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# Reimagining the Feminine Role in Fin Amor: Feminine Compassion as Agency in Geoffrey Chaucer's The Knight's Tale

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**Reimagining the Feminine Role in Fin Amor: Feminine Compassion as  
Agency in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale***

by

Taara Ness-Cochinwala

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

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Lehigh University

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Taara Ness-Cochinwala

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“Reimagining the Feminine Role in Fin Amor: Feminine Compassion as Agency in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale*”

Taara Ness-Cochinwala

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## Abstract

This paper argues for a revised reading of the feminine role in Fin Amor. Guided by an interest in the presentation of gender in *The Canterbury Tales*, I was specifically invested in the question of whether there is more to the woman's role in the *Tales*, than a misogynist objectification that it is often written off as. Grounding this interpretative question in the notion of Fin Amor or Courtly Love, I aim to offer a theoretical contribution, which reevaluates the dynamic between masculine and feminine lovers, and a concrete contribution, which applies this theory specifically to *The Knight's Tale*, to glean a modern and progressive interpretation of the woman's role, and what it has to offer in a Boethian world, like the *Knight's*.

## Introduction

Discussing the historical and continued relevance of courtly love in literary culture and amorous relations, Larry D. Benson eloquently states, “The pangs of unrequited love and the suffering that necessarily accompanies it have been part of Western courtship for centuries” (Benson 238). A medieval conception of expressing one’s love in a noble and chivalrous fashion – *Fin Amor* involves *suffering for and serving the object of one’s affection* (generally the lady), and waiting for a return of love, in response to the lover’s call<sup>1</sup>. Despite the persistence of this convention both on the page and off, thus far the emphasis on suffering in courtly love has typically focused on the masculine lover alone. As I understand it, this has been the trend in critical discourse because prominent scholars like Slavoj Žižek have read the woman as unable to *actively suffer and return love*, due to her status as a ‘*passive object*’ of masculine desire<sup>1</sup>. Rethinking the feminine role, I argue that this is in fact a misinterpretation and misrecognition of the woman. Because the feminine lover does not suffer in the ‘traditional,’ masculine manner, her uniquely feminine suffering has gone unnoticed, causing her to be misinterpreted as passive and incapable. Thus, while there has been a significant amount of feminist criticism on the feminine role in courtly love, that literature has tended to focus on the woman’s role as a blank screen onto which masculine desire is projected and unanswered. My approach proposes something rather different, that we can take seriously the role of the woman in courtly love as something

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<sup>1</sup> S. Žižek, “Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing.” (*The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, 1994), 89-112. In this article, Žižek elucidates and confirms this as the accepted understanding of Courtly Love.

more than an object, at least in certain medieval texts, even those that have conventionally read the feminine in terms of a passive object. Specifically, this paper aims to reimagine the lady's role in *Fin Amor* as an *active subject* and *source of virtuous feminine compassion*, rather than a *passive object of masculine desire*. To clarify, I assert that the woman is a subject, performing compassion and a source, teaching compassion. Refracting our traditional understanding of the feminine role, I contend that through this modern interpretation, we can clearly and accurately recognize the courtly lady's uniquely feminine suffering, through which she *actively and intentionally* responds to her lover's call. Using Geoffrey Chaucer's canonical work, *The Knight's Tale*, a text that has most commonly read the woman in the conventional manner, I hope to explore and prove my interpretive claims.

Uniquely attuned to the suffering of the *feminine lover*, my argument offers a different kind of feminist reading that does not foreclose further scholarship through a critique of misogyny. Instead, I hope to generate additional criticism by making a *theoretical contribution*, which reevaluates the dynamic between masculine and feminine lovers in *Fin Amor*, and a *concrete contribution*, which applies this theory particularly to *The Knight's Tale*, to glean an unconventional and progressive interpretation of the feminine role in courtly love, and its implications within a Boethian world like the *Knight's*. My humble aspiration is to offer feminist scholars a fresh and productive perspective with which to approach medieval texts and the notion *Fin Amor*, both of which are invested in learning virtue, understanding human desire, and reconciling the two; processes that are eternally ambiguous, complex and invaluable.

## I. Compassion as a Feminine Virtue: Compassionate Women

To support my understanding of the feminine role, in which the woman is *active* and defined by *feminine compassion*, rather than *passive* and defined by *masculine desire*, I will begin by clarifying the connotation of compassion both broadly, in the Middle Ages, and particularly, in *The Knight's Tale*. Turning first to historical evidence, we must be aware that linguistically, compassion, pity and mercy were used and thought of interchangeably in the Middle Ages<sup>2</sup>, and will be invoked accordingly in this paper. With respect to the historical moment, I will prove that compassion was considered a virtue in general, and more specifically, a *feminine* virtue. To validate compassion as a virtue and elucidate its past understanding, I defer to medieval philosopher, St. Thomas Aquinas, whose work would have been widely available in the later Middle Ages.

St. Thomas Aquinas defined the virtue of "mercy" in his *Summa Theologiae* (ST II-II.30.1) as "the compassion in our hearts for another person's misery, a compassion which drives us to do what we can to help him." For St. Thomas this virtue has two aspects: "affective" mercy and "effective" mercy...However, to be the authentic virtue of "mercy," it must manifest two additional characteristics. First, it must be rooted in "right reason"—that is, in the truth about the sufferings of others, and what is in fact the objective "good" for the other whom we seek to help. Secondly, the virtue of mercy is proven in effective action for the good of others, as circumstances permit. If we merely "sympathize" with the plight of another and "share their pain" without making the best of the opportunities we have to help them, then virtue of mercy does not abide in us in any significant degree (Stackpole).

Here, the emphasis on *reason* and *mercy* together, or mercy rooted in reason, as what motivates the will to action is noteworthy. This will be of greater significance when considering the *Tale's* Boethian reflection. Like Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* depicts a world where one must constantly negotiate

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<sup>2</sup> Middle English Dictionary (University of Michigan Digital Library Production Service, 2001).

between reason and desire, or ‘resoun’ and ‘solas.’ Within this Boethian world, we will see how the virtue of feminine compassion, which I argue can be learned from Fin Amor, becomes relevant and valuable. First, it affords a deep understanding of the world, which operates on the terms of reason and logic, *unlike* human desire. Second, it equips one with the compassion to cope with and relieve what reason cannot – with what is unreasonable or irrational, like human emotions that result from the very disconnect between reasonable means and desired ends. In this way, we will see how mercy rooted in an understanding of reason, motivates the will to compassionate action, to succor what reason cannot. The fact that this is an *emotion*, which spurs *action*, is also relevant for my reading of the courtly lady who becomes an *active participant* through her *compassion*. Yet, what is crucial at this point is simply that we have established mercy as a virtue, as it was accepted to be in the Middle Ages. Through its virtuous status, mercy becomes significant because courtly love, as confirmed by scholar Larry D. Benson, is a source for learning or acquiring *virtue*. He writes, “What distinguishes this style of love from the styles of other times and places is not only the theme of suffering...The distinction lies rather in the conviction that this sort of love is admirable -- that love is not only virtuous in itself but is the very source and cause of all the other virtues, that indeed one cannot be virtuous unless he is a lover (Benson 241). Thus, having established compassion as a virtue and courtly love as a source for learning virtue, we must now examine the gendering of compassion to locate it within the structure of courtly love and more specifically in *The Knight’s Tale*.

While critics like Sarah McNamer have identified compassion as a distinctively feminine virtue in religious literature<sup>3</sup>, there has been less consideration of feminine compassion in the political or courtly context. Though the courtly context is particularly pertinent for this paper, an understanding of compassion in both circumstances is helpful, as my argument will build upon what has already been established. In the religious framework, McNamer traces the beginnings of feminine compassion to the literary genre, affective meditation on the Passion. Caroline Walker Bynum explains, “women, because they were considered more ‘carnal’ than men, could identify more fully with the incarnate Christ, whose suffering body was understood to be symbolically feminine” (McNamer 27). Though McNamer establishes compassion as an emotional ability that came naturally to women, she explains that men could activate this ability through gender performance, writing, “compassion, as scripted in and through Middle English meditations on the Passion, is largely a function of gender performance: to perform compassion is to feel like a woman” (McNamer 119). This is further apparent from the genre’s adoption of feminine subject positions from which to perform compassion: bride, mother, handmaid, and feminized man<sup>3</sup>. From this, it is evident that in order to compassionately identify with another being, one must either be a woman or “‘act natural,’ like a woman,” (McNamer 120). Thus, we have confirmed that compassion was a specifically feminine virtue in the religious sphere, felt and induced by inhabiting the subject position of a woman or importantly, a *feminized man*.

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<sup>3</sup> S. McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).

Moving on, though scholarship on *feminine* compassion in the courtly context is lacking, Louise Fradenburg helps establish the importance and influence of *compassion in general* in this domain. Of significance, is that she attributes compassion in the civic arena to learning in courtly love. In her article, "My Worldes Blisse": Chaucer's Tragedy of Fortune, she explains that from the twelfth century on,

In the religious context of the laicizing and massifying of devotional practice, love was associated with a highly valorized understanding of pity. In the twelfth century, the secular discourse of courtly love, central to which was the capacity of the "gentil herte" (noble heart) to feel pity, began to formalize and groupify an amorous experience that would dignify aristocratic subjectivity. Putting amorous suffering and consolation into discourse involved the development of laws, taxonomies, and scenarios for public debate and entertainment. In the "cadre" of the court, one was in or out, one fell or ascended, according to one's ability to speak of love." (Fradenburg 1)

While Fradenburg asserts the influence of pity broadly in the courtly context, she also specifically associates a 'highly valorized understanding of pity' with aristocratic or courtly *love*, claiming that the capacity to feel pity is in fact '*central*' to courtly love. By associating the ability for and understanding of pity with experience in courtly love, we can verify that Fin Amor is indeed a source for learning and acquiring pity. This complements Aquinas' claim, which suggests one who loves is more capable of mercy. He writes, "The person who *loves* regards his friend as another self, and so he counts his friend's troubles as his own, and grieves over them as if they were his own" (Aquinas II-II.30.2). Further, by characterizing pity in this context as elevated or 'highly valorized,' it can be understood as the virtue of pity or mercy— the elevated form of this trait, and likened to the lady's elevated position in courtly love. From this evidence, we can deduce not only that compassion is a virtue learned from Fin Amor, but also that it is one

specifically linked to the *feminine role*, and thus a *feminine virtue* in both the religious and courtly spaces.

Having corroborated the femininity of virtuous compassion in multiple contexts, I would like to address a complication concerning the nuanced manifestations of compassion in the religious versus the courtly circumstance. In the religious realm, the context being a meditation on the suffering of Christ, the goal of compassion is to lose oneself, becoming wholly absorbed in the process. The *human* performing compassion is subsumed by Christ's suffering at the hand of his *divine affect*, and through this, one can empathize with and understand the most human part of Him. Differently, in the courtly context, the lady bears witness to the suffering of an earthly figure, like herself. Thus, the goal is not to become completely absorbed or lose oneself in the suffering of another, whose humanity is already understood. Instead, the goal is simply to alleviate the suffering of another in turmoil, to 'make the best of the opportunities we have to help them,' as Aquinas suggests (Stackpole). Furthermore, it should be impossible to be completely subsumed and erased by the suffering of another human being, who by definition is not capable of the same affect as the divine. Thus, in performances of secular compassion, the woman does not empty herself out to be filled up by the emotions of another, such as the male's desire for her; instead, *she retains and relies on her feminine identity*, virtue and emotional ability to alleviate the suffering of another. This will become increasingly clear as we examine characters in the text, whose capacity for compassion varies according to their gendered identity. As Aquinas states, "our affective sympathy for others arises from our capacity for empathy," (Stackpole). Through this important distinction we have begun to destabilize the traditional interpretation of the

feminine role in Fin Amor. The distinct and complex nature of the feminine identity is now evident; the woman is not simply a blank screen, whose identity is defined by and dependent on masculine desire<sup>1</sup>, as previous critics have suggested. Instead, because it is *necessary* for the woman to maintain her unique and complex *feminine* identity – naturally imbued with the capacity for virtuous compassion, in order to offer relief, it is clear that the feminine identity is defined, at least in part, by feminine virtue and endures independent of her relation to the male.

At this point, we have established compassion as a distinctly feminine virtue in both the religious and courtly contexts. We have also made the important distinction that, whereas following performances of feminine compassion in a religious circumstance, remnants of divine identity and experience persist in the woman; in a courtly framework, personal identity and feminine virtue endure. Thus, we can move forward with a clearer understanding of the connotation of compassion in the Middle Ages at large. Turning next to *The Knight's Tale*, I suggest a particularized understanding of feminine compassion that is informed by the historical evidence already mentioned, and textual support that will follow. In *The Knight's Tale*, I understand the virtue of feminine compassion as the defining feature of the feminine role in Fin Amor, the virtue learned from the feminine role, by the masculine lover, and a determinant of fitness in the Boethian world of the *Tale*. In this way, I see the courtly lady as a subject and source of feminine compassion; she actively participates in the process of Fin Amor by *performing* and *teaching* mercy, to offer and produce something unique from the masculine lover.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Žižek, "Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing." (*The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, 1994), 89-112.

Turning to the text itself, I point to a moment that exemplifies the courtly lady's performance of compassion, providing evidence for the feminine role as a subject of compassion. Establishing the feminine identity and role as substantiated and activated by feminine virtue rather than defined and objectified by masculine desire is crucial to disavow the reading of her as a passive object. This in turn will be critical when discussing the woman's potential to return love, which until now, has been limited by the current, conventional understanding of her identity and role as inactive. For now, however, I'd like to turn to one of the most controversial moments in the text, in which Emily prays to the goddess Diana. In my reading of the *Tale*, this is the first instance that Emily vocalizes her personal desires, but what those desires are, how and why she changes them are of the utmost significance. Emily prays,

'Chaste goddesse, wel wostow that I/ Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf./ Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf./ A am, thow woost, yet of thy compaignye./ A mayde, and love huntynge and venerye./ And for to walken in the wodes wilde./ And noght to ben a wyf and be with childe./ Noght wol I knowe compaignye of man./ Now help me, lady, sith ye may and kan./ For tho thre formes that thou hast in thee./ And Palamon, that hath swich love to me./ And eek Arcite, that loveth me so soore./ This grace I preye thee withoute moore./ As sende love and pees bitwixe hem two./ And fro me turne away hir hertes so/ That al hire hoote love and hir desir./ And al hir bisy torment, and hir fir/ Be queynt, or turned in another place./ And if so be thou wolt nat do me grace./ Or if my destyne be shapen so/ That I shal nedes have oon of hem two./ As sende me hym that moost desireth me' (Chaucer 2304-2325).

As I stated above, this is the first instance readers are made aware of Emily's personal desire: to be a maiden. What is significant here is the content of her desire. Emily wishes to live a life of purity and virginity; she strives to uphold virtue and thus is working towards the supreme Good in the world. While her desire to work on behalf of the force of Good writ large is significant in itself, it is perhaps more important that Emily recognizes the particularity of her desire, and all individual desires for lesser (earthly)

goods. In other words, she understands that insofar as what we truly desire is an ideal, that desire supersedes the material world we live in. Thus, our natural longing for the ideal Good is deflected or misrecognized, fixating instead on particular attainable goods, like maidenhood, that may emanate from but are not equivalent to the Good writ large. In keeping with this logic, one can assume that Emily also understands the irrelevance and misdirection of both Arcite and Palamon's particular desire for her. In spite of this, Emily, as a woman is inherently compassionate and therefore recognizes the futility of this rational, of *reason* to relieve the grief felt by Palamon and Arcite, who continue to long for her, unable to understand the Boethian world they inhabit, or reconcile reason and desire as she does. Thus, it is the lady's deep understanding of the world order and virtuous compassion that allows her to be *flexible* with her desire, shifting what she wants to accommodate that of another being in turmoil. So, while many have read this moment as a weakness of the woman, a simple submission to male desire, it is much more complex than that and in fact quite the opposite. In this moment, we are shown the woman's steadfastness to *feminine* virtue. Looking closely, the feminine role becomes clear; Emily participates *through* virtuous compassion, *on behalf* of her desire to uphold the Good, thereby submitting to the will of the *divine*, not man. Emily does not passively take fate as it comes to her, but *acts intentionally*, praying *first* for what she believes will alleviate the suffering of both men – a restoration of their bond to each other, “This grace I preye thee withoute moore,/ As sende love and pees bitwixe hem two (2316-7). Only after this does she submit to the desire of the divine, *not man*, stating that *if it is not the goddess' will* to grant her mercy in this plea, then “As sende me hym that moost desireth me;” in other words, send her the one who suffers most (2325). Read in this way,

feminine compassion is revealed to be influential and *integral* to the feminine identity. Guiding and enabling her to work on behalf of *her own* desire, for the Good, the courtly lady becomes an *active subject* of feminine compassion, proving my claim.

Moving forward, Emily's motivation to work towards the ideal Good rather than individual goods informs us about the philosophy at work in *The Knight's Tale*, and the role of feminine compassion within it. We now know that the *Knight's* world operates on the specific terms of Boethian philosophy. To understand the function of feminine compassion within this philosophical structure, I will begin by summarizing the reflections of Boethian thinking that inform the *Tale*. To do so, I rely on Mark Miller's chapter, which succinctly spells out the similar philosophical problems investigated and expressed in Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* and Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*. Generally speaking, both works explore the nature of human desire, considering what meaning or 'sentence' we can gain from what we desire, and if those desires are truly satisfying, or an impediment to our happiness. Rooted in Books II and III of the *Consolation*, Miller reiterates Lady Philosophy's debate on desire and happiness. Her argument proceeds like this: if we ask people what they want, they will likely respond with a list of multiple goods, for example, possessions, money or fame. If we then inquire why they want these things, they will likely respond that they think having them will make them happy. Thus, we uncover what people truly desire: happiness. Here, Miller picks up on what is problematic about the relation between desire and happiness, explored by both Boethius and Chaucer. The capacity to gain true happiness from particular, earthly goods is unfounded because they are mere deflections of the ideal Good that we truly desire, and as such, they are always unsatisfying.

Instead,

Real happiness can only be achieved through the possession of what is supremely good: something that suffers no lack, something that can never change, something that relieves you of the desire for anything else. And there is only one candidate for the status of a supreme, unchangeable, perfect good that contains within itself all other goods, and that is God. True happiness, then, rests in union with the divine; and since everyone wants happiness, what everyone really wants is union with the divine. (Miller 114-5)

In his discussion, Miller makes the important clarification that “Happiness is not a matter of ‘feeling good’ or of being in any other desirable psychological state; it should rather be understood as something like an agent’s fulfillment in pursuing an activity she sees as good” (Miller 116). The courtly lady, Emily has already demonstrated a manner to pursue activities, which garner true fulfillment, through feminine compassion. Seeing Arcite and Palamon in turmoil, *Emily acted out of compassion*, shifting her personal desire for maidenhood to alleviate the suffering of others because she saw it is an activity that *upheld the supreme ‘Good’* she truly desires, thereby giving her greater fulfillment. Furthermore, because the *emotion of mercy drove her to act* in a way that alleviates the suffering of another, we have verified the courtly lady’s role as a subject of *virtuous* feminine compassion, and witnessed how this feminine virtue can be used as a tool to successfully negotiate and gain satisfaction from a world that is otherwise, often dissatisfying (Aquinas II-II.30.1). In this way, we have clarified the role of virtuous feminine compassion within the larger philosophical structure of the *Tale*, a tool with which to reconcile reason and desire, to the extent that is humanly possible, and orient our actions toward the supreme Good, that is truly fulfilling.

## II. Gender Performance and Feminization: Compassionate Men

Having uncovered the function of feminine compassion, we are now aware of its value in a Boethian world, like the *Knight's*, riddled with problems of human desire. With this in mind, the question arises of how to learn and acquire this virtue. While both Boethius' and Chaucer's works similarly explore the problems of reconciling 'sentence' and 'solas,' meaning and desire, I see *The Knight's Tale's* manner of understanding and solving this problem as uniquely invested in Fin Amor and the gendered roles within it. Specifically, by invoking and fantasizing about the idealized, otherworldly lady in Fin Amor, masculine courtly lovers are confronted with the problem in which desire for an ideal is impossible to satiate in the material world, and by consequence, the lack and dissatisfaction inherent to particular, earthly goods. In this way, *The Knight's Tale* exposes the problem of human desire through Fin Amor, and presents a solution through the feminine role, which I understand as a *source* from which to learn feminine compassion.

To test my claim, we will examine the woman's interaction with and affect on the masculine lover. In this discussion, I will consider both mature and immature courtly lovers to evaluate the woman's ability to teach and unlock this virtue in men, and whether it is in fact a determinant of fitness in this world. Beginning with the mature courtly

lover, Theseus, we will notice similarities to Emily in his understanding of the problem of desire, as well as the tactics and tools he relies on to grapple with it. Throughout the *Tale*, we see him similarly *feel* the compassion of women, show flexibility with personal desire and *act* in accordance with what he believes to fulfill the Good. Of significance is that Theseus is “usually seen as an idealized ruler characterized by wisdom and justice,” and arguably the character most well adjusted to the world of the tale<sup>4</sup>. Knowing this, the fact that Emily’s understanding of the world and actions within it parallel those of Theseus, suggest that we can take seriously her character, her role and potentially that of all other courtly ladies (at least in this *Tale*). In Theseus’ introductory scene, we can notice the philosophical problems of the *Tale* invoked and encountered yet again. More importantly, we witness his feelings and actions in response to those problems as reminiscent of the courtly lady’s. Returning from battle and en route to celebrate his victory, Theseus comes across a group of women pleading for his mercy to rescue the ravaged bodies of their husbands from the tyrant Creon, so they can be laid to rest. While the women’s entreat provides further insight into the complexity and depth of the problem of human desire, Theseus’ response has important implications for my claim that the feminine role is a source of learning compassion – the tool with which to combat this problem. In an attempt to induce compassion, the widows implore,

Have mercy on oure wo and oure distresse!/ Som drope of pitee, thurgh thy gentillesse./ Upon us wrecched women lat thou falle./ For, certes, lord, there is noon of us alle/ That she ne hath been a ducheese or a queene./ Now be we caytyves, as it is wel seene./ Thanked be to Fortune and hire false wheel./ That noon estaat assureth to be weel./ And certes, lord, to abyden youre presence./ Heere in this temple of the goddesse Clemence/ We han been waitynge al this fourtenyght./ Now help us, lord, siwth it is in thy myght (Chaucer 919-930).

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<sup>4</sup> V. J. DiMarco “Explanatory Notes to The Knight’s Tale” (*The Canterbury Tales Complete*, Ed. Larry D. Benson, 2000), 359.

In this entreat, the discussion of ‘Fortune and hire false wheel’ recalls the problem of human desire similarly confronted by Emily. This reference specifically speaks to the disconnect between the material goods afforded by Fortune and those often undeserving individuals who receive them, thus demonstrating another manner in which material goods are unsatisfying. Harkening back to the speech made by the allegorical figure, Lady Reason in the 13<sup>th</sup> century poem, *Romance of the Rose* the figure of Fortune’s Wheel embodies Lady Reason’s ideology. In this figure, Fortune is depicted as a queen because her control is limited to earthly gifts and pleasures. Fortune is also blinded because she “apportions her gifts without regard to merit” (Miller 1). What we gather from this moment and the Boethian philosophy that informs it, is that the world of *The Knight’s Tale* operates on the terms of ‘resoun.’ According to Fortune’s false wheel, sometimes you are up, sometimes you are down, and this occurs independent of merit. There is no karmic sense of justice in this world, because ‘resoun’ has the ultimate and natural ‘maistire’. With this in mind, it is curious that the Theban widows would cite this figure to persuade Theseus to be merciful and do good works, if his individual actions and personal merit are irrelevant to his fortune. However, the fact that the women do cite Fortune in this manner implies their understanding of the problem of human desire, and the fact that their pain persists *despite* understanding the ‘resoun’ or rational behind it. Thus we begin to see how reason is incommensurate to the problem of human desire. The fact that they plead for *mercy instead* supports my understanding of mercy as a more adequate solution to relieve the pangs of lost or unrequited love and desire.

To assess the efficacy of the feminine role in teaching this virtue, we turn to Theseus’ reaction, “This gentil duc down from his courser sterte/ With herte pitous, whan

he herde hem speke./ Hym thoughte that his herte wolde breke./ Whan he saugh he, so pitous and so maat./...And in his armes he hem alle up hente./ And hem conforteth in ful good entente” (Chaucer 952-8). Here, the affect of the feminine role is clear; the courtly male is both moved by the women’s plea for mercy and able to enact the compassion of women in response. The multiple references to Theseus as ‘pitous’ to the point where ‘Hym thoughte that his herte wolde breke,’ demonstrate his ability to *feel* compassion. Theseus’ ability to *feel as a woman would* recalls the portrait of the Knight in the *General Prologue*, described as “though that he were worthy, he was wys./ And of his port as meeke as is a mayde” (Chaucer 68-9). Because both Theseus and the Knight in the *General Prologue* have been established as idealized figures, it seems that we should take seriously their repeated feminization, perhaps as exemplary, *as what makes them ideal*. Considering this in light of what we have already established in terms of the value and role of this feminine virtue, and the inadequacy of reason, I suggest that feminine compassion is the ideal tool to cope with the problem of human desire inherent to a Boethian world, and feminization, the prerequisite. Continuing on, the *actions* Theseus takes in response— immediately leaping down from his warhorse to physically comfort the women, then entering battle without question to avenge the death of their husbands and alleviate their grief at the peril of his own life, evince his fulfillment of the virtuous form of compassion as Aquinas defines it. Having demonstrated the successful learning of feminine compassion in a masculine figure, we turn to the process of this learning: feminization through Fin Amor.

Because Theseus, married to Hipolita, has evidently passed through courtly love on his way to governance, we can characterize him as a mature courtly lover. Further, his

ability to enact feminine virtue, *feeling* and *acting* as a woman, implies his feminization. So, while the masculine courtly lover learns the virtue of feminine compassion from the *source*: the courtly lady, the process is more complex. He must *first* become feminized, adopting a feminine subject position and *feeling* like a woman, to access and unlock this *feminine* virtue. Sarah McNamer's findings, discussed earlier, corroborate this claim. She writes, "compassion...is largely a function of gender performance: to perform compassion is to feel like a woman" (McNamer 119). Referring to the genre, affective meditation the Passion, McNamer finds that while initially only targeting women, the genre remained inextricably linked to its feminine origins, even when adapted to include male readership, in order to generate compassion. Openly advertised as texts originally written for women, the gendered subject positions, which in addition to traditional feminine roles included the *feminized man*, were a more subtle strategy to make readers *feel* feminine. The maintenance of these overt and discrete techniques, which infiltrated femininity into the genre regardless of the reader's gender, validates my claim for femininity as a precursor to and requirement for compassion. Further bolstering my argument, McNamer cites a telling example in which medieval religious writer, Richard Rolle, cross-dressed as a woman in order to perform compassion (McNamer 119). From this evidence and the character of Theseus, we can conclude that feminization, achieved through the feminine role in *Fin Amor*, is the necessary process through which to learn and unlock the virtue of feminine compassion in men. This conclusion will be further confirmed by the following example, depicting entirely masculine individuals, incapable of feminine compassion. Turning to immature courtly lovers, Arcite and Palamon, who have not yet experienced the feminine role or feminization in *Fin Amor*, we can

definitively determine the woman's role as an active source of feminine compassion in the *Knight's* world.

Moving forward, Chaucer as the Knight tests the understanding of both readers and characters traversing the *Tale* by constructing ethical dilemmas of human desire, which recall the established philosophy. To do this, he introduces immature courtly lovers, Arcite and Palamon who do not comprehend their Boethian world, as Emily and Theseus do. In the early stages of Fin Amor, Arcite and Palamon are exposed to the problem of unrequited love and human desire, suffering for a lady they cannot attain. In the midst of their grief, the reader's own understanding is tested. Using direct address, the narrator implants us into an ethical dilemma, inquiring, "Yow loveres axe I now this questioun:/ Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamoun?/ That oon may seen his lady day by day./ But in prison he moot dwelle always;/ That oother where hym list may ride or go./ But seen his lady shal he nevere mo./ Now demeth as yow liste, ye that kan./ For I wol telle forth as I bigan" (Chaucer 1347-1354). Upon first examining this passage, we notice the literary technique of direct address, requiring the reader to experience the same quandary as the characters. Having already affirmed this as a test for readers' comprehension of the world they have entered, I will not discuss its use at length but to say that Chaucer expects the reader, when finished, to have garnered new insight and similarly question the meaning of desire in the context of his or her own world, as well as those of the *Tales* that follow. Next, by referring to this amorous issue as a 'questioun,' glossed as: a logical problem, the philosophy of the tale is invoked yet again. This purposeful diction<sup>5</sup> recalls the perspective that everything, apparently even love is meant

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<sup>5</sup> G. Chaucer, "Chaucers Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn." (14<sup>th</sup> century).

to operate on the terms of logic and reason. However, by virtue of the fact that Arcite and Palamon are in this predicament, suffering from ailments, which they fail to see are logically versions of the same problem, it is clear that they also fail to understand the rational world at large and the compassion to empathize with one another. Thus, their immaturity in *Fin Amor* is apparent. The four lines that follow reveal the particular problem of each knight. Notable here is that both the form and content of these lines is logical and equivalent. The problem of each knight is enumerated in a parallel structure; first revealing what is advantageous about each situation (Arcite, still imprisoned has the ability to see his desire; Palamon, released from prison has the ability to move toward his desire). Second, revealing what is problematic about each situation (Arcite, incarcerated, is unable to move towards his desire; Palamon, exiled, is unable to see his desire). Along with the parallel structure the problem is presented in, we notice a parallel content: Arcite's disadvantage is Palamon's advantage and vice versa. Additionally, when read in the Middle English, all four lines have the same number of syllables. Thus, the structure, content and form of these lines, when read in the Middle English, reveal the problem of each knight as utterly and logically equal. As a result of this lucid logic, and the pervasive suffering of the knights in spite of it, this passage also serves to characterize reason as ineffective in combating emotions like grief. Feminine compassion, on the other hand, would be a more appropriate tool to alleviate the pangs of grief, yet it is clear that both men, unacquainted with the feminine role and unable to 'feel like a woman,' are unable to enact it.

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This short poem establishes Chaucer's anxiety about scribal culture, his desire for identical replication of his work and consequently that there was clear and purposeful intention behind his diction.

The passage ends with, “Now demeth as yow liste, ye that kan,/ For I wol telle forth as I bigan” (Chaucer 1353-54). Of significance here is the qualified request to only those readers *that know how* to judge the problem. By using a conditional statement, the narrator reveals that only those who understand the world of the Knight are equipped to assess this problem and succeed in this world, riddled with ethical dilemmas of this very kind. From this, we can deduce that Arcite and Palamon are at this point unfit to succeed in the world of the *Tale*. I attribute this to their immaturity in Fin Amor, leaving them unfeminized, unable to enact feminine compassion and thus unable to cope with emotions like grief, for which reason has no efficacy, thereby proving this feminine virtue to be a determinant of fitness in the *Knight's* world.

Having now evaluated immature courtly lovers, it is clear that *without* experiencing the courtly lady in Fin Amor, the *source* of this virtue, men are unable to enact feminine compassion, at least in this text. Whereas Arcite and Palamon fail to empathize with even each other, even while suffering the same fate, Theseus, the mature courtly lover incredibly manages to show mercy towards both knights, who have contested his authority on multiple occasions. Finding Arcite returned from exile and Palamon escaped from prison, Theseus' personal, particular desire is to kill both knights immediately. Yet, again we are shown his feminine compassion and flexibility with desire,

The queen anon, for verray wommanhede,/ Gan for to wepe, and so dide Emelye,/ And alle the ladyes in the compaignye./ Greet pitee was it, as it thoughte hem alle./ That evere swich a chaunce sholde falle./ For gentil men they were of greet estaat./ And no thing but for love was this debaat;/ And saugh hir bloody woundes wyde and soore./ And alle crieden, bothe lasse and moore./ ‘Have mercy, Lord, upon us women alle!’/ And on hir bare knees adoun they falle./ And wolde have kist his feet theras he stood;/ Til at laste aslaked was his mood./ For pitee renneth soone in gentil herte./ And though he first for ire quook and sterte./ He hath

considered shortly, in a clause./ The trespass of hem bothe, and eek the cause./  
And although that his ire hir gilt accused./ Yet in his resoun he hem bothe  
excused./ As thus: he thoghte wel that every man/ Wol help himself in love if that  
he kan./ And eek delivere himself out of prisoun./ And eek his herte had  
compassioun/ Of women, for they wepen evere in oon;/ And in his gentil herte he  
thoghte anoon./ And softe unto himself he seyde, 'Fy/ Upon a lord that wol have  
no mercy' (Chaucer 1748-1774).

Whereas the previous passage revealed immature courtly lovers to be incapable of feminine virtue and unfit for this world, in this singular moment Theseus exemplifies both feminine virtue and fitness in the world. A close reading of this passage not only affirms Theseus' understanding of this world governed by reason, but also confirms the source of his understanding and ability to succeed within the world, to be feminine compassion. To clarify, I am referring to Theseus' ability to both comprehend the 'maistrie' or authority of reason, and enact the compassion necessary to combat those things that reason cannot, both of which make him more successful and satisfied in the world of the *Tale*. Returning to the text, the passage begins with the women weeping in a display of pity for the knights, which the narrator attributes to 'verray wommanhede:' sheer or genuine womanliness. Tara Williams helpfully breaks down the etymology of the term, womanhood, allowing us to accurately interpret its connotation within the historical context. At a moment of radical social change, the conceptual limitations for imagining women were corresponded by what David Burnley refers to as a 'lexical gap,' in which language lags behind societal changes, and thus lacks the words to describe the new circumstances (Williams 6). In this moment of lackadaisical linguistics, Chaucer coined the term womanhood<sup>6</sup>. Continually incorporating this term into his sources and original works where he typically discarded other coinages after a few uses, "This

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<sup>6</sup> T. Williams, *Inventing Womanhood – Gender and Language in Later Middle English Writing*. (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2011).

anomalous usage suggests the significance of the notion of womanhood to Chaucer and indicates an interest in representing women in ways that depart from tradition” (Williams 6). Though “the most established avenues to authority for women were spiritual,” Williams distinguishes Chaucer’s use of this term to “investigate forms of feminine power, such as intercession and mediation, that can occur in a secular context,” and can be accomplished, as I will demonstrate, through secular compassion (Williams 7). Through their own display of mercy, women are able to both unlock and provoke the virtue of feminine compassion in the (mature, feminized) male lover, thereby ‘interceding’ or ‘mediating’ in the male authority’s course of action. This is confirmed by textual evidence, which demonstrates women, *joined by their womanhood and because of their femininity*, actively mediating in masculine authority and asserting feminine authority, “And alle crieden, bothe lasse and moore./ ‘Have mercy, Lord, upon us women alle!’ ” (Chaucer 1756-7). Evidently, this display of feminine compassion and womanhood does not depend on estate or rank, as women ‘bothe lasse and moore’ participate. Here, we see feminine compassion transcend class and *universally* attributed to women, when they invoke their gender to inspire compassion in Theseus, intercede in his authority, and assert their own agenda to uphold the supreme Good.

Here, the women’s display of mercy is productive for my argument in multiple ways. First, their ability to intercede in masculine authority and redirect his actions to fulfill the Good exemplifies how *action* and *agency* are linked to the virtue of feminine compassion, which defines the feminine role in *Fin Amor*. This debilitates previous readings of the courtly lady as a passive object, and strengthens my reading of her as an active subject and source of learning. Second, the universal ability of women to enact

feminine compassion destabilizes previous understandings of the feminine identity, which saw her as solely defined by and dependent on masculine desire. Instead, the fact that feminine compassion is a naturally occurring, permanent feature in all women, while masculine desire is an artificial, fleeting feature in some women, supports my interpretation of the feminine identity as defined primarily by feminine virtue and durable independent of her relation to the male.

Following the women's display of mercy, Theseus' reaction also importantly confirms the source of the knowledge and ability that equip him for the world he inhabits. While Theseus is admittedly, initially angry at the knights' trespasses, we are told that his mood soon calms, "For pitee renneth soone in gentil herte" (Chaucer 1761). This line is significant since it makes the distinction that pity is activated in a 'gentil herte,' one of noble *character* not rank, proven by the medieval connotation of 'gentil'<sup>2</sup>. Thus, in contrast to the women, for men, compassion does not transcend class, instead a *lack* of compassion does; and a man must be of noble character rather than birth or estate to unlock the virtue of feminine compassion. From this, we can ascertain that first – because men require noble character, even virtuous character to activate the virtue of feminine compassion, and second – because courtly love is a source for learning virtue, and the courtly lady is a source of virtuous compassion, that a man must experience the feminine role in Fin Amor – *feel* and *act* like a woman, to achieve what she does. The mature and feminized courtly lover, like Theseus, has done just this.

The source of his knowledge and ability to negotiate through this world is finally clear in the rationale he provides for sparing the knights' lives: 'resoun' and

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<sup>2</sup> Middle English Dictionary (University of Michigan Digital Library Production Service, 2001).

‘compassioun/ Of women’ (Chaucer 1766, 1770-1). It is through this rational that I interpret the source of Theseus’ fitness in the world as feminization through Fin Amor. In citing reason, Theseus demonstrates his comprehension of the natural authority that both governs and problematizes this world. This problem, realized through the feminine role in Fin Amor, lies in the fact that the objective, *rational* world is always at odds with *irrational* human desire, and emotions that result from that very realization. In citing ‘compassioun/ Of women,’ the enjambment of the lines suggests a certain ambiguity; does Theseus have compassion *of* the women, or does he have compassion *for* women? I see this ambiguity as intentional, yet again testing the readers—do we understand the role of the courtly lady, the role of compassion? I would like to boldly claim that I do, interpreting this purposeful structure as indicative of a dual meaning: Theseus has compassion *of* women (i.e. the feminine virtue of compassion) *and* compassion *for* women. This corresponds to the lady’s dual ability to unlock feminine compassion *in* men *and* provoke compassion *from* men. Thus, it is through feminine compassion gained from the feminine role in Fin Amor, that Theseus has unlocked a solution to the problem at hand. Though this world is ruled by reason, he can enact mercy to succor what reason cannot— what is human, what is irrational. Thus, as I have claimed throughout, the courtly lady is a *subject* of compassion- performing mercy when the lover suffers from the problem of human desire, and a *source* of compassion, teaching mercy as a solution to this very problem. Having solidified and supported my interpretation of the feminine role and identity, we move into my final claims, that invoke and apply this understanding.

### III. Feminine Return Love and the Implications of Feminine Virtue

Having established the feminine role as an active subject and source of feminine compassion, I assert my final claims concerning the potential for feminine return love, that has been unfounded thus far in scholarship, and finally the implications of femininity in the Boethian world of the *Knight*. Specifically, I aim to prove that through the revised feminine role, we are able to clearly recognize that the woman does actively suffer for and return love to the masculine lover, *in a uniquely feminine way* that has previously been un- or misrecognized, as a result of its deviation from the masculine norm. Secondly I will show that it is the feminized man, who has learned the virtue of feminine compassion through the feminine role in *Fin Amor* that is capable of *accepting* feminine return love, and succeeding in *The Knight's Tale*.

To begin, I would like to use the argument set forth by philosophical giant, Slavoj Žižek to explain why scholarship thus far has seen the woman in courtly love as a passive object, incapable of actively answering and returning the call of love to the masculine lover. While Žižek is not emblematic of all scholars writing on *The Knight's Tale*, I do think he makes a convincing argument for the debilitating reading of the feminine figure, exemplary of the common complaint of feminist scholars. While Žižek asserts the

traditional view of courtly love, in which the man views the woman as otherworldly, elevating her to the status of an unattainable ideal, he differently argues that she is in fact within reach. However, he quickly forecloses this potential to attain her, explaining that the “the detour in the psyche isn’t always designed to regulate the commerce between whatever is organized in the domain of the pleasure principle and whatever presents itself as the structure of reality” (Žižek 94). In other words, the lover prevents himself from realizing the availability of the woman by personally constructing obstacles, not to heighten libido or enjoyment of love<sup>1</sup> but to thwart the realization that she is a misrecognition of what he truly desires; that she is, in actuality lacking and dissatisfying, like all earthly goods – that she is *not* an otherworldly ideal, but an ordinary woman. He does this by elevating her to the level of “the Thing, of the ‘black hole,’ around which desire is organized” “as a limit whose Beyond is inaccessible” (Žižek 96, 91). Žižek refers to this, as the male’s “protective fantasy structure” (Žižek 108). Shattering this protective fantasy structure and forcing masculine lovers to realize what Žižek refers to as their biggest fear, the misrecognition of their desire, is return love from the feminine figure.

While I agree with Žižek up to this point, and commend his seminal work, showing that the lady is in fact within reach, I do not foreclose her potential accessibility as he does. Instead, I assert that feminine compassion first facilitates an understanding of the disconnect between reason and desire, more specifically, the disconnect between the reasonable, earthly means we have to attain our desire, and the human desire for an otherworldly ideal. This understanding effectively shatters the male’s protective fantasy

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<sup>1</sup> S. Žižek, “Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing.” (*The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality*, 1994), 89-112.

structure. Second, feminine compassion provides a solution to deal with that disconnect and resulting dissatisfaction. It allows the man to see the woman as she truly is: an ordinary woman, and accept her as that, doing so not to fulfill a particular, erotic desire, but as an act that fulfills the supreme Good, and is therefore *truly* satisfying. These actions importantly represent the solution posited in Boethius' *Consolation* – to give up much of what we believe about ourselves and our world, most notably the desirability of Fortune's particular goods, in order to redirect our actions and desires towards our true *telos* or ultimate aim, the supreme Good (Miller 121).

With this in mind, we turn to Žižek's understanding of 'return love,' to determine if the proposed solution can be realized within its structure. He writes,

To exchange, in a metaphorical gesture, his status as the loved one for the status of the loving one. This reversal designates the point of subjectivization: the object of love changes into the subject the moment it answers the call of love. And it is only by way of this reversal that a genuine love emerges: I am truly in love not when I am simply fascinated by the *agalma* in the other, but when I experience the other, the object of love, as frail and lost, as lacking 'it,' and my love none the less survives this loss (Žižek 104).

Here, we notice that Žižek's concept of return love is predicated on the masculine or 'loving one's' vision in courtly love of woman or 'object of love' as ideal, as not real. Thus, the exchange of return love is only possible when first, the object of love responds to the lover's plea, thereby descending from the ideal pedestal she has been placed atop, and reveals herself for who she really is, not an ideal, but an ordinary woman; and second, when the masculine lover (now object of love) has experienced her as she truly is, and accepted her. Thus, it seems that through feminine compassion, feminine return love and masculine acceptance of that love, is possible. This brings us to Žižek's next complication.

Aside from blows to the male ego, psyche and satisfaction, Žižek cites the apparent consequences to feminine identity, as the primary factor preventing the woman's ability to return love. He states,

This very semblance of man serving his Lady provides women with the fantasy-substance of their identity whose effects are real: it provides them with all the features that constitute so-called 'femininity' and define woman...as she refers to herself with regard to her (potential) relationship to man, as an object of his desire. From this fantasy-structure springs the near-panic reaction – not only of men, but also of many a woman – to a feminism that wants to deprive woman of her very 'femininity.' By opposing 'patriarchal domination,' women simultaneously undermine the fantasy-support of their own 'feminine' identity (Žižek 108).

While Žižek claims that the woman's femininity is at stake in moving into the traditionally masculine role to return love, this is because he views her as a passive object, whose feminine identity is so unstable, insignificant and simplistic that it is entirely made up of and requires the 'fantasy-substance' provided by her role as an object of masculine desire, to persist. However, through my revised version of the feminine identity and role, which accurately complicates the substance and active ability of a woman, we know that her identity endures independent of her relation to the male. While I do not deny that in her initial and traditional feminine role, the courtly lady is in part characterized by masculine desire, I affirm that in any and every role, she is *primarily* defined by virtuous feminine compassion. And because this *feminine* virtue is universally attributed to women regardless of class, occupation or time, we know that a woman's femininity persists even when occupying a traditionally masculine role, making feminine return love, entirely possible.

I make this argument with one important caveat. For the exchange of return love to succeed, and the masculine lover to both recognize and accept the lady as she is, the

man must be feminized. To clarify, I suggest that the man must be a mature courtly lover, having experienced the lady or other in courtly love (as Žižek's definition of return love suggests), *felt* like a woman by embodying her role as witness to the lover's suffering (through the reversal in subjectivization), and thus unlocked the virtue of feminine compassion to give '*le done de merci*, the gift of mercy' what Jacques Lacan refers to as one of the final stages of courtly love (Lacan 152).

To clarify my claim, I will outline the process of feminine return love, demonstrating how we arrive at these ends. Once the lady answers the male's call for love, an exchange in roles occurs. She is brought down from the elevated status he has raised her to, becoming the lover, suffering for his acceptance. The man, now the object of love experiences the woman at an attainable level and sees her as she truly is: an ordinary lady and misrecognition of his true desire for an ideal. Despite realizing and experiencing her lack, the subjectivization has reversed; he now occupies the traditional feminine role, bearing witness to the lover's suffering. It is *through experiencing the feminine role*, that the masculine lover is able to fill himself with the *emotion* of feminine compassion, *driving him to compassionate action* to relieve the suffering (feminine) lover and in turn, unlock the virtue of feminine compassion. In this process, he must shed part of his masculinity – his particular erotic and earthly desire, replacing it with the feminine desire for the supreme and ideal Good. Through feminization and feminine compassion then, the male lover realizes particular desires as unimportant and becomes flexible. He shifts his desire to accommodate that of the lady, alleviates her suffering, and accepts her, as she is – an act that upholds the Good and brings him true fulfillment. In this way, the male courtly lover has gained an understanding of the world and the significance of

desire within it; he is able to reconcile meaning and desire, ‘sentence’ and ‘solas,’ *through feminine compassion*. He has achieved all of this as a result of feminization and feminine virtue gained through Fin Amor, amended to include return love from the woman.

Having argued for feminization, which produces an understanding of the rational world and ability to perform feminine compassion, as a determinant of fitness in the *Knight’s* world, we now turn to textual evidence. At the point of Arcite’s death, when Emily is finally within Palamon’s reach, we find him is in the midst of return love from the feminine figure. Emily has agreed to the terms of the battle and he has won; thus his call for her love has been answered. Yet, now that she is finally attainable and the protective ‘fantasy-structure’ has been shattered, he sees her as she truly is, a misrecognition of his desire. Furthermore, he must grapple with the death of his dear cousin Arcite, whom he has sacrificed to achieve a desire he now realizes to be unsatisfying. For the benefit of both Palamon and the reader, who jointly grieve over Arcite’s excruciating death, the feminized and experienced courtly lover, Theseus performs an act of (feminine) compassion. He consoles,

“ ‘The Firste Moevere of the cause above./ Whan he first made the faire cheyne of love./ Greet was the’effect, and heigh was his entente./ Wel wiste he why, and what thereof he mente./ For with that faire cheyne of love he bond/ The fyr, the eyr, the water, and the lond/ In certeyn boundes, that they may not flee./ That same Prince and that Moevere,’ quode he./ ‘Hath stabalised in this wrecched world adoun/ Certeyne dayes and duracioun/ To al that is engendred in this place./ Over the whiche day they may nat pace./ Al mowe they yet tho dayes wel abregge./ Ther nedeth noight noon auctoritee t’allegge./ For it is preeved by experience./ But that me list declaren my sentence./ Thanne may men by this ordre wel discernen/ That thilke Moevere stable is and eterne./ Wel may men knowe, but it be a fool./ That every part dirryveth from his hool./ For nature hath nat taken his bigynnyng/ Of no partie or cantle of a thyng./ But of a thyng that parfit is and stable./ Descendynge so til it be corrumpable./ And therefore, of his wise purveiaunce./ He hath so wel biset his ordinaunce/ That spesces of thynges

and progressiouns/ Shullen enduren by successiouns./ And nat eterne, withouten any lye./ This maystow understonde and seen at ye” (Chaucer 2987-3016).

In this speech, Theseus elucidates the philosophy of this world, one of stability and reason. Sagely, he does so by explaining the logical reasoning used to create this world in the first place, in which a limit was placed on all life to engender a form of stability and natural succession that dissuades corruption. By explaining the reason behind mortality, Theseus invokes compassion to address the grief Palamon feels for Arcite’s death; in this way we see him exercising the tools and products of feminization to navigate the world. He again alludes to the authority of reason by referring to men that do not understand or yield to this natural philosophy as fools— individuals defined as lacking judgment. This is noteworthy when recalling the Middle English connotation of ‘resoun,’ as judgment. Thus, even Theseus’ critique follows a logical progression; someone who does not understand a world based on reason would inherently and obviously lack reason. In this way, we see the form and content of Theseus’ words and actions affirm his reliance on the tools obtained from feminization through Fin Amor, to thrive in this world. Finally, Theseus advises, “Ther nedeth noght noon auctoritee t’allegge./ For it is preeved by experience,” compelling Palamon to experience these truths on his own (Chaucer 3000-1).

Before Palamon does so however, Theseus, having clarified the necessity and understanding of ‘resoun’ in this world, remarks on the equal if not greater importance of virtue, because as even Boethius admits, it is impossible for irrational and fallible mortals to ever completely enact an objective and rational solution. As Miller iterates,

It is a basic condition of the human that the reflective drive cannot reach an absolute limiting point, a perspective stripped of all subjective contribution. There is no point at which a rational creature, no matter how intent on reflection,

can declare itself free of the danger of finding itself compelled once again by the incoherent seeming's that masquerade as a firm and fixed reality. (Miller 129)

Considering and recognizing the objective truth of both the world and our humanity, Theseus calls on the *necessity* of virtue, first stating, “Thanne is it whysdom, as it thynketh me,/ To maken vertu of necessitee,” the importance of virtue in this world is made clear (Chaucer 3041-2). He then specifies, “For gentil mercy oghte to passen right,” confirming the undeniable value of mercy in particular, to succeed in this world (Chaucer 3089).

Armed with this understanding, Palamon revisits his own life experience, in which the tables have turned and he is put to the test. Having received a response of love from Emily, an act that alleviated *his* suffering, their status' and subject positions have reversed, and he now bears witness to *her* suffering. Occupying this traditionally feminine role, Palamon is able to feel the emotions of a woman and now of 'gentil herte' (or noble character), he can enact the virtue of feminine compassion. In the process, he rejects his masculine motivation to work towards a particular earthly good, adopting the feminine counterpart, to work on behalf of the universal Good. Through the feminization that results, he is able to have mercy on the lady, demonstrating flexibility with desire, to alleviate her suffering and accept her as she is,

“And thus with alle blisse and melodye? Hath Palamon ywedded Emelye./ And God, that al this wyde world hath wrought/ Send hym his love that hath it deere aboght;/ 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 ther no word hem bitweene/ Of jalousie or any oother teene” (3097-3106).

Thus, as a result of feminization through Fin Amor, a process, which *crucially includes* feminine return love, the male courtly lover has gained access to the knowledge and

ability necessary to succeed in the Knight's world. From the passage above, we notice the bliss achieved by Palamon, now a feminized courtly lover; and from the *Tale* as a whole we observe the wisdom and content attained by Theseus, also a feminized courtly lover. From these details, I would like to make the final claim that insofar as what we truly desire is an otherworldly ideal, feminization through Fin Amor, in which the courtly lover rejects his desire for an *earthly good* to work on behalf of the *ideal Good*, brings us closer to attaining that desire than ever before, leaving us more satisfied than ever before. While Fortune limits our pleasures to the material on earth, making the immaterial ideal never fully within reach, the partial pleasure experienced in suffering *for* that ideal is the truest form of fulfillment possible on earth, since we are finally suffering for a desire that is accurately recognized.

Perhaps the fitness of the feminized courtly lover is most evident in this world, by looking at its converse, the un-feminized, immature courtly, who has failed to complete the process of Fin Amor. Here, that title belongs to Arcite. Because Arcite dies in the midst of Fin Amor, before experiencing return love from the lady and occupying the feminine subject position, he is unable to enact the full form of virtuous, feminine compassion. Despite this, his life and death are not a total failure. While Arcite falls short of truly reconciling 'sentence' and 'solas,' meaning and desire, he has at least realized that this a universal problem, one that we all experience and endure on earth, and is able to sympathize with that fact. This is evident in his final speech, his dying words,

'Naught may the woful spirit in myn herte/  
Declare o point of alle my sorwes  
smerte/ To yow, my lady, that I love moost./  
But I biquethe the servyce of my  
goost/ To yow aboven any creature./  
Syn that my lyf may no lenger dure./  
Allas, the wo! Allas, the peynes stronge./  
That I for yow have suffred, and so longe!/  
Allas, the deeth! Allas, myn Emeleye!/  
Allas, departyng of oure compaignye!/  
Allas, myn hertes queene! Allas, my wyf./  
Myn hertes lady, endere of my lyf!/?

What is this world? What asketh men to have?/ Now with his love no win his cold grave/ Allone, withouten any compaignye.? Far wel, my sweete foo, myn Emelye!/. . . I have heer with my cosyn Palamon/ Had strif and rancour many a day agon/ For love of yow, and for my jalousye./ And Juppiter so wys my soule gye./ To speken of a servaunt properly./ With alle circumstances trewely--/ That is to seyen, trouthe, honour, knyghthede./ Wysdom, humlesse, estaat, and heigh kynrede./ Fredom, and al that longeth to that art--/ So Juppiter have my soule part./ And in this world right now ne knowe I non/ So worthy to ben loved as Palamon./ That serveth yow, and wol doon al his lyf. And if that evere ye shul ben a wyf./ Foryet nat Palamon, the gentil man' (Chaucer 2765-2797).

In the opening lines, we notice Arcite's inability to fully reconcile meaning and desire, to bridge the concrete with the abstract. Referring to Emily as his 'hertes queen,' his 'wyf,' his 'hertes lady,' and finally characterizing her as 'aboven any creature,' Arcite's failure to see the lady as she truly is, a misrecognition of his true desire, is evident (Chaucer 2775-6, 2769). Insofar as he has not recognized her as she is, she remains otherworldly, on a pedestal; this is most clear in his characterization of her as 'aboven any creature' (Chaucer 2769). Here we notice the crucial nature of feminine return love to complete the process of feminization and achieve fitness in this world. Because Arcite has not experienced feminine return love, he has not occupied the feminine position of the 'loved one' and cannot see the woman as she truly is – a mere human who like him, wrestles and suffers with the insatiable problem of human desire. Due to his lack of complete feminization and inexperience with feminine return love, Arcite is unable to empathize with Emily, and blames her as, 'endere of my lyf' and 'my sweete foo' (Chaucer 2776, 2780). While upon his death, Arcite is still only capable of thinking in terms of particular, masculine desire for earthly goods, he at least realizes that this is not a unique problem, and one that at least all masculine lovers must endure, stating 'What is this world? What asketh men to have?' (Chaucer 2777). Thus, while Arcite demonstrates an understanding of this problem, because he has not experienced return love from a woman to complete

the process of Fin Amor, he is unable to fully enact the solution. Incapable of virtuous feminine compassion, Arcite seems unable to show mercy towards women, like Emily, who are too far removed from his limited ability to empathize. He *is* however able, to be merciful to another man, who occupies a role more identifiable to him, like Palamon. He states, “As in this world right now ne knowe I non/ So worthy to ben loved as Palamon./ That serveth yow, and wol doon al his lyf. And if that evere ye shul ben a wyf./ Foryet nat Palamon, the gentil man’ (Chaucer 2793-7). In this way, we see how Arcite’s life is not an utter failure, but a partial success. With an understanding of the problem, without a fully realized solution, Arcite enacts *part* of the virtue of feminine compassion, according to Aquinas – he *feels* and expresses the emotion, but *cannot act* to reduce suffering because for him, it is his very inability to act, his closeness with death, that brings about this realization. By examining masculine courtly lovers prior to, in the process of and after completing Fin Amor, it should now be clear that feminization, resulting from the feminine role and feminine return love, determines fitness in the *Knight’s* world.

Having reached a critical and final juncture in my argument, I would like to situate my overarching claims in terms of the critical discourse. While Elaine Tuttle Hansen’s article, “Women as the Same in the A-Fragment,” similarly discusses gender and feminization in *The Knight’s Tale*, my argument is a rather drastic divergence. Whereas Hansen characterizes Palamon and Arcite as feminized, critiquing them for their resulting inability to develop into ‘noble, *manly* heroes,’ I have distinctly claimed that it is initially their *lack* of feminization that impedes their nobility and debilitates them in the world at large (Hansen 212). Thus, in a final attempt to evince my argument, I will test its stability against that of another scholar whose argument is thematically linked but

essentially different. Interpretively, I see this tale as a romance, wrestling with the problems of sentence and solas in a world that denies the pangs of unrequited love and pleasure, and positions a solution to this dilemma in feminization through *Fin Amor*. Differently, Hansen interprets the tale as centrally grappling with the paradoxical demands of patriarchal authority and self-definition in a culture that molds men to a particular chivalric model, and locates a way out of this dilemma in aristocratic masculinity. Though she does not state this outright, I see the structure of Hansen's argument, which takes on a political angle, as comparing immature and established figures of masculine authority in an aristocratic setting. To exemplify the former, she cites Arcite,

The transformation that Arcite suffers when he is exiled to Thebes—his enervation, his weeping, and the alteration in his speech and voice, ‘that no man koude knowe’ (Chaucer 1370)—suggests the threat to selfhood and manhood, to both class and gender identity, that love of a woman (even when that means merely talking about and gazing at her) inevitably poses” (Hansen 211).

Unpacking this claim in Hansen's argument, I have to disagree that love of a woman is presented as a threat to selfhood and manhood, and is in fact the opposite. While Arcite does undergo a change in class, this is of his own doing. He is released from prison and makes the choice, on his own accord, to return and become Theseus' servant. His change in speech and voice are merely attributed to the disguise he must adopt, having been exiled by Theseus. The fact that Arcite goes to such lengths to return and take on this role, and is evidently upset before able to do so, does not characterize him as an effeminate man, but rather a man suffering from the pangs of unrequited love, a man serving his lady in *Fin Amor*. Thus these actions do not suggest the threat that love of a woman poses to manhood, but instead confirms his hetero-normative and masculine

desire for a woman. Furthermore, courtly love is not a threat to selfhood, but a source for self-definition. As previously stated, Larry D. Benson points out that “the distinction lies rather in the conviction that this sort of love is admirable -- that love is not only virtuous in itself but is the very source and cause of all the other virtues, that indeed one cannot be virtuous unless he is a lover (Benson 241). As Hansen herself admits, Arcite and Palamon have been read as indistinguishable, attributing this to their apparent feminization. She is correct that they are initially indistinguishable, however, the only thing that ultimately differentiates one from the other, that defines their selfhood is their experience in courtly love, and the feminization that results from it. Thus, the problem Hansen sees as inherent to the text—a struggle for self-definition in a world that promotes an adherence to set chivalric types, is in fact solved by feminization, what she cites as *causing* this very problem.

Having assessed the stability of my argument against that of a fellow scholar, I hope to have proven its depth and durability. While Elaine Tuttle Hansen is anxious about the threat posed to manhood and selfhood by love of a woman and its consequence, feminization, I hope to have eased her anxieties through my argument for quite the opposite. That is, this *Tale* is in fact about how the process of loving of the woman is a *source* for self-definition, learning and success in the world; the woman’s role in Fin Amor, which feminizes the man is *necessary* for the male courtly lover to not only be recognizable but successful and satisfied in a world in which masculinity alone is insufficient. In framing a place for this argument in the critical discourse, I hope to have paved a way for feminist scholars to rethink medieval texts and the notion of Fin Amor, which have conventionally been read as misogynist or marginalizing women. Instead, I

hope that we can now take seriously the role of the woman in courtly love as more than a passive object of masculine desire, and instead a complex being substantiated by feminine virtue, who is capable of actively suffering and returning love, in a uniquely feminine way that sees those acts as fulfilling the supreme Good. Through her inherent compassion, the woman is able to actively intercede in masculine authority, to assert her own agenda for the Good; in the process, she spreads feminine virtue and the best available solution to the problem of human desire, to compassionately help others in turmoil, to promulgate virtue and achieve true fulfillment. With enduring identity *distinct* from the masculine courtly lover, the courtly lady is a source of virtue, compassion and knowledge, which in the world of the Knight at least, the man is utterly inept without. Thus, while what Hansen ultimately gleans from the text is, “The truly decisive winner is the aristocratic ideal of manhood,” I beg to differ (Hansen 214). The truly decisive winner in *The Knight’s Tale* is the ideal of womanhood, a term coined by Chaucer, defining the intangible features of a woman whereby a man can be saturated with womanhood, utterly feminized, and still be a man, and a more noble, satisfied and successful one at that.

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## Vita

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