the popular language of society or literature for several centuries, Chaucer still decided to publish his works in the language. He wrote “for the English

people in English . . . and that in so doing he laid the foundations of a national literary language” (Coulton 5). In doing so, he was writing in a post-colonial context. Susan Bassnett references Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin who explain that the “crucial function of language is as a medium of power. Writing back in a postcolonial context to the centre of power therefore involves a reappraisal of the dominant language, and a reclaiming of linguistic alternatives, whether as variants of that dominant language, or as totally different systems . . . language carries the values of a people” (82). Since Chaucer decided to write *The Canterbury Tales* in English, it can be assumed that what he was writing about pertains to the values of the English people. Also, because he was one of, if not the, first to write in English after the Norman Conquest, Chaucer was giving power back to his language and thus his people.

Chaucer was born and grew up in the late Middle Ages; according to G.G. Coulton, he was “probably born about the year 1340, in his father’s London dwelling” which was described as a tenement (15). His father, John Chaucer, was involved with “extensive mercantile operations, especially as [a vintner]” (Coulton 12). As discussed by F.J. Snell, the name Chaucer has French origins and suggested an occupation of lower social status, like that of a chafe-wax (122). However, John Chaucer was also employed by King Edward III and acted as the “deputy to the King’s Butler in the Port of Southampton” (Snell 123). Although his last name suggested a lower status, John Chaucer rose up and held a position of power in the court. This was not a normal tendency, though. Fraser states:

[The] English class system always surprised foreign observers by its flexibility, with people moving swiftly up and down the scale through marriage and successful careers. In particular, the merchant’s daughter had become an instrument for increasing the family fortune, as the merchant class benefited from

expanding trade, improved education and better health and as the population and the economy at last recovered from the effects of the Black Death. (209-10)

In most instances in Europe, class shifting due to marriage and career-building was not typical. However, England was different because of the diminishing of the feudal system because of the Black Death as in 1348 “it killed an astonishing one-fifth of the population within the year” (Fraser 190). Fraser continues to explain:

The shortage of labour undermined the system of serfdom or villeinage introduced by the Normans which forbade families to move from their local lords’ domain. So many landowners were desperate for men to work their fields that a “no questions asked” policy towards runaway serfs was widely opened, and by the end of the fourteenth century the institution was in tatters. (190)

The merchant class was emerging and the British economy was identifying itself as something new and different. The culture of late fourteenth century England appears to have very little in common with the Roman, Anglo-Saxon, or Norman England. However, Chaucer’s England was coming out of the effects of the Norman Conquest; French and English lines were melding together and the monarchy was identified as English. The feudal system was withering away. It appears there was little evidence of a Norman presence, save for the language and literature.

The most evident sign of England’s post-colonial status is its literature and language. As explained by Baugh and Cable previously, many governmental, administrative, ecclesiastical, law, fashion, food, societal, art, learning and medicine words came from French (165-8). By Chaucer’s time, there were “nearly a thousand French adjectives in Middle English” (Baugh and Cable 169). English, because it was regarded as socially inferior, was not the language of the upper class and was thus not the language of literature. However, it was the language of a good

portion of the populace. Since most of the population was below the aristocracy, they had no reason to participate in polite society, thus reducing the exposure to French. Even those in the higher estates were not native speakers of the language. Aforementioned, Calin explains that most people in the higher estates after the Conquest acquired the ability to speak French (5). By Chaucer's lifetime, although French was still spoken, it was starting to die out. Coulton explains by 1340,

Legislation ceased to recognize any distinction of races: all natives of England were alike Englishmen. Sixteen years later it was first enacted that cases in the Sheriff's Courts of London should be pleaded in English; seven years later, again, this became in theory the language not only of the King's law courts, but also to some extent of Parliament . . . . [E]ven before this the French language must have been in full decay among us, for at the Parliament which Edward III called in 1337 to advise him about declaring war on France, the ambassador of Robert d'Artois took care to speak "in English, in order to be understood of all folk, for a man ever knoweth better what he would say and propose in the language of his childhood than in any other." . . . . In 1362 English superseded French as the spoken language of the law courts; next year the Chancellor opened Parliament in an English speech and in 1385 Trevisa complained that boys in grammar schools "know no more French than their left heel". (3-4)

English was beginning to make its way into polite society, as well as government and everyday conversation. However, French was still around in society even though it was being weeded out: "French still kept the upper hand in Parliament till about fifty years after Chaucer's death, nor

did the statutes cease altogether to be published in that language until the reign of Henry VIII” (Coulton 4).

French was still the dominant language, even though the Normans had for the most part intermarried with the English. In fact, by Henry I’s death in 1135, many barons were half-Norman (Fraser 120). Those with Norman ancestry continued to marry the English, and as time went on, the first estate projected a hybrid of Norman and English mentalities. However, there was still resistance toward the French, even until the fourteenth-century. Edward III, the King of England (1327-1377) during most of Chaucer’s life, is best known for the Hundred Years War (1337-1453) in which he and his son achieved many victories against France (Fraser 189). This conflict, or rather series of conflicts, began as a response to the dispute over Gascony, France’s support of Scotland, and eventually escalated with Edward’s pursuit of the disputed French crown. As W. M. Ormrod explains,

Since the treaty of Paris of 1259, the kings of England had been forced to acknowledge that they held [Gascony] as a fief of the French crown. The reluctance of both Edward I and Edward II to accept this personal and political subjugation had already provoked seizures of their French lands in 1294 and 1324. So from his earliest years, Edward III was conditioned to the idea of an Anglo-French struggle. (17)

This mentality of a predisposed Anglo-French struggle did not improve once France decided to sympathize with the Scottish national resistance. Fraser explains that England and Scotland, previously, had lived in peace for many years until 1286 when King Alexander III of Scotland passed away, leaving his granddaughter Margaret as the only heir to the throne. When she passed away four years later, debates arose as to who would ascend the throne. Thirteen

individuals stated their claim, John Balliol and Robert the Bruce the strongest of the candidates. Edward I, King of England at the time, was elected to name the new king, but would only do so after all Scottish nobility swore fealty and named him the overlord of Scotland. The nobility obliged, and Edward I selected John Balliol as the new King of Scotland. However, tensions arose when war broke out between France and England over Gascony. As Edward I defended the land, King Philip IV of France sent agents over to Scotland to rouse rebellions against the English. The threat was so strong, a series of treaties known as the Auld Alliance were signed in 1293 to secure a link between Scotland and France against their mutual enemy England (180-1).

These tensions continued through to the reign of Edward III. Ormrod discusses that he attempted to strike compromises with France in 1331, declaring,

[He was] himself willing to perform liege homage for the duchy of Gascony and had made an incognito trip across the Channel to discuss his continental possessions and a possible marriage alliance with France. But the deposition of David II [King of Scotland] inevitably changed the situation. In the spring of 1334 Philip VI took David into his protection and announced that the Scottish succession must be included on the agenda in any future Anglo-French talks. Every warlike move made by Edward III towards Scotland now brought his country one step closer to open hostility with France. (18)

This situation was made even more difficult for Edward III as France continued to reclaim Gascony. Fraser explains that France continued attempts to unite all of its territories under the French crown. Edward III's attention was divided between the Scottish border and Gascony. However, once a struggle over Flanders arose—"England's biggest trading partner"—tensions boiled over and led to the Battle of Sluys, which is generally regarded as the beginning marker of

the Hundred Years War. The battle was won by the English and “secured the freedom of the Channel for the next thirty years” (192). By doing so,

Edward III could afford to make a truce with the French, though he returned to England to raise more money for a new land campaign against them. The war meanwhile had shifted into a game with higher stakes. Through his mother Isabella, Edward III had a strong claim to the French throne since Isabella’s brother King Charles IV had died without male heirs. The French crown therefore passed to the head of the more distant Valois branch of the family, who ascended the throne as Philip VI. But it was arguable that Edward, as the former king’s nephew, had a nearer claim. In 1340 Edward III had revived his claim to be King of France . . . . For the next century the English and French were in a state of constant warfare. Indeed, it would not be until the nineteenth century that the English crown abandoned its claim to the throne of France. (Fraser 193)

Edward III’s claim to the French crown marks the beginning of English resistance to French imperialism. After 300 years of Anglo-French tensions, Edward III reverses the direction of military aggression and acts imperialistically toward France.

The question now becomes: how did Anglo-French relations specifically tie into Chaucer’s “Knight’s Tale”? As will be discussed in Chapter Three, the story that Chaucer tells in “The Knight’s Tale” reflects examples of colonialism and imperialism. It also, through its concentration on the stories of Palamon and Arcite, reveals an example of postcolonialism and demonstrates the plight of the subaltern. These four concepts – colonialism, imperialism, postcolonialism, and subaltern – are organically embedded in Chaucer’s work because his England was coming out of an era of colonization by the Normans. From a wider historical

perspective, this colonization was simply the most recent event in a series of invasions that dates back to the Romans at the beginning of the first millennium. Since Chaucer was familiar with Norman colonization it seems as though concentrating on that invasion would be appropriate. However, the previous incursions by the Romans and Saxons are also reflected in “The Knight’s Tale,” particularly with Theseus’ conquest of the Amazons.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CHAUCER'S SOURCES FOR "THE KNIGHT'S TALE"

It is well-known that while Chaucer was a revolutionary author for scribing his work in English, the language of a majority of the population, the plots and themes were not always original. As Robert A. Pratt and Karl Young discuss, many of Chaucer's works were based upon previously published stories such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and familiar tales; for instance, Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women* is a collection of stories about well-known, saintly women that were familiar to a medieval audience (10). Giovanni Boccaccio, an Italian contemporary, and his works were particularly inspirational to Chaucer. He gained many of his ideas for *The Canterbury Tales* from Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, including the framework of the narrative (Pratt and Young 14). Not all of the tales were based upon *The Decameron*, though. "The Knight's Tale" was a product of another Boccaccio work entitled *The Book of Theseus* or *Teseida*. Boccaccio, like Chaucer, got inspiration from previous or foreign works; his story of Theseus was crafted from Book Twelve of Publius Papinius Statius' *The Thebaid: Seven against Thebes*. There is speculation as to whether or not Chaucer also was inspired by Statius, which will be explored later in this chapter.

It is known that these two texts, specifically Boccaccio's, inspired the plot of "The Knight's Tale." However, the imperialistic instances that are evident in Chaucer's rendition of the story are either not present or not focused upon in Boccaccio's and Statius's versions. The character of Theseus differs between texts as Boccaccio and Statius focus on the heroics of the Duke of Athens while Chaucer's Theseus has character flaws and behaves imperialistically—that is, the treatment of those he conquers is unfair and there is some form of gain, though not always in the form of monetary value. The interactions between Theseus and those he colonizes in "The

“The Knight’s Tale” also differ from the source texts; Statius’s Theseus reverses the unjust laws decreed by Creon, and Boccaccio’s Theseus attempts to utilize rhetoric before conquering the Amazons and is hospitable toward Arcite and Palamon during their time as prisoners. The comparison must also reflect the theoretical approaches that can be applied to each work. By examining the source texts, the thematic elements of “The Knight’s Tale,” specifically the imperialism and postcolonialism, appear to have been Chaucer’s inventions.

It seems appropriate to first examine *The Thebaid*, the text that inspired Boccaccio’s *Teseida*. Statius’s story recounts the battle between Polynices and Eteocles, two brothers struggling for political superiority over the kingdom of Thebes. When Jupiter decides to send the Argives and Thebans to war against each other, Eteocles—the current leader of Thebes—and Polynices—who had washed upon Argos’ shores after being exiled from Thebes—lead troops against each other. Throughout *The Thebaid* the two sons compete for Thebes until they are both slain. Creon, after the death of the brothers, ascends the throne of Thebes, seeking vengeance against Polynices and the Argives in particular for the death of his son, Menoeceus. The final section of the story, Book XXII, must be paid special attention as it is where Boccaccio and Chaucer gained their inspiration and also is the debut of Theseus. Here, Statius illustrates Theseus’s reason to visit Thebes: to reestablish the social norm that Creon upset.

Book XXII opens with the assembling of a funeral pyre for Menoeceus, Creon’s son. Anguished, Creon commands that Argives could not burn their fallen soldiers, decreeing “let no one dare give fire or final rites to these Pelasgians, for the punishment is death” (Statius 12.102-4). Upon hearing these rumors, the women of Argos begin grieving as they cannot provide proper funeral rites to their husbands, sons, and brothers. As the women leave Argos for Thebes, in hopes to protest the new command, they encounter Ornytus, who warns:

What pathways do you follow, wretched ladies?

Do you seek bones and ashes of dead husbands?

A sentinel of shades stands vigilant

and counts unburied bodies for the king.

Those who approach to weep are driven back.

Only wild beasts and birds may venture closer.

Will even-handed Creon sympathize

with your lamenting? You may sooner pray

before the evil altars of Busiris,

the famished horses of Odrysae,

or the divinities of Sicily!

I know him: he will seize you, suppliants,

and have you killed, not on your husband's bodies,

but far away from dear departed shades.

You should proceed now, while the road is safe:

return to Lerna . . . . Or you may go implore

Athenian assistance. They say Theseus

is coming back from Thrace, a conqueror,

favored by fortune. Creon must be forced

by war and arms to follow human customs! (Statius 12.149-64)

Creon's actions are viewed as cruel and vengeful—he is altering important traditions, punishing those who fought against Thebes. Maintaining funeral traditions is a large part of Greek culture. According to Donna C. Kurtz and John Boardman, there were many laws surrounding funeral

rites and offerings. A fifth-century inscription from Iulis in Keos is quoted, illustrating the various laws surrounding burial customs, including how the body must be covered, what offerings must be prepared, and how people should behave at the funeral “according to [Greek] ancestral custom” (200-1). It seems odd, though, that Creon, a Greek, would allow burial rites for his son and Eteocles but deny the tradition to Polyneices and the Argives. H. A. Shapiro explains Creon’s situation:

Polyneices is not simply an enemy who fell honorably in battle. He is a traitor who died attacking his own city of Thebes. By the laws of fifth-century Athens, he would not be allowed burial in the city, and for him to be buried at all, his family would have to take the body elsewhere . . . . The problem for Creon is that he is one of the very family that should be seeing to it that Polyneices receive some kind of burial, while at the same time representing the interests of the state in keeping the traitor unburied. (120)

This is also true of Polyneices’s allies; they, too, are included in Creon’s punishment. Creon’s motive is not to dominate economically or colonize, but rather seek revenge. He is angered by the death of Menoeceus and Eteocles, which reveal his actions to be more of a reaction. Also, *The Thebaid* traces the struggle for power between people of similar backgrounds. Creon’s actions are not a way to impose his will on a new culture as Argos and Thebes are comparable culturally. However, Theseus is the focus. Theseus is Athenian, not Theban, and, therefore, his power to challenge Creon’s new values seems limited to conquering. The women who call upon Theseus, though, are determining factors in revealing Theseus’s non-imperialistic motives, as well as Statius’s focus on his treatment of Hippolyta. When Ornytus suggests the women go to

Theseus, his presence is being suggested not as an imperialistic force but rather as a restorer of balance.

The first appearance of Theseus establishes his character. Statius wishes to create a Theseus that is likeable and heroic, explaining,

After his bitter wars in Scythia,  
 Theseus drove his laurelled chariot  
 back to his native country. Joyful shouts  
 rang out; the peoples' voices reached the stars.  
 Before him came the spoils of war and cars . . . .  
 The leading passion of the people was  
 to see the victor driving snow-white steeds:  
 nor did Hippolyta draw less attention,  
 as she, with kind regard, endured the bonds  
 of marriage. The Athenian women marveled—  
 they murmured and exchanged oblique regards—  
 to see her break her country's rigid custom  
 by covering her bosom with her cloak.  
 She hid her breasts, and she had trimmed her hair.  
 Although barbarian, she graced great Athens  
 and came to bear her warlike husband children. (Statius 12.519-39)

The rhetoric and tone utilized by Statius shows Theseus as a champion of “bitter wars,” which seems to imply there was strife on both sides of the battlefield. However, he returned with prisoners and rewards as opposed to staying and colonizing. Although he brings Scythian

“spoils” back, he leaves the culture for the most part intact. More evidence that Theseus is a hero as opposed to a tyrant is illustrated in Hippolyta’s behavior. Although imperialistic in the sense that Theseus gains spoils and a wife, the treatment of Hippolyta and her reaction to her new environment tones down the imperialism. Hippolyta does not resist but rather embraces her new status as wife and Theseus’s customs. It may be assumed that because she is “enduring” the bonds of marriage as opposed to willingly accepting them there is some reluctance to her new status, but because there is little opposition shown and because she “graces” Athens, it can be suggested that Hippolyta does not feel as though she has been imperialized. Theseus does not treat her as though she is an object or trophy he has gained; Hippolyta is there, apparently, by her own volition. Readers see that while Theseus has gained imperialistically, Hippolyta’s willingness to accept her new situation helps the audience overlook it. This is also proven when Theseus departs for Thebes and leaves Hippolyta behind. Statius notes that “Hippolyta would have gone too and led her northern troops but the sure hope of her expectant womb restrained her” (12.633-6). Theseus is treating her as an equal because of the concern of her accompaniment. If she suffered under an imperialistic command, the consideration would not have occurred as an imperialist dictates the treatment of his or her new bounty.

During the procession, Theseus takes notice of the weeping women and asks them what ails them. The wife of Capaneus explains Creon’s command and begs Theseus:

Athenians—good sons of Cecrops—hurry!

Lay down the law—your cause is just—before

Emathians and Thracians come to grief,

as well as any others who believe

in final rites and flames for those deceased. (Statius 12.570-4)

Theseus, moved by her call for aid, proclaims he will help the Argives and demand that Creon “must give the Greeks their funerals and pyres or hear from me” (Statius 12.597-8). While this is never fully expounded upon in “The Knight’s Tale,” Statius gives the background needed to show that the women, when making their request for Theseus’s assistance want to have his law enacted. Thus, by accepting this task, Theseus is addressing the needs of the people and appealing to their requests. By doing so, he is hardly behaving in an imperialistic manner. Theseus, instead of identifying himself as an Athenian going to overthrow Thebes’s power, is claiming to act as a Greek on behalf of other Greeks, enforcing values precious to them all. Theseus, taking the Argive women’s pleas into consideration, does not demonstrate an imperialistic mindset. This is also emphasized when he rallies his men to follow him to Thebes:

You who defend the universal rights  
and laws of men, prepare your worthy hearts  
for this our enterprise, since it is clear  
that Nature leads us, that we have the favor  
of gods, men, and the silent ghosts of hell.  
For their part, they enlist a band of Furies:  
serpent-haired sisters lead the Theban banners.

March joyously, I pray, and trust our cause. (Statius 12.643-8)

By insisting the “universal rights and laws of men” are protected, Theseus proves to be a non-imperialist. There is the suspicion that his rhetoric could be tainted; generally, imperialists feel their values and principles are the correct way to establish and preserve what they presume are universal rights in attempts to achieve some sort of gain. Theseus, though, because of the

request of the women, supports his desire to aid the Argives without the motives of an imperialist.

The suspicion to label Theseus as imperial is essentially quashed once the Athenians reach Thebes. Creon, angered by the retaliation, proclaimed to himself that “following the war, let there be no complaints when those who fall suffer our law” (Statius 12.694-6). Although under attack, Creon still challenges the universal burial traditions of all Greeks, which labels him as the antagonist. Since Theseus is the opposing force to Creon, Statius wishes to have him perceived as the hero in these circumstances. This is evident after Creon’s defeat:

...Theseus  
 became the city’s guest; men prayed that he  
 would dignify their homes and enter Thebes.  
 The victor did not scorn his enemies  
 but glorified their households with his presence. (Statius 12.784-8)

This passage’s importance is illustrated by explaining Theseus’s reception to those he had defeated and could potentially colonize. The people of Thebes wish for Theseus to enter their homes, feeling as though it would merit them. This could have seemingly been a retaliation tactic; by appeasing the one who defeated their leader, the Thebans who opened their domiciles to Theseus presumptively are held in better esteem, provided Theseus was attempting to colonize or imperialize. However, Theseus—according to the passage—did not respond to their hospitality with dominating aggression but rather seemed to appreciate the kind gesture. Once again, while he does *gain*, the reactions of the Thebans allow readers to overlook the imperialistic inclinations. Also, imperialism tends to suggest there is a subaltern identity that will emerge. Since Theseus does not go to Thebes with the intention to colonize, but rather

restore a tradition sacred to all Greeks, the Thebans are not considered subaltern as their practices are kept intact. This glowing reception of him not only speaks to his non-imperialistic ways but it also describes Theseus as a sort of antithesis of Creon. If Creon is presumptively vengeful and enacts his will in a cruel manner, then Theseus is the hero in this situation.

Whether Chaucer gained any influence from Statius is unknown. However, Charles Stanley Ross remarks upon an argument made by Lee Patterson who argues that “Thebes represents cyclic disorder in *The Knight’s Tale* . . . . Chaucer responded to the way Statius asserts the value of virtue and piety and the hints he gives of a happier afterlife” (Statius xxii). There does appear to be some reflection of *The Thebaid* within Chaucer’s text, but not in terms of a postcolonial argument. Theseus opposes Creon in Statius’s text while Creon is not a character of importance in Chaucer’s. For Statius to even have postcolonial tendencies in his text would be curious; Statius lived “from approximately A.D. 45 to 96” when Rome was still pagan and highly imperialistic (Statius ix). Living in an imperialistic society, Statius presumptively would not altogether disapprove of the use of force in some situations. However, in *The Thebaid*, as Charles Stanley Ross, the editor and translator of the text, states,

[Statius’s subject] is neither the raw force that underlies civility nor the moral blindness of human lives but rather the sad horror and inevitability of conflict.

The *Thebaid* is not about society as it develops . . . but the stress lines of the modern: the return of repressed violence and the fragmentation of culture. There is, it seems, such a thing as too much success, as well as too much failure, whether in Rome two thousand years ago or today. (Statius x)

While Statius most likely supported imperialism, he also recognized the sad reality of the conflicts. Creon’s vengeful actions lead to his inevitable downfall; Theseus’s actions help

restore balance. While Theseus reveals imperialistic tendencies—he gains a wife and also hospitality—the reactions of Hippolyta and the Thebans, as well as the Thebans’ status as non-subaltern, do not identify Theseus as an imperialist, unlike his character in “The Knight’s Tale,” as will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

The main inspiration for “The Knight’s Tale” came from Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, as aforementioned. Although Chaucer never truly mentions Boccaccio as an inspiration, the plot of “The Knight’s Tale” is practically identical to its predecessor (Ruggiers 144). However, there are distinct differentiations, specifically with the role of Theseus. Boccaccio’s Theseus, much like Statius’s, is very just-minded and comes out a hero with his actions; Chaucer’s Duke of Athens is harsh, and at times, tyrannical. Plot points rarely vary, but the behavior of characters and the lack of motive explanation gives Chaucer’s tale a thematic twist that differentiates from Boccaccio’s rendition of the story.

Focusing on key scenes in which Theseus avoids utilizing imperialistic methods in *Teseida* helps illuminate the differentiation from Chaucer’s Theseus. The first instance is when encountering Hippolyta and the Amazons. As Boccaccio explains,

[Hippolyta and her women] banded together, therefore, and in haughty proclamation announced that they would not be kept in subjection, but that they wanted to govern themselves. And they found a way to carry out their foolish design. Each one spilt the life blood of her men with her own weapon, leaving them in the icy embrace of death as the stone cold victims of spite . . . . They liberated themselves in this way. (1.6-7)

Boccaccio continues, revealing that these women would not “grant entry into their domains to Greeks or Thracians or Egyptians or Sabians, or, in fact, to any men at all . . . . Any man who

drew near was to lose his life unless he quit their territory immediately” (1.10). Upon hearing this, Theseus “summoned his Grecian barons and explained to them that he intended to avenge the cruel harassments perpetrated by the Amazon women. To accomplish this he needed the help of those on whose valiant deeds he relied. They all replied enthusiastically that they were ready to do his will” (Boccaccio 1.16). Later, Boccaccio explains:

Through two of his barons, Theseus informed Hippolyta of his arrival and the reasons for his coming. In addition, he granted her terms under which she might make some adjustments to the conditions he was imposing on her if, guided by less evil counsel, she should be pleased to sue for peace before she was discomforted. None of the conditions which he proposed, however, were acceptable to her. On the contrary, she inveighed against him bitterly for what he had already undertaken to do, rebuking him for meddling in the affairs of another state outside of his own realm. In fact, if she could, she would make him repent it speedily. And she intended to do just that. (1.44-45)

Hippolyta appears to be of the opinion that Theseus is behaving like an imperialist—he is interfering with her affairs and attempting to establish a civil system much like the one he is familiar with. However, the author’s intention is what must be noted. While he is giving Hippolyta a voice, the audience still sympathizes with Theseus: he is attempting to create balance from the hostile environment Hippolyta established. Boccaccio shows Theseus utilizing reason—allowing the Amazons to change some of the conditions—and Hippolyta rejecting logic—refusing to consider Theseus’s offer. Also, Hippolyta is guilty of the same behavior she ascribes to Theseus: she and her women murdered the men of her society because she wished to gain an entirely female environment.

By presenting the audience with both sides of the situation at hand, as well as emphasizing on the Duke of Athens's attempt at fairness, Theseus's imperialistic actions are justifiable. In stanza 92 he begins his besiegement of Hippolyta and her women, and after several months of battle, Hippolyta sends Theseus a letter explaining the humiliation he has caused her and requests that he leave her and her women in peace. Theseus responds, explaining,

What shames us is to have our people killed and chased from their lands. On the other hand, it does us great honor to take up arms in wreaking vengeance . . . . [W]e intend to humble your pride. We do, however, what a good warrior is accustomed to do, that is we take the advantage so that our own men may be saved the more readily and the enemy vanquished. Soon you will see us within the confines of your city, not as a friend, certainly, unless you surrender to us at once . . . . Therefore I advise you to obey my command and you will have peace.  
(1.110-1)

Although imperialistic, Theseus is offering Hippolyta the opportunity to discuss terms to stop the siege and end things peacefully. His letter also reveals that his actions are in response to her initial imperialistic actions. In stanza 123, Hippolyta concedes and sends two of her women, Polyxo and Dynastora, to negotiate peace terms, "having granted them whatever liberty they would need" (1.123). In stanza 124, Theseus, "after conversing for a long time of one thing and another, he decided that he would take Hippolyta for his everlasting bride and that he would keep the land under the laws of the valorous Hippolyta. They consented to these and many other terms and returned" (Boccaccio 1.124). Any traces of imperialism are validated; Hippolyta, the subaltern, accepts her fate to create peace. There is no reference to an identity struggle on her

part. Also, Theseus's action was in response to Hippolyta's initial imperialistic act of killing the men in her society.

In Book Two, Boccaccio draws from his influence, *The Thebaid*, and introduces the Argive women who weep in order to evoke pathos in Theseus. Upon his return to Athens, Theseus encounters these women who beg him to march on Thebes and restore order so they could bury their dead, identical to their pleas in Statius's account. Theseus answers the women:

Your mournful dress and bitter tears and your respect for your noble men, and my recollection of your former pomp and the riches and delights of your kingdoms and your servants, and the glorious reign of your kings have found a place for your prayers, even in the midst of my lofty honors, and for the return of fortune transformed from sorrow to joy. I wish that I could bring your kings back to life in their former state, just as I believe that I can make it possible to give the honor of burying them to whomever it will please to receive it. May the pride of him who denied you what you wanted be humbled. If vengeance can supply comfort for evil received, however, let it be exacted by me. (Boccaccio 2.37-38)

Boccaccio's Theseus is comparable to Statius's in this passage—he has no desire to enact his own laws or beliefs; Theseus wishes to restore things to the way they were and merely honor the dead with proper burial rites. His act of force is fueled by revenge as opposed to power-lust.

The glowing descriptions of Theseus do not end; after the battle against Creon, his men stumble upon the severely wounded Palaemon and Arcites. The two men were marched before the Duke of Athens, and hearing of their high birth and association with Creon, Theseus “knew well the royal disdain they had in their speech, but the reaction such wrath deserved did not follow. He became more compassionate to them and did what he could by means of his doctors

and every skill so that their wounds were healed. Then he confined them with the others in prison” (Boccaccio 2.89). He then made a further determination about the fate of Palaemon and Arcites, after observing that they were “Very attractive and noble of mien and bearing”:

He considered having them both put to death, for he hesitated to let them go, lest they perhaps should prove troublesome to him. Then he said to himself, “I would commit a great sin, for there is nothing treacherous about them.” And he decided in his own mind that it would be best to keep them in prison. He commanded the prison guard at once to watch them carefully and to do them honor. And thus were Arcites and Palaemon condemned to eternal imprisonment by Theseus. The prisoners were all incarcerated and handed over to guards who knew how to do this well. And these two were set aside to put them more at their ease because they were born of royal blood. And he made them live in the palace and keep them in his way in a room where they served at their pleasure. (Boccaccio 2.97-99)

Although both of the princes were imprisoned, Theseus’s courtesies are inconsistent with the rawest forms of imperialism. As opposed to behaving tyrannically or forcefully toward those who oppose the dominant values system, Theseus decided to treat the two men of higher birth with great respect and jailed them in his palace with the satisfactions they would be used to. If Theseus were behaving in an imperialistic manner, the two Theban prisoners would not receive special treatment by the guards and would not have the privilege of having a nice area in which they are incarcerated. Also, Theseus would most likely attempt to gain from their situation. There is no mention of a ransom, and while he does gain prisoners of war, the presence of imperialism is toned down because of the treatment of the prisoners as Theseus does not treat

them as trophies or plunder apart from their presence in his triumphal procession, noted above. Parallels can be drawn between this response and his reaction to Hippolyta's actions. Creon does not allow the Argive men to be buried, which is a Grecian tradition. Hippolyta and her women murder the men in their society to enact their own social order. In both cases, Theseus responds as a restorer of balance. While he reveals imperialistic tendencies—by gaining a wife and honor by defeating Hippolyta and prisoners of war by defeating Creon—they are in response to their initial injustices.

The final instance in which imperialism could be demonstrated by Theseus within the plot is when Arcites and Palaemon decide to duel over Emilia. The two are convicts outside of their confinement—Arcites was released and told never to return, while Palaemon escaped from prison. When they are discovered by Emilia and Theseus, and explain their reasons for combating one another, begging for death, Theseus states:

“Since one of you has returned against my command, and the other has broken out of my prison, I would never be blamed if I did what you have deserved. And it would not be a mistake, either, but I would be observing a good and ancient custom. However, since I once fell in love and committed follies for love, it is very pleasing to me to pardon others. For I have received pardon many times, not on account of my deeds, but through the mercy of [Tyndareus] whose daughter I once stole. And so you can be certain of my pardon. My great compassion will triumph over your wrongdoing. But let not the pardon be absolute, for I shall lay down pleasant conditions, that you will promise to observe, if I forgive your offense.” They promised and he made them swear to observe them without fail. And he made them make solemn peace together. (Boccaccio 5.91-93)

Once again, Theseus is presented with an opportunity to punish Arcites and Palaemon by death but allows them to live. He utilizes logic to support his reasoning for electing death as an option, but employs his heart to pardon them. The only imperialism that can be detected from the above passage exists in the establishment of the conditions the two noblemen had to follow. However, this is downplayed because it is a lighter punishment than the one originally in place. Instead of exuding the airs of an imperialistic warmonger, Theseus is fair and logical.

Both Statius and Boccaccio designed and revealed a Theseus who was honorable, just and logical. For Statius, Theseus was responding to Creon's dictatorial refusal to allow the Argives to bury their dead. Theseus's exploits were in response to this decree, thus casting him as the hero of the story. Boccaccio showed his Theseus applying logic to his actions. When attacking Hippolyta, he stated his reasons and offered the opportunity to negotiate the conditions; upon capturing Arcites and Palaemon, he granted them the treatments they were used to as noblemen of Thebes while imprisoned in his palace; Theseus spared the two men's lives after discovering they had broken his command and instead enacted a duel between the two in which the victor would win Emilia. Although he gained in some sense, which is a characteristic of imperialism—Hippolyta becomes his wife and Arcites and Palaemon are prisoners of war—his treatment of these characters as people, as opposed to objects, quashes any imperialistic motives. Boccaccio's Theseus comes off as both a hero and a reasonable leader, which downplays the instances of imperialism.

It is obvious that Chaucer borrowed extensively from these two previous accounts, particularly Boccaccio's. Both Boccaccio's and Chaucer's renditions are romances, while Statius's is an epic. Chaucer also relies heavily on *Teseida* for the plot of "The Knight's Tale," as well as the similes Boccaccio draws from Statius; for instance, Eteocles and Polynices become

Arcites and Palaemon. How much interaction Chaucer had with *The Thebaid* is unknown, but what he drew from *Teseida* reflects some of the echoes Boccaccio was gaining from Statius. He also precludes “The Knight’s Tale” with lines from the epic, revealing that he must have had some experience with the text (Statius xxii). Simply because the plot of “The Knight’s Tale” is not original does not mean that it is merely a repetition of stories from the past. The character of Theseus alters drastically from the two source texts. While seemingly just a change in personality, the tonality and rhetoric also shift, giving “The Knight’s Tale” its own theme and treatment of the text through a postcolonial lens.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### “THE KNIGHT’S TALE” AS SUBALTERN LITERATURE

*The Canterbury Tales*, written from about the late 1380s until his death in 1400, was Chaucer’s all-encompassing commentary on society. The estates satire genre describes representative members of each social class as well as the vices they would be prone to in an entertaining, and at times, comical manner. It is a moral analysis on each level of society; as Helen Phillips points out, “Chaucer’s tendency, in the *Tales* as a whole, [is to] present human social relations as a conglomeration of separate and incompatible purposes and viewpoints. His decision to designate his story-tellers by profession also signals an interest in society, social identities and social relationships, not just in individuals” (24). From Phillips’ perspective, each pilgrim signifies a social relationship or construct aside from representing a specific echelon.

The Knight is of particular interest as he is a member of the first estate, the first pilgrim to tell a tale, and the first pilgrim described in the “General Prologue.” While the narrator paints the Knight primarily as a crusader, Phillips identifies two additional elements: the Knight embodies “virtues that in the ideology of chivalry comprise the mind and heart of an archetypal knight” and he is neither ostentatious nor materialistic. As evidence, Phillips cites “the knight’s eschewing of *gay* splendid clothing, his unpretentious demeanour . . . and his rust-stained tunic” (29). While Phillips describes the Knight as such, Chaucer, in the “General Prologue” made comments upon each pilgrim, creating implications and using rhetoric to appear complimentary while simultaneously jesting at each character’s flaws. As described above by Phillips, the estates satire illustrates the sins of each social tier; the Knight’s, then, would be a lack of humility, which shall be discussed in greater detail.

After presenting each pilgrim in the “General Prologue,” Chaucer begins his *Tales* with the Knight winning a straw draw to tell the first tale. Describing the Knight first in the “General Prologue” and then allowing him to tell the first tale appears to be preferential. Thomas A. Kirby explains this as a socially acceptable construct: “the fact that the Knight comes first in his group of Knight-Squire-Yeoman is, of course, as it should be, and that he is the first in the series of pilgrims should surprise no one; this is simply another illustration of Schütte’s law, i.e. first place is accorded to the person most worthy of respect” (216). However, the character “most worthy of respect” is not necessarily the most interesting character, and, as Kemp Malone explains, Schütte’s Law places the character deemed most intriguing by the author at the end of a sequence or list. Therefore, the Knight’s placement simultaneously meets social expectations, while suggesting that the “Knight’s Tale” is not the story Chaucer is most interested in – according to Schütte’s Law, that distinction goes to the Parson (155-6). In a sense, then, placing the Knight’s Tale first is preferential treatment by Chaucer, but not toward the Knight.

Why then focus on “The Knight’s Tale” if Chaucer did not perceive it as the most important of the tales? Its placement illustrates his lack of interest in the subject, but by placing it first he sets the tone of the *Tales*. Everything after “The Knight’s Tale” must be paid special attention if, according to Schütte’s law, preference increases as the list continues. By doing so, the audience can begin to see a social commentary rise out of the narrative. While close reading has allowed previous generations of readers to recognize the social, political, and cultural elements inherent in Chaucer’s tales, postcolonial theory enables modern readers to put those valuable observations into a greater social context, one that makes the text both historically relevant and immediately familiar. In the case of “The Knight’s Tale,” the actions of Theseus, easily the dominant character of the tale, can be read as a metaphor for Norman attitudes toward

the English after the Norman Conquest of 1066. While Norman imperialism is particular to a time and place, its essential component—gain—is present throughout history.

Postcolonial nuances permeate “The Knight’s Tale.” “The Knight’s Tale” begins with an introduction of Theseus, the Duke of Athens, and his conquests in war and chivalry. The Knight continues, describing at length Theseus’s latest defeat of the Amazons:

He conquered al the regne of Femenye  
 That whilom was ycleped Scithia,  
 And wedded the queene Ypolita,  
 And brought hire hoom with hym in his contree  
 With muchel glorie and greet solempnytee,  
 And eek hir yonge suster Emelye.  
 And thus with victorie and with melodye  
 Lete I this noble duc to Atthenes ryde,  
 And al his hoost in armes hym bisyde.

And certes, if it nere to long to here,  
 I wolde have toold yow fully the manere  
 How wonnen was the regne of Femenye  
 By Theseus and by his chivalrye;  
 And of the grete bataille for the nones  
 Bitwixen Atthenes and Amazones;  
 And how asseged was Ypolita,  
 The faire, hardy queen of Scithia;  
 And of the feste that was at hir weddyng,

And of the tempest at hir hoom-comynge;

But al that thing I moot as now forbere. (866-85)

The Knight begins by describing Theseus as wise and chivalrous in line 865, and in line 863 the audience is informed that “gretter was there noon under the sonne.” From this first description, we see that Theseus has achieved both martial victory and marriage, something no other character in the tale is able to do. However, his description is offered by the Knight, who was similarly described in the “General Prologue.” Automatically, the reader gains a sense of preference toward Theseus, something literary theorists identify as a subject position; unlike Boccaccio’s rendition of the story, the narrator of the “Knight’s Tale” will be unreliable, that is, the narrator will not tell an objective, all-encompassing account of the story. This is particularly evident in the silence from the Amazons. The Knight describes Theseus’s conquest of Ypolita and Emelye as a great military success. The only attention paid to the women is when they are explained as “asseged”—besieged—in line 881 and how Ypolita is then married off to Theseus.

Interest must be paid, however, to line 884, specifically the word “tempest”—storm. This term can be taken one of two ways: either the celebration was intense and joyous or there was opposition to Ypolita’s “hoom-comynge.” While the definition can arguably be applied in either manner, through a postcolonial lens, the term reveals that there was most likely some resistance, but by whom? If the Athenians were angered by her arrival, Ypolita may have behaved in a manner offensive—or unconventional—to the Athenians. If the “tempest” was from Ypolita, this reveals her hostility toward Theseus’s imperialistic actions and disdain to her new environment. In either situation, the character of Ypolita is behaving in a subaltern manner. Rousing a reaction from the Athenians suggests that the queen did not abandon her Amazonian traditions and therefore resisted adopting the new identity thrust upon her, perhaps passively, by

not dressing or behaving in a Grecian manner. If, in fact, she was causing the “tempest,” Ypolita was actively opposing the Athenian identity she was expected to espouse by vocalizing her resistance. Ypolita is a subaltern in both situations, struggling between two identities—the native and the imperialist. She is attempting to maintain her Amazonian identity but has the Athenian mindset thrust upon her. This subaltern identity struggle is illustrated once again later in the tale but by Emelye. Before the competition between Arcite and Palamon overseen by Theseus, Emelye prays to the goddess Diana, asking,

...fro me turne away hir hertes so  
 That al hire hoote love and hir desir,  
 And al hir bisy orment, and hir fir  
 Be queynt, or turned in another place.  
 And if so be thou wolt nat do me grace,  
 Or if my destynee be shapen so  
 That I shal nedes have oon of hem two,  
 As sende me hym that moost desireth me.  
 Bihoold, goddesse of clene chastitee,  
 The bitter teeris that on my chekes falle.  
 Syn thou art mayde and kepere of us alle,  
 My maydenhede thou kepe and wel conserve,  
 And whil I lyve, a mayde I wol thee serve. (2318-30)

Once again, this reveals a subaltern attitude. Emelye indicates her desire to maintain Amazonian traditions, but also reveals the struggle with her new Athenian identity. She is willing to accept her fate—identifying as Athenian—as long as she is with the man who loves her most. Both

Emelye and Ypolita are thrust into the position of subaltern, struggling to maintain their original identity.

Authors of earlier versions of this story pay more attention to the Amazons and their reception of their fate. Statius describes Hippolyta as accepting her fate and even embracing it by covering up her breasts when she arrives in Athens. Boccaccio attempts to explain both Theseus's and Hippolyta's views on the conquest and even explains Theseus's motives as vengeful as opposed to imperial. His Theseus even offers to discuss terms; however, Hippolyta's unreceptive response force him to invade. Chaucer's Theseus, it appears, forced Ypolita into marriage and did not give adequate reason for invading in the first place. The Knight also decidedly does not focus on her reaction and when Theseus is called to Thebes, she and Emelye are sent to Athens to wait for his return: "ther is namoore to telle" (Chaucer 974). This dismissal of the women is the first instance of imperial action taken by Theseus. Although he did not colonize, he reaped the benefits of his conquest and gained a wife. Arguably, Statius's and Boccaccio's Theseus also gained wives, but the reactions of the previous Hippolyta's to their marriages draw emphasis away from the imperialistic aspect.

This treatment of the women falls into another category of postcolonial criticism which includes the aspect of feminism as well. As Leela Gandhi explains, the "third-world woman" is "victim *par excellence*—the forgotten casualty of both imperial ideology, and native and foreign patriarchies" (83). Ypolita and Emelye are "third-world women;" Theseus captures them and treats them as spoils of war. Their culture abandons them as Ypolita was Queen of the Amazons and was taken. Without a leader, it is assumed that the Amazonian women could not rally to rescue both women. This transcends to another level, also; the Knight as narrator is showing that his culture, fourteenth-century England, also does not view these women as anything more than

plunder. If women had a greater position in society, at least in the eyes of the first estate, the female characters would have a greater role in the tale. Another society has also demeaned these women to an ultimate state of inferiority.

The narrative continues and reveals another key instance of imperialistic attitude exhibited by Theseus. Upon returning from Scythia, he encounters the Argive women mentioned in Statius and Boccaccio. They, once again, plead for his assistance in overthrowing Creon so they can perform proper burial rites for their husbands. Theseus obliges and promises that everyone in Greece shall speak of “How Creon was of Theseus yserved” (Chaucer 963). ‘Yserved’ translates to Modern English as “treated” or “served.” Although Creon had imposed a culturally unacceptable decree, Theseus’s reaction is rhetorically more biting than the previous Dukes of Athens. In Statius’s and Boccaccio’s versions, attention was drawn to the righting of wrongs. Chaucer’s Theseus is concerned with how he will treat Creon. By making a proclamation that hangs heavy with threat and doom, Theseus’s character is being revealed as vindictive. Upon entering Thebes, Theseus defeats Creon and restores the burial rites to the women. After,

Whan that this worthy duc, this Theseus,  
 Hath Creon slayn and wonne Thebes thus,  
 Stille in that feeld he took al nyght his reste,  
 And dide with al the contree as hym leste. (Chaucer 1001-4)

Theseus sets up camp in the country of Thebes after defeating them in battle. This is magnified to an imperial level as he did “as hym leste,” or “as he pleased.” This implies that, once again, Theseus gains something out of the interaction, whether it be lodging, hospitality or a variety of special treatments. Statius does not focus entirely on the aftermath of the battle, as *The Thebaid*

ends after Creon is defeated. However, Theseus is shown as a hero who is well received by the people. Boccaccio's story is similar, as his Duke of Athens is invited into the homes of Thebes and behaves in a humble manner. Chaucer does not give the Thebans a voice, much like the Amazons previously, and because of this Theseus takes on an imperialistic persona once again.

This is continued when searching the bodies on the battlefield for survivors. As Theseus and his men looked for survivors they stumbled upon,

Two yonge knyghtes liggynge by and by,  
 Bothe in oon armes, wroght ful richely,  
 Of whiche two Arcita highte that oon,  
 And that oother knyght highte Palamon.  
 Nat fully quyke, ne fully dede they were,  
 But by hir cote-armures and by hir gere  
 The haraudes knewe hem best in special  
 As they that weren of the blood roial  
 Of Thebes, and of sustren two yborn.  
 Out of the taas the pilours han hem torn,  
 And han hem carried softe unto the tente  
 Of Theseus; and he ful soone hem sente  
 To Atthenes, to dwellen in prisoun  
 Perpetuelly—he nolde no raunsoun. (Chaucer 1011-24)

Theseus saw that these men were of Theban royal blood. Obtaining them as prisoners of war would be a financial gain if he set the ransom high enough. However, he decided not to accept any ransom and instead took Arcite and Palamon as spoils of war and imprisoned them. Arcite

and Palamon, a few lines later, are described as being “in a tour, in angwissh and in wo” (Chaucer 1030). This is yet another example of Chaucer drawing attention to imperialism by his rhetoric. Boccaccio’s Theseus also did not set a ransom; however, the treatment of Arcites and Palaemon in his poem downplays imperialism by not treating his prisoners of war as such. Chaucer’s Theseus differs; he does not set ransom but subjects Arcite and Palamon to “angwissh” and “wo.” Theseus is treating Arcite and Palamon as war trophies, much like Ypolita and Emelye. The difference is that Ypolita was a gain because Theseus married her; Arcite and Palamon are spoils he has collected, as if to represent a warning to those who would potentially oppose him in the future.

These are two direct examples of Theseus’s imperialistic ways. The Knight, and Chaucer, relay his conquests but do not focus on the reactions of those being conquered like Statius and Boccaccio do. The tale then takes an odd route—the main characters of the text become Arcite and Palamon, the two Theban captives. Instead of focusing on the imperialist, both narrators switch to discuss those imperialized. This is the first foray and example of postcolonial theory at work—the subalterns in the piece are given a voice. The text focuses on Arcite and Palamon as they are trapped in the tower, both lamenting their weariness. One day, Arcite and Palamon, while gazing out of a window in their prison cell, see Emelye in the garden below, both immediately falling in love with her. Their conversations turn to Emelye and which cousin loved her first. Palamon, attempting to maintain their kinship loyalty, relays that,

Ne in noon oother cas, my leeve brother,  
 But that thou sholdest trewely forthren me  
 In every cas, as I shal forthern thee—...  
 I loved hire first, and tolde thee my wo

As to my conseil and my brother sworn  
 To forthre me, as I have toold biforn.  
 For which thou art ybounden as a knyght  
 To helpen me, if it lay in they might,  
 Or ells artow fals, I dar wel seyn. (Chaucer 1136-51)

Arcite wholly disagrees with Palamon and insists he was the first to love Emelye. He then attempts to make the argument:

That “who shal yeve a lovere any lawe?”  
 Love is a gretter lawe, by my pan,  
 Than my be yeve to any erthely man;  
 And therefore positif lawe and swich decree  
 Is broken al day for love in ech degree. (Chaucer 1164-68)

The two men are illustrating the reactions of the subalterns to being colonized. Although their culture is not that different from Athenian, they are lusting after what Theseus and Athens can give them: Emelye. They are imprisoned, and yet are beginning to see the benefits of their colonization. Palamon, however, still looks back to his Theban past and reminds Arcite they are cousins and must stay together, using logic to explain that he was the first to see Emelye and thus is entitled to her love. Arcite’s argument centers on the deconstruction of currently established constructs; by proclaiming love is greater than any law, he illustrates the adaptation to the colonizers mindset—no law can stop what he does. This reflects postcolonialism in that the two subaltern men are given a voice; however these voices are contradicting one another. Palamon attempts to draw back on his previous culture and use rhetoric to explain that he was deserving of Emelye and that he and Arcite must remain loyal to one another. Arcite argues for love and

the ignorance toward law, a mindset comparable to imperialism. This is explained by Nicholas Harrison as performative contradiction:

Two points need to be emphasized straight away. The first is that no *action* follows automatically if and when it transpires that one set of cultural and political values is on some conceptual level genuinely incompatible with another, which is to say that, from within one set of values, the other *cannot* be recognized as valid. There is always a decision to be made about whether and how to react to such an incompatibility, in a complex context where different values (and rights) around issues such as equality, toleration and political autonomy may not be fully commensurable. (154)

Harrison continues to explain the second point: that there are different classifications of relativism, the most crucial in this context being “moral relativism, which is to say the notion that morals hold only in relation to the cultures from which they develop and within which they are upheld; conceptual relativism, which means the notion that some concepts hold only in relation to their own delimitable context; and ‘relativism of reason’” (155). The latter explains that “what counts as a reason, or as a good reason, for holding beliefs’ is held to be relative” (Harrison 155). These orders of relativism can be applied to Arcite and Palamon because of their struggle with adjusting to Athenian, or rather Theseus’s law. Although the two cultures—Thebes and Athens—do not vary that much, the values of the two knights are still challenged. Palamon recounts how they used to support one another, an example of moral relativism, and continues to do so throughout their captivity, but Arcite applies the relativism of reason, explaining that love supersedes all bounds, a mentality that Theseus illustrates later. Here, the concept refers to integrating with the dominant culture, that of the Athenians in the tale. Arcite

could attempt to integrate into Theseus's culture, but it is impossible because he can never fully encapsulate the Athenian identity because of his Theban past.

The two continue to bicker over their love of Emelye. Eventually a friend of Arcite, Philostrate, pleads to Theseus to set his companion free. Theseus sends Arcite away with the understanding that he would not return under punishment of death. Palamon wishing for freedom as well escapes from prison. The two meet and decide to battle to determine who deserves Emelye's love. This, arguably, is an instance of battling colonization; they have both escaped their capture and are exercising their own cultural standards to determine the winner. This is impeded, however, when Theseus spots them dueling and interrupts, asking why they were behaving in such a manner. Palamon divulges the truth, identifying themselves as the Arcite and Palamon who broke Theseus's law by returning and escaping from jail, respectively. He states that they both deserve death since they cannot have Emelye. Furious, Theseus decides to comply:

This is a short conclusioun.

Youre owene mouth, by youre confessioun,

Hath dampned yow, and I wol it recorde;

It nedeth noght to pyne yow with the corde.

Ye shal be deed, by myghty Mars the rede! (Chaucer 1743-7)

Ypolita and Emelye, who were traveling with Theseus, burst into tears and beg him to have mercy on them as they were fighting for love. Upon seeing this demonstration, Theseus was reminded of the love he had for Ypolita and pardoned the two knights:

...Fy

Upon a lord that wol have no mercy,

But been a leon, bothe in word and dede,  
 To hem that been in repentaunce and drede,  
 As wel as to a proud despitous man  
 That wol mayntene that he first bigan.  
 That lord hath litel of discrecioun,  
 That in swich cask an no divisioun  
 But weyeth pride and hubmlesse after oon...  
 The god of love, a benedicte!  
 How myghty and how greet a lord is he!  
 Ayeyns his might ther gayneth none obstacles.  
 He may be cleped a god for his miracles,  
 For he kan maken, at his owene gyse,  
 Of everich herte as that hym list divyse. (Chaucer 1773-90)

This is, as Harrison would describe, a demonstration of relativism outside of the performative contradiction. Love is a universal feeling, nonspecific to any culture. Theseus realizes that he loves Ypolita and after her sorrowful plea for pity on the Theban knights he drastically switches his mindset and rhetoric:

My wyl is this, for plat conclusioun,  
 Withouten any reppliccacioun—  
 If that you liketh, that it for the beste:  
 That everich of you shal goon where hym leste  
 Frely, withouten raunson or daunger,  
 And this day fifty wykes, fer ne ner,

Everich of you shal brynge an hundred knyghtes  
 Armed for lystes up at all rightes,  
 Al redy to darreyne hire by bataille.  
 And this bihote I yow withouten faille,  
 Upon my trouthe, and as I am a knyght,  
 That wheither of yow bothe that hath might—  
 This is to seyn, that wheither he or thow  
 May with his hundred, as I spake of now,  
 Sleen his contrarie, or out of lystes dryve,  
 Thane shal I yeve Emelya to wyve  
 To whom that Fortune yeveth so fair a grace...  
 And if yow thynketh this is weel ysaid,  
 Seyeth youre avys and holdeth you apayd. (Chaucer 1845-68)

Instead of being tyrannical and implementing his will without the cares of those he is imperializing, Theseus is now concerned with guaranteeing Arcite and Palamon a fair chance at winning Emelye's heart. He begins his proposal by asking if they would like the recommendation. Also, instead of forcing the decision, he closes by asking the two knights to agree if it is satisfactory in their opinions.

It seems puzzling that after being an imperialist throughout the tale, implicating his law through both aggressive—conquering Scythia and Thebes—and passive manners—locking Arcite and Palamon up—Theseus would suddenly change his mind. For the first time, Chaucer's Theseus is reminiscent of Boccaccio's. In *Teseida*, Theseus stumbles upon the two men and upon hearing Palamon's explanation of events, he understands based upon love. In "The

Knight's Tale," Theseus must be begged by the women to show mercy. However, his character changes and his rhetoric alters drastically from the threatening active tone to a passive one in which he attempts to please everyone.

The explanation lies within the narration of the tale, revealing its subaltern roots. The history of England explained in Chapter One must be applied to elucidate this as well. Chaucer's England was at a turning point. The middle or merchant class was emerging and introducing a whole new social attitude. Chaucer himself, in a way, represented this shift in the norm. Snell reveals that although he shared many of the qualities of an Englishman—frank, tolerant, aware of the world—he differed as well. He was Puritanical in his piety and had a broad-based intellectual view. He was educated in French, the language of the upper class, but resented the dominating and allegedly superior culture: "another literature gained ascendancy over his mind . . . If he wrote English, that is clear proof that the churl's tongue, in however indeterminate a form, had at last ousted its rival from the field of general discourse" (121). Chaucer embraced this change and encouraged it. England was coming out of the age of Norman control. After 1066, a Norman monarchy and society was established, making way for the feudal system and cultural alterations; French became the language of polite society, forcing English, the language of the people, to become a plebeian tongue. By writing in the language of the lower class, Chaucer was aiding in the social revolution, pushing away from French control. In this sense, the entirety of *The Canterbury Tales* is a subaltern text; Chaucer was writing in English, despite French being the language of polite culture. What makes this even more of a subaltern text is Chaucer's insignificance in the social hierarchy. Paull F. Baum states that he was a member of the emerging middle class, and had he not been a poet his name would have been lost among the

score of others in public records (6). Had Chaucer not made himself noteworthy, he would have just been another fourteenth-century individual of little to no historical significance.

This transposes onto his work and is especially evident in “The Knight’s Tale.” The colonization indicative in the work represents the Norman Conquest and the Normans forcing their culture upon the English. While appearing to be a radical claim, as there were multiple invasions and conquests that shaped England’s history, there are three indicators that reveal the colonization to be representative of the Normans. The first is the presence of a prevalent leader of the conquests. The previous invasions on England had leaders, but none that stayed in the country and became iconic. Julius Caesar and Emperor Claudius encouraged the invasion of Britain but did not establish or lead the Roman troops personally. The Anglo-Saxon invasions were not commanded by any significant leaders. Cnut’s Invasion, while conducted by Cnut, was historically important based upon the aftermath of the battle. The Norman Conquest, though, produced William the Conqueror who became the king of England after colonizing. Unlike the previous instances, the Norman Conquest presented an identifiable leader who had a cultural and economic role after the invasion. However, for Chaucer’s first audiences, Theseus’s swift and decisive actions in the “Knight’s Tale” may well have called to mind current events: since 1340, the English King Edward had been fighting battles against the French in what became the Hundred Years War. In fact, in language reminiscent of Chaucer’s description of Theseus, Anniina Jokinen goes so far as to compare Edward’s “martial exploits” to “those of a gallant knight rather than those of a responsible general” (par. 10). Edward’s campaigns begin as a response to the French crown’s support of the Scottish nationalism, foray into plundering expeditions, and result in his assumption of the title “King of France.” Edward III is an example of contemporary English imperialism directed toward the French. This also supports Chaucer’s

position as a subaltern: his society was struggling, or in the case of the Hundred Years War, literally rebelling against the colonizer's values. However, Edward III is not an entirely adequate comparison for Chaucer's Theseus. His military exploits were a reaction to political events which threatened the English crown. Comparatively, Theseus does not have any connection to his martial endeavors—from what Chaucer relays, he defeats Hippolyta for honor and a wife and goes to Thebes upon the request of the Argive women, gaining honor and war trophies.

A better historical echo of Theseus's actions in "The Knight's Tale" lays in events that happened some 300 years earlier, events that set into motion Edward III's campaigns during Chaucer's lifetime. William the Conqueror's speedy victory at the Battle of Hastings and the sweeping political and cultural changes that followed closely resemble Theseus's quick and complete defeat of Hippolyta's and Creon's forces. Theseus is also an iconic subjugator as he is the only one mentioned in the tale, and according to the Knight, the greatest conqueror of all time. Although not entirely similar—as Theseus did not establish himself as king of Thebes—the status and recognition achieved by both is comparable enough, especially in the context of the other indicators.

The second indicator is the postcolonial feedback that is provided in both instances. Chaucer is writing from a postcolonial standpoint as he is a subaltern individual. He is not from the upper class, but is emerging into it. He was raised experiencing both English and French cultures. Chaucer, according to David Richards, was attempting to reshape his identity. Within this context, postcolonialism is "neither neutral nor detached from its subject, but engaged and oppositional, since such a reconception of others also requires a radical reconception of one's own identity as similarly 'fluid' and transforming" (19). In order to shape the polite culture, he must shape English culture, and does so by writing in English. Similarly, Palamon continuously

laments the situation he is in, focusing upon the brotherhood he and Arcite must maintain as well as the pain he feels from being captured. However, he must shape his own identity—that is, he battles Arcite over Emelye and obliges Theseus's request for a proper battle.

Finally, there is a similarity between the two cultures. When William the Conqueror stormed the shores of Hastings, the culture he was looking to implement was essentially the same, but with a few minor differences. This is the same circumstance as in "The Knight's Tale." Theseus captures Arcite and Palamon and imprisons them in a culture that is practically identical to their own, but is superior in that it conquered Creon and Thebes. This is also evident in the battle scene. Theseus stumbles upon the two battling, separates them, and then politely requests that they battle under his conditions. It appears to be an asinine request as he is having them battle once again, only with a few added stipulations. This is indicative of the comparable cultures; both Thebans and Athenians would solve their arguments in battle.

Despite these comparisons, Chaucer also gained inspiration from the invasions before the Norman Conquest for smaller details. For instance, the role of Ypolita is comparable to that of Queen Boudicca. Ypolita and Boudicca alike were strong female leaders who lead resistances against imperialistic influences, both failing, Ypolita being captured and Boudicca dying. However, the way Chaucer explains Ypolita's situation is similar to Boudicca's account. Ypolita, as mentioned before, does not comment upon her capture or even her resistance. Her actions are explained by the Knight, who shows preference to Theseus. Statius and Boccaccio both give Ypolita some amount of input: Statius implies that there was some discussion with Hippolyta when she does not accompany Theseus to Thebes and Boccaccio's Hippolyta verbally chastises Theseus. Chaucer abandons the voice given to the Amazon Queen to reflect the historical parallel. Her story, too, is told by the imperialistic force she is battling against.

Boudicca's history is recorded by Tacitus and Dio, two Roman historians. These accounts are all that are available; even if the Britons kept a historical record it has either been lost or has yet to be discovered. Both women are similar in action as well as how their histories are relayed.

The Anglo-Saxon Conquests also provided some inspiration for Chaucer. Once again, the commonalities are found in the details. During the Anglo-Saxon invasions, the identity of the native Britons shifted. They were either killed off or bred in with the conquerors. Chaucer illustrates both of these options with the ending of "The Knight's Tale." Theseus catches Palamon and Arcite battling for Emelye's love and decides to make a tournament out of the situation. In the end, Arcite dies, albeit accidentally, and Palamon wins Emelye, thus marrying into Theseus's family. Although Theseus's rhetoric had changed at this point to a more inclusive and less imperialistic tone, thus almost negating the imperialistic nature of this event, the extremes are still present. Palamon marries Emelye and there is never mention of his Theban relation again. His identity has been swallowed and he is now considered, by default, Athenian. Arcite dies and while he presumptively dies as a knight of Thebes, his previous shift in rhetoric and his adoption of Theseus's laws and mindset shows an abandonment of his past identity and attempt to adopt an Athenian one, as explained by Harrison and his relativism of reason. Even though the Anglo-Saxon invasions were not the complete basis for "The Knight's Tale," inspiration was still gained from the event.

Focus must now be turned back to the narration, concentrating on the Knight. The tale told is riddled with instances of imperialism, which the Knight praises. Throughout the tale, he uses positive adjectives to describe Theseus, such as "worthy" (line 1025), "gentil" (line 952), and "chivalric" (line 982), even during his conquests, which yielded imperialistic results. However, similar descriptors were used to explain the character of the Knight in the "General

Prologue.” This is evidence that the Knight shows preference to Theseus because he can relate. But why? The Knight is an Englishman and the English were colonized by the Normans. However, the Knight is a member of polite society and was raised under Norman influence. Christopher Dyer explains that fourteenth-century knights were granted the same rights as a Norman who first came over after the Conquest:

They ruled over estates and manors which provided a flow of money and labour from tenants. They wielded extensive powers of jurisdiction by holding courts, and they exercised much control over unfree slaves and serfs. At their behest the landscape was reorganised for more efficient production in compact demesnes, granges, mills and reclaimed wastes, or mainly for pleasure in the case of parks, pools, and gardens. They channeled trade through the boroughs and markets that they founded and protected. And by their own spending power, they were able to mould the trading system, encouraging the concentration of rich merchants in large towns to supply their specialist needs. (Dyer xii)

Since he had all of the benefits of being Norman, the Knight would either not notice or not pay attention to the imperialistic tendencies evident in his tale. If that is the case, then the postcolonialism is out of place. However, according to Donald R. Howard, the use of multiple layers of narration reveals that Chaucer is making claims throughout (232). Chaucer was drawing attention to himself as the narrator and therefore his beliefs. Thus the subaltern inclinations are of the author’s doing as opposed to the implied narrator.

Throughout “The Knight’s Tale,” multiple instances of imperialism are provided, seemingly contradicting the praise-worthy adjectives used to describe Theseus the conqueror. This illustrates a departure of Chaucer’s text from his sources in which Theseus resorted to

military action only after his diplomatic efforts had failed. By viewing the tale through a historical lens, it is revealed that there are several instances in the text that parallel England's history, particularly the Norman Conquest. The similarities between Theseus and William the Conqueror, the postcolonial tendencies of history and the text, as well as the comparable cultures of the Normans and the British reflected in the Thebans and Athenians, make this text subaltern literature. Chaucer was commenting upon his colonized country and giving his people a voice through his use of English as a literary language.

## CONCLUSION

What governance is in this prescience,  
 That giltelees tormenteth innocence?  
 And yet encresseth this al my penaunce,  
 That man is bounden to his observaunce,  
 For Goddes sake, to letten of his wille,

Ther as a beest may al his lust fulfille. (Chaucer 1313-18)

These lines, spoken by Palamon in “The Knight’s Tale” encapsulate the postcolonial feeling that Chaucer was attempting to convey. Although these lines refer to the pain that Palamon is feeling through unrequitedly loving Emelye, the dual layers of narration reveal Chaucer’s opinions on colonization and imperialism, especially in relation to England after the Norman Conquest. The culture shifted; that is to say, the language of the population became plebian while the language of polite society became French. The societies were very comparable, and yet England was still colonized by the Normans.

This is shown throughout “The Knight’s Tale” by Chaucer. Although there were many examples of colonization and imperialism throughout England’s history, Chaucer decided to focus upon this specific example. True, it was most likely simpler to find comparisons between the Norman Conquest and the narrative that had been laid out by Statius in *The Thebaid* and Boccaccio in *Teseida*, both of which downplayed Theseus’s imperialistic actions through his rhetoric, revealing the overt examples of imperialism intentional by Chaucer. The comparisons probably would have stood out to those in fourteenth-century England. The Conquest had occurred approximately 300 years prior to the scribing of *The Canterbury Tales* and England was

still exhibiting colonized tendencies—French was still being taught and spoken, and the feudal system instated by the Normans was finally coming to a close, for instance. By shifting the rhetoric of the previous works, Chaucer was able to compose a subaltern text in both postcolonial resistances to imperialism and giving identity to the English-speaking population by writing in their language.

It seems strange, though, that the Knight, who was described first in the “General Prologue” and selected by Chaucer to tell the first tale, would tell a tale such as this. While praising the imperialistic instances, there were still examples of postcolonialism through his narration. Why then would he have such a contradictory narrative? The answer lies with Schütte’s law and the order of preference. Chaucer most likely selected the Knight to tell this first tale because he had little predilection toward him. As a member of the emerging middle class, Chaucer would place the Knight first to appease to the standards of polite society but does not prefer him as he is a member of the first estate, those who still exhibited Norman-like qualities. Since he was placed first, though, Chaucer must be attempting to make a statement. He gave the Knight a romance, a genre that originated in France. The text, according to Charles Muscatine, leans heavily on conventional forms and utilizes the “high” rhetoric style (173). The pace is “deliberately slow and majestic . . . [and Chaucer] frequently resorts to the rhetorical device of *occupatio* to summarize in detail events or descriptions in such a way as to shorten the story” (Muscatine 177). These shortened sections are the ones that concentrate on the imperialistic qualities of Theseus. Frequently throughout the text, the Knight would focus on great, ornamental detail of feasts and glamorous attributes of Theseus’s wealthy, but would gloss over key imperial instances. Since the tale is a romance, this could also be a comment upon the

Norman views of England. The great aspects were praised while the colonial instances were glossed over, as to appear less imperialistic.

The question still remains though as to why this tale was placed first, besides as a comment upon Chaucer's preferential treatment of pilgrims. Perhaps the answer can be found in relation to what occurs after Palamon wins the battle and Emelye becomes his wife:

For now is Palamon in alle wele,  
 Lyvyng in blisse, in richesse, and in heele,  
 And Emelye hym loveth so tenderly,  
 And he hire serveth so gentilly,  
 That nevere was there no word hem bitwene  
 Of jalousie or any oother teene.

Thus endeth Palamon and Emelye. (Chaucer 3101-7)

The Knight gives the tale a “happily ever after” and says that is the end of Palamon and Emelye. However, the audience is aware that life goes on afterwards. There are seven lines to summate the rest of their lives after a rather lengthy explanation of how they were united. The audience is left wondering, perhaps, what is next. The answer can be found within the rest of *The Canterbury Tales*. Chaucer shows the English people their history in just over 3100 lines and demonstrates through a postcolonial attitude that England has regained, or at least redefined, their identity. “The Knight’s Tale” is placed first to show that what happens after is what is evident in current society. The rivalries between friars and summoners, a feminist wife, and the Parson who closes the storytelling, giving a sermon on morality, are all parts of this civilization. Perhaps Chaucer is presenting how England got to the point it was currently at through “The

Knights Tale” to show the English people where they were with the rest of the tales, and then offers his own solution with “The Parson’s Tale.”

“The Knight’s Tale” is Chaucer’s subaltern commentary on his post-Norman society. Although most of the influences from the Conquest had faded away, the English identity still had remnants of Norman imposition—English was inferior to French and the social hierarchy was similar to that in Normandy, for example. By altering two well known texts, Statius’s *The Thebaid* and Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, the character of Theseus became a metaphor for Chaucer’s perspective. The placement of this tale within the constructs of *The Canterbury Tales* seems to challenge the audience to become active; by clarifying what English society had become, Chaucer was encouraging his readers to take an active role in redefining Britain’s identity.

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