

RESEARCH

Chaucer's Treatment of Outlawry in *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Knight's Tale*

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The medieval outlaw appears in historical, religious, and legal texts of late Medieval England and is imagined in fiction as well, specifically in the romance narratives of Geoffrey Chaucer. Outlawry was a legal state that could be imposed. Chaucer found himself occasionally outside the law at different points of his life, an item to consider when examining Chaucer's representation of knights acting outside the chivalric code. He populates his romances with outlawry, illustrating the ethical, legal, and social assumptions of their own times. In Chaucer, knights can sometimes be outlaws, and when they are, they are often portrayed as running amok or going mad, leading them to a quest or to an act that must be completed before they can be reintroduced into society. Early critics Maurice Keen and Eric Hobsbawm narrowly defined what they saw as outlawry in medieval literature, but the more recent work of Timothy S. Jones renews the possibility of better examining outlawry's intersection with medieval romance.

Outlawry has traditionally been associated with the narratives of Robin Hood. Yet broadening the definitions of what constitutes an outlaw narrative can lead to fresh readings of Chaucer's work. To be outlawed, in medieval fiction, carries with it an additional displacement of a character's connection to others. In this project, I examine fictional knights tarrying in outlawed space while grounding my argument in historical narratives. In doing so, I illuminate how outlawry intersects with medieval romance, unveiling chivalry's ideological blemishes.

Keywords: Chaucer; outlawry; Wife of Bath; Knight's Tale; medieval England; medieval crime

Outlawry in the Middle Ages: An Overview

Outlawry, banishment, and exile have long histories, varying in duration and social context. Early forms of legal outlawry were deeply rooted in community involvement, characterized by arbitrariness. To contextualize my argument concerning fictional treatments of individuals breaking the law, I will briefly outline the historical background on outlawry as a legal practice, which influenced Chaucer's time. In addition, I will highlight how fictional depictions of outlawry differ from outlawry as a legal practice. Outlawry as a means of social exclusion has taken on several forms, but the most prevalent in England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was the declaration of a person to be outside the protection of the law. In medieval England, there existed different punishments, including exile and imprisonment. In a 2013 study, Melissa Sartore examines the complexity of outlawry in historical narratives, highlighting the significance of exclusionary practices in law and governance in England from the tenth through the thirteenth centuries. The purpose of outlawry as a legal practice, as a whole, functioned as "the root of many 'pure' and 'affective' punishments, such as the death penalty and imprisonment" (Sartore 9). Criminal outlawries arose from indictments for treason, rebellion, conspiracy or other serious felonies. Civil outlawries were generally proclaimed in cases of debt. An outlaw forfeited all goods, rights, and often, his life.

The application of the law in medieval England, despite there often being few bailiffs to enforce it, was frequently employed by the king's chief officer — the sheriff. The sheriff could arrest and imprison criminals and was obliged to hold several courts, the most notable being the county court, which was held every four to six weeks. This court, in particular, served as the location at which men were declared legally outlawed.

If a criminal were at large, he would be summoned to this court. If he failed to appear in court four times, he was declared an outlaw on the fifth occasion and subsequently could be beheaded (Pugh 194). As H. R. T. Summerson points out, it was also the county court in which "trials by battle" took place (Summerson 314). Such a trial could occur in the case of a severe crime, such as rape or arson. The accuser or the accuser's representative could fight the accused to determine guilt or innocence. In the event that the accused might be in a different county before his crime was discovered and could not be captured, he could be identified and steps could be taken "to ensure that he never came back, not only to his place of origin or to where his felony was committed, but to any other law-abiding community" (Summerson 313). The accused was then reduced to the status of "hunted vermin, liable to arrest when seen and execution when arrested" (Summerson 314). Such a status was, of course, that of the outlaw.

In fiction, Maurice Keen points out, an outlaw is a man who has literally been put outside the protection of the law, who eventually takes on the status of outlaw. Legal outlawry has been described as "a violent confession of failure" and as "an admission of weakness on the part of the law itself" (Barlow 314). Likewise, Keen states that the sentence of outlawry as presented in medieval fiction "implied an admission of weakness on the part of the law itself. You have defied us, the Law said to Outlawry, therefore we will disown you" (Keen 9–10). While legal outlawry proved useful as an alternative to a fine or as a response to serious crime and wrongdoing, in fictional accounts, outlawry appears as a marker of self-identity rather than branding by authority. Trevor Dean points out that what "medieval historians have usually done with medieval crime literature is look for the correspondences with history" (Dean 145). Furthermore, "a number of literary outlaws, both medieval and modern, were based on real, historical persons," including the protagonist of the *Tale of Gamelyn*.¹

James Bellamy points out that several rulers preferred to inflict immediate and severe punishments, yet there was still a period of time between the surrender (or capture) of a suspect and a trial when confinement in custody was essential. Bellamy states that there were "more sentences of imprisonment in the Middle Ages than in preceding centuries" perhaps because of "the actions of trespass following misdeeds... had broken the king's peace" (Bellamy 163–64). When courts found men guilty of such a count, the criminal was both responsible for damages and liable to a period in prison. As time went on, the act of casting a malefactor out of society, through means of exile or banishment, became replaced by mechanisms of social, political, and judicial control that included imprisonment.

As the law developed in England, so did the forms of punishment for specific offenses as means of correcting wrongdoing. Imprisonment was initially used to "gain compliance" and was not arbitrary (Bellamy 164). During the thirteenth century, imprisonment was used for a wide variety of crimes, including but not limited to: riots, forcible entry, misbehavior of officials, economic crimes, and offenses against statutes of laborers. These crimes, as Sartore points out, "all, in theory, touched the king" (Sartore 218). The same can be said of war criminals and trespassers. Such criminals "were subject to terms of imprisonment" (Sartore 219). Though most sentences typically lasted only a year or two, the king ultimately maintained full jurisdiction over how long the offender should remain imprisoned. Many of those who suffered in later medieval prisons and jails were not awaiting trial but rather, had already been "tried and sentenced to imprisonment, either as their sole punishment or as part of it" (Bellamy 163). Those sentenced were often imprisoned because other penalties, such as execution, were not available or preferred by the king. The destitute and alone were more likely to be unjustly punished. Those who demonstrated what was seen as abnormal behavior could also find themselves imprisoned.

The ways people of the Middle Ages understood various mental conditions and disabilities are reflected in medical and legal documents of the time. The questionable behavior of criminals is frequently linked with madness, and in medieval fiction, outlawry is often linked with the theme of insanity. Irina Metzler has worked through a disability studies lens to employ "a wide-ranging vocabulary to describe the phenomenon of impairment" in the Middle Ages (Metzler 4–5). In the Middle Ages, natural factors were believed to induce madness in individuals. Physiological makeup, the influence of the stars, the changing seasons, as well as social and cultural expectations, were thought to play a role. For example, Agnes Wyrseye became "mad after childbirth and killed her daughter," whereas Ida Crekton, oddly, intentionally "killed her child in childbirth" (Turner 121). Medieval physicians thought that physiological, astrological, and seasonal forces could affect the humoral balance and thereby induce madness. Bartholomeus and Robert Burton (slightly later sources

¹ *The Tale of Gamelyn* is a romance about a noble robber who becomes a provincial hero. The story illuminates the corruption of the law during the reign of King Edward I. Richard W. Kaeuper examines in "An historian's reading of the *Tale of Gamelyn*" how court records have been used to verify the details of the story (Kaeuper 52).

than Chaucer) discuss how the balance of the humours is essential in maintaining proper health (Costerus 162). For them, Original Sin, often considered the primary catalyst in the imbalance of the humours in humankind, was ultimately responsible for illness and disease. Yet attempts to control one's physiological state were not only commonplace but also expected in the Middle Ages. Failure to maintain this physical balance was no different from a failure to control one's sinful urges. Through equating these failures, the people of the Middle Ages often made a connection between the spiritual and natural causes of insanity and criminal behavior.

The next section discusses Chaucer's depiction of a knight who exhibits criminal behavior resulting from a lack of self-control. When Chaucer wrote *The Wife of Bath's Tale* (WBT), the crime of rape in England was often conflated with the charge of abduction. Dean points out that during this time, "many medieval rapes involved an abuse of trust or authority by men," such as "kinsmen, employers, and officials" (Dean 85). Rape was not a prosecutable crime until 1275, and few prosecutions (which happened only in the form of private accusations) resulted in a jury verdict (Dean 82). The evolution of medieval England's law on rape is complex and muddy, but not uncommon to the continental laws shared by France and the Low Countries. Not until the fourteenth century did "state prosecutions of rape become possible," and likewise, the only successful prosecutions were typically framed by "extreme elements": the rape of underage girls, the betrayal of trust, or accusations by women of good repute (Dean 86). Consequently, the actions of Chaucer's unnamed knight in WBT mirror the occurrence of rape in the fourteenth century.

Outlawry in *The Wife of Bath's Tale*

Chaucer's WBT and *Knight's Tale* (KnT) concern knights who find themselves beyond legal protection, although for vastly different reasons. Chaucer's treatment of the outlawed (and usually exiled) knight in both KnT and WBT demonstrates the malleability of this literary figure. Outlawry and romance narratives center on the nobility, and particularly in WBT, the knight's conflict with the legal system points out his internal conflict between erotic desire and social obligation. The development of Chaucer's outlawed hero in WBT begins with the outlaw realizing he must use his newfound independence from the court's protection in order to negotiate his own set of social associations and accomplish his assigned quest.

Not every outlaw is a criminal on the run, nor, in WBT, is Chaucer's unnamed knight. However, this knight is not "a champion of the good and justice against a corrupt and flawed royal administration" either (Sartore 223). Chaucer's outlaws are not defenders of the penniless, per se. They sometimes challenge the idea that an outlaw be characterized as "good-at-heart," as the outlaws of the Robin Hood legends are. Not all outlaws operate in the service of their king but, instead, may serve the interest of their own needs and desires. Later, I will draw upon Arcite and Palamon's imprisonment by Theseus, duke of Athens, in KnT to further examine how outlaws change when beyond the king's rule. For now, I will consider the unnamed knight of WBT whose moment of outlawry derives from darker motives.

In WBT, a rapist knight, referred to here as "the unnamed knight," faces the sentence of death by King Arthur immediately following his attack on a young girl, which "rafte hire maydenhed" (888). However, the women in King Arthur's court "longe preyden the king of grace" so that instead the unnamed knight is exiled, sent on a personal and profoundly psychological quest as an outcast to discover what it is that women most desire (895). Although the unnamed knight does not go into the greenwood forests as in the Robin Hood legends, he does find, on the final day of his search, an old hag "under a forest syde," near the edge of a forest (990). It is upon entering this place that the unnamed knight begins to behave differently. Initially, he raped a young maiden with impunity but here he treats the old hag with politeness, calling her "leeve mooder" (1005). She will tell him the secret of what women want if he will do the first thing she asks – which is that he marry her.

Nevertheless, the knight resists union with the hag until she gives him a bedtime sermon, which calls on classical and medieval warnings against treasuring wealth, beauty, or social position. Perhaps, by having the hag in bed with him, the knight has metaphorically brought the wild and the forest into close proximity with him. By the tale's end, the unnamed knight ultimately matures as a result of his time as an outcast. It is important to note that Chaucer's unnamed knight is criminally impulsive, but not quite mad or lovesick – an important distinction from the subsequent examples of outlaws I will examine.

By pushing beyond conventions of romance, WBT complicates the idea of what an outlaw is. King Arthur and his knights are often represented in nearly ideal terms, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, yet often the convention of courtly love becomes a veiled and tolerable disguise for passion. The obsessive power of passion, like a kind of love-madness, operates as "a superhuman force which relieves the individual of his moral responsibility and exorcises guilt and shame" (Hughes 71). Chaucer's writing is deeply engaged with

the power of affect and shame on both minds and bodies. He returns again and again to the psychology of love and loss in the *Book of the Duchess*, *The Knight's Tale*, and *Troilus and Criseyde*, among others. Feeling and thinking, and the loss of both, play crucial roles in his stories. Corinne Saunders contends that while women were traditionally assumed to be more bodily and more emotional, "Chaucer emphasizes the relationship between thinking and feeling, the embodied nature of being in the world, across his works and across genders" (Saunders 12).

The idea of love as passion can be traced back to Constantine the African's chapter on love in *Viaticum*, an adaptation of a tenth century medical handbook. In *Viaticum*, Constantine argues that "just as loyalty is the most extreme form of affection, so eros is the most intense form of pleasure" (Wack 47). Eros, or erotic love, provokes the unnamed knight's actions. Likewise, Constantine states that just as unthinking fidelity is immoderate love for a lord, eros is "immoderate love for those to be possessed (sexually)" (Wack 47). By comparing intense sexual love to the ideals of loyalty to a lord, Constantine connects passion with chivalric service.

This connection was a literary convention by the time Chaucer wrote in the fourteenth century. Constantine's pupil Johannes Afflacius further developed *Viaticum* into the manuscript *Liber de heros morbo* to articulate a medical, technical term for passionate nobility. Yet immoderate love, or lovesickness, surface in circumstances in which aristocratic men exert an inordinate degree of power over women, generating fears of reprisal. Mary E. Wack points out that even Christine de Pisan, who elsewhere shows with eloquent pain the sufferings inflicted on women by patriarchal culture, "advocates obedient submission to husbands who may be brutally violent" (Wack 167). The conventions of courtly literature and medieval romance, despite the circulation of stories in which women temporarily or symbolically assume power and reverse hierarchal arrangement, embody a strong medieval sense of hierarchy in which man's place was on top.

In WBT, the rape of a maiden and marriage to a poor, old, and ugly woman conflict with powerful structures of masculine dominance in moments of unbridled desire. Unlike early social bandits and robbers, the unnamed knight, a "lusty bachelor," commits what modern readers identify as indisputably rape (883). To readers of Chaucer's time, this moment would stand out as a knight acting against chivalric code. Chaucer disrupts our expectations surrounding how such a story should unfold based on the conventions of earlier Arthurian legends. Rarely does Chaucer present such a shockingly straightforward account of sexual violence, though *The Reeve's Tale* comes close. Courtliness, in general, is a philosophy of self-control, yet the knight in WBT dramatically fails to maintain it. Libidinal and aggressive desires make the unnamed knight unable to remain within the bounds of normal social behavior, marking him as flawed.

In WBT, Chaucer creates a conflicting message on the nature of romance. As mentioned, modern readers instantly convict the knight for committing what we see as society's most notorious sign of social and sexual deviancy. However, Brian S. Lee draws attention to the troubling nature of the tale's message when he examines the rape scene precipitating the events of WBT: it was not meant to shock Chaucer's audience. What seems to be the casual inclusion of rape and the knight's indifference derive from a literary tradition that repeatedly depicts similar moments. One literary precedent to the WBT, the Old French *pastourelle*, is a subgenre of pastoral poetry that focuses on a maiden shepherdess. Descriptions that are usually comic or light-hearted saturate *pastourelles*, and initially, "unwilling victims soon grow compliant, then grateful, and finally eager for the knight's return" (Lee 19).

Additionally, the *pastourelle* rarely portrays the protagonist as a villain and openly favors male aggression. The rape in WBT, at least in medieval times, is less a crime against a woman than a breaking of the rule of Arthur's court. Chaucer's audience, and perhaps even modern readers, are given little time to ponder the maiden's safety and condition. Attention is quickly redirected to Arthur's authority and the expectations of his legal court; the maiden exits the story entirely. The knight must undertake his quest, but he receives no trivial award — such as good luck — but instead, enjoys a lifetime of "parfit joye" by the tale's end (1258). Having submitted to the will of his hag, he receives an obedient and beautiful wife and hence, the scene shocks modern readers because it is reported as casually as it happened; he is rewarded "as a matter of deliberate judicial policy" (Lee 17). Nevertheless, the knight indisputably commits a crime against the state and faces the ultimate punishment: death. What arises from this moment is a knight who is outlawed and exiled for breaking social order, rather than for performing an explicitly violent crime.

Chaucer's knight initially faces a death sentence because, "cours of law," the knight "shoulde han lost his heed" (35). It is the intercession of the ladies and Arthur's queen, presumably Guinevere, that formally positions the knight as an outlaw. Chaucer then thwarts readers' expectation that the crime will be taken seriously by shifting into the realm of fantasy.

When Arthur submits to Guinevere's plea and the demand that he discover what "women most desyren," the plot shifts dramatically, and the tone becomes sympathetic towards the sorrowful, excommunicated rapist; the story's focus moves away from chivalric ideals about justice. However, the knight's shocking behavior forces him to explore what he can, and must, do to regain the court's grace. His banishment from the king's protection for "A twelf-month and a day,/to seche and leere an answer," makes him both a legal and social outcast, a role that reconstructs the simple quest narrative of medieval romance as both an external and deeply internal search (900–01). The knight must question his pride, superficial values, and moral impairment in order to fulfil the court's demand that he find what women most desire. As Kathryn L. McKinley points out, critics traditionally read "the knight's concession to the hag as an act illustrating the virtue of passive obedience, and thus a final exemplum of women's wish for domination over their husbands" (McKinley 363). But Chaucer depicts the knight as deeply conflicted with his choice, as "This knyght avyseth hym and sore siketh" (363). Despite labeling the old hag as his "damnacioun," the knight ultimately submits (1068). And, after some additional words of loathing, a markedly changed knight speaks kindly:

"My lady and my love, and wyf so deere,
I put me in youre wise governance;
Cheseth youreself which may be moost pleasance...
For as yow liketh, it suffiseth me." (1230–33)

Finally, after she asks him if "I may chese and governe as me lest?" he gives a sincere "Ye, certes, wyf...I holde it best" (1237–38).

WBT becomes less and less concerned with the knight's ability to return to Arthur's court and function in the king's society. Rather, the exiled outlaw with his physically transformed lover transforms into a courtly lover himself. Gone is the youthful rashness focused on the knight's needs and desires. In its place is a relationship that more closely resembles a fairytale with a traditional happy ending, despite the narrator's final swipe at men.

I opened this essay by introducing the literary outlaw as a man of the forest. And while the unnamed knight wanders throughout the countryside seeking to learn what women most desire, it is worthwhile to examine in some detail the woodside encounter of the knight and hag, who appears when 24 dancing maidens disappear. In other words, Chaucer's forest in WBT is a habitat for supernatural creatures – such as the hag – and for outlaws. Psychological readings of wilderness suggest the outlaw's journey into the forest functions as a confrontation with the unconscious or the animal nature of human beings. As Jones points out, when the outlaw leaves behind "the cultural or social self" and is left to face "the natural self, he fashions a more complete identity" (Jones 41–42). The world outside the law offers a space for transformation and, contrary to early critiques of the woods as explicitly hostile environments in romance, the physical space outside the law can offer a respite from legal authorities that might even provide a sense of alternative community. And, as in WBT, this explicitly outlawed space provides banished knights with ways to forge new connections.

The world outside the law often appears emboldening, offering freedom of action and increased agency. Laura L. Howes traces Chaucer's experience of the land and how his knowledge of England's woodland shapes his representations of late medieval landscapes. Howes contends that his "firsthand knowledge of John of Gaunt's holdings and King Edward III's pleasure grounds and parks, among others, correlates to poetic depictions in the *Parlement of Fowls*, and in tales told by the Knight, Nun's Priest, Pardoner, Wife of Bath, and Friar" (Howes 125). In WBT, Chaucer's forest is a place for social outcasts as it houses the outlawed and the physically decrepit. The unnamed knight meets the old woman while riding home "under a forest syde," and she sits "on the green" (990). She is described by the narrator as so hideous that "A fouler wight ther may no man devyse" (999). The strangeness of the old woman – later seen to be a shape-shifter – seems to derive, in part, from the woodland she inhabits. The woods harbor those outcast from society and hence operate under rules and expectations sharply different from those imposed by the legal system.

The old hag's lecture offers the knight a "new way of defining desirability, and thus a way to attain sovereignty over himself by desiring only that which is reasonable and leads to the common good" (Thomas 94). In place of his desire grows an understanding of what women truly expect from men: sovereignty. I would argue that the knight's experience in the unpopulated woodland allows him to contemplate his actions in privacy and isolation not easily achieved elsewhere. Isolation leads to strange happenings and chance encounters in both medieval romance and in outlaw narratives. Furthermore, moments of isolation lead to moments of profound change beyond the court's influence. Chaucer's forests provide "space for wild

animals, outlaws, and supernatural figures" (Howes 133). By placing a noble outlaw beyond Arthur's court, Chaucer uses the outlaw motif as a way to explore the possibility of change and transformation in human nature.

However, WBT does not end in the woods. The tale ends with the knight and his newfound lover returning to Arthur's court to report his findings, completing the quest. Both in Arthur's court and in the bedroom, the outlawed knight has opportunities to repent of and abandon his wrongdoing. Susanne Weli argues that WBT, like its prologue, gives us a representation of conflict in relationships, a suggestion of how it might be resolved, and finally, "a pragmatic notion of how very hard it is to reconcile these human impulses" (Weli 37). The problem with the tale's romantic ending is that the knight is apparently rewarded for breaking a crucial social norm and for following his own desires. The knight followed his desires more than the law and chivalric code, demanding control over others when he has little to no control over himself. By the end of the tale, the knight receives bliss despite becoming the controlled rather than the controller.

The knight's understanding of sovereignty remains so uncertain that he passes up the opportunity to define what he truly desires. He is, after all, unable to choose whether he prefers obedience or beauty in women. When he responds to the old woman's question, he only says, "Cheseth youreself which may be moost pleasance" for "as yow liketh, it suffiseth me" (1232–35). However, neither option he is presented offers much depth. The knight ultimately gets both by the tale's end, "at the cost of giving up maistrie, but had he been willing to redefine his values, he might have received something less superficial" (Thomas 95). Surely, there are more than two potentially desirable qualities in women, but the hag constrains the knight's unruly desire by the choices she presents. His choice is between two shallow values. Although the knight resigns himself to his wife's preference, the ending of the outlaw narrative, as Jones points out, does not rely primarily on an assumption of resignation, the logical result of the abandonment of control. Rather, "the story of outlawry is open to a variety of endings," for when an outlaw is found guilty, he might "expect to pay a fine, suffer mutilation, or lose his life depending upon the crime" (Jones 48). In the case of WBT, the story's end conveys a sense of outlawry as malleable.

Outlawry in The Knight's Tale

In KnT, Arcite and Palamon's military excellence and episodes of violence demonstrate another aspect of the outlaw as a chivalric knight. These two young Thebans are captured and imprisoned by the Athenian ruler Theseus. Their imprisonment is a form of being outcast, since prisoners typically are criminals, but more central to this story, neither knight can speak with Emelye, the woman both desire. Emelye is their chief focus throughout the tale. The knights are also cut off from society as a whole when Arcite is eventually released as a favor to an ally, while Palamon remains imprisoned, with each knight wishing he were in the other's place. Their frustration suggests a form of psychological imprisonment as well, as neither sees the benefit of his position.

Following his release, Arcite undergoes a physical transformation. His desire for Emelye makes him so lovesick that he is "disfigured" and returns, unrecognized, to Theseus's court as a servant (1403). During this time, Palamon flees the prison with the help of a friend, intending to return to win Emelye; even as he escapes, however, he encounters the returned Arcite. Two outlaws face one another, one hiding in plain sight, self-exiled to a lower station in life, and one fresh out of jail. Both claiming the right to love Emelye, they agree to meet again, armed, and the vicious fight between them is described with animal images of lion, tiger, and bear. The knights are unrestrained in their violent behavior:

Thou myghtest wene that this Palamon
In his fightyng were a wood leon,
And as a crueel tigre was Arcite;
As wilde bores gonne they to smyte,
That frothen whit as foom for ire wood.
Up to the ancle foghte they in hir blood. (1655–60)

When Theseus and a hunting party find them, the king pledges to carry out the death sentence each is under, until he responds to the women's pleas—similarly to Arthur in WBT—and declares a formal tournament through which they can resolve their conflict. At the tournament, Palamon is rendered helpless and loses, but by the tale's end, Arcite dies from a wound received right after the battle. After years of desiring her, Palamon marries Emelye.

Both Arcite and Palamon are out-of-bounds at various points of the tale. Their first outlawed experience takes place under the strictures of Theseus's rule. The knights face isolation in the tower and their conversations depict the outlaw's psychological strain — partly due to isolation and partly to infatuation. Their status as outlaws carries across the tale, shaping their actions and physical conditions; shame and guilt play recurring roles in reframing the psyche of the out-of-bounds knights. Chaucer's outlaws reject the communal values of their society, shaping them as different. They are outlaws first because they are foreigners. Next, because they flout Theseus's command and finally because they attack one another. As outlaws, Arcite and Palamon display different behaviors in KnT, depending on the forms of punishment imposed: for one, forced isolation and banishment, for the other, self-inflicted exile and escape.

Cousins, Arcite and Palamon are prisoners of war, imprisoned by Theseus, who had "faught, and slough" Creon, "manly as a knight/In pleyn bataille, and putte the folk to flight" (129–30). The knights find themselves outside the law's good graces as enemies of Theseus, and separated entirely from Athenian society as a whole. Despite Theseus's decree that they will not be ransomed or pardoned, Arcite's punishment eventually is reduced from imprisonment to exile: "at requeste and preyere/Of Perotheus, withouten any raunsoun" Theseus "hym leet out of prisoun/Frely to goon wher that hym liste over al" (1206–10). However, Arcite may not, on pain of death, return to Athens. Thus, he is forced into a state of perpetual exile. Palamon, too, leaves the prison, but through the aid of an intermediary. Thanks to the "helping of a freend," breaks free from the prison "And fleeth the cite faste as he may go" (1466–67).

Arcite's and Palamon's initial sentence as outlaws lands them together in a human-made construction: Theseus's prison-tower. Jones points out that while the forest is the usual home of the outlaw figure, the artificial and "built environment inevitably lead to conflict and even catastrophe" for outlaws (Jones 130). Both knights experience conflict through their shared experience in Theseus's tower. Hence, this becomes the first out-of-bounds location in which Chaucer positions his knights and it is in this outlawed territory that incivility and psychological unsoundness take root. Outlawry in medieval legends often represents a struggle against authority and abuse of law, but Chaucer's outlaws in KnT demonstrate a more personal drive and expression of romantic dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction, a result and eventually a cause of their further outlawry, grows from the recurring pestilence that romance writers use to unhinge chivalric men: the intoxication of courtly love.

Upon the first time he "cast his eye upon Emelya," Palamon grows lovesick, "And therwithal he bleynte and cride, 'A!/As though he stongen were unto the herte'" (1078–79). However, as a prisoner, he is unable to pursue her. Arcite, while being the second to view her, argues that Palamon does not love her as a woman but rather that "Thyn is affecciuon of hoolynesse, /And myn is love as to a creature" and hence, it is he who is worthiest of her love (1158–59). Lovesickness shapes Arcite's physical appearance and thus, his actions upon his exile from the tower. It leads to his return and eventual recapture, and finally, causes his deadly battle with Palamon. Courtly love — a love for Emelye, to whom he has never spoken — also motivates Palamon's escape. It was not uncommon in the Middle Ages for romantic pursuit and scandal to lead to moments of outlawry, as murder and other forms of treachery often plagued the courts. Gwenyth E. Hood points out that "on the one hand, to feudal society, courtly love was irrelevant to marriage and potentially destructive of feudal relationships" and, to add more fire to the flame, "to the Medieval Church it represented the willful (and wicked) subjection of that highest of human faculties (reason) to unruly passion" (Hood 22).

Even in the Robin Hood legends, the outlaw is often motivated by a love interest, even if romantic love is not an initial motive. Lorinda B. Cohoon points out that across the many reimaginings of Maid Marian, from chaste to bawdy depictions, "Marian is always disruptive; her contrast to the band of merry men places significant pressure on outlaw hierarchies that replicate the patriarchal order of court and the town" (Cohoon 210–11). Furthermore, in later versions of Maid Marian, we see "Marian figures that are saintly and sexually provocative, loyal and loving, as well as skilled in outlaw strategies" (Cohoon 213). Likewise, Emelya, in her chaste and largely voiceless manner, ignites Arcite and Palamon's development as outlaws.

Chaucer's entanglement of lovesickness with outlawry demonstrates the complex relationship and intersection of romance and outlaw narratives. Outlaw stories are crafted by the historical and social situations of the times when they appear. Through this exploration of the development of the literary outlaw, I have shown how Chaucer uses the theme of outlawry to craft tales that complicate and reinvent the typical medieval romance story. The development of crime, punishment, and law touches each tale, as the medieval outlaw is equal parts cultural artifact and literary convention, reappearing again and again in medieval literature. If we read Chaucer's knights against the legal and cultural backdrop of medieval England, his characters emerge as far more complex than the traditional reading of them as solely chivalric figures.

Looking at popular figures, such as Arcite and Palamon, through the lens of outlawry refreshes our interest in their development as characters. And, by honing in on less examined knights, such as the knight in WBT, I believe we can find that medieval romance does intersect with outlawry, even if it is in discreet ways. These moments challenge the conventions of chivalric romance; medieval romance characters sometimes exhibit transgressive behavior that belies the expectations of the court.

The world outside the law, whether the traditional setting of the forest or the solitude of a prison tower, and the hardships of the exiled and imprisoned are frequently imagined in outlaw legends. The immediate threat of isolation reframes banished knights, who have no ready access to the king's justice. Jail breaks appear in Chaucer's romances. Figures sometimes flee from prison and choose exile, whereas others are confined to it. Such knights are frequently portrayed as leading desperate lives. Their desperation is often depicted through animal metaphors and imagery of wildness, leading to associations with madness and barbarism. Moments of animality intersect with outlawry. Arcite and Palamon transform physically and psychologically due to lovesickness. Chaucer portrays these changes by using animal and woodland imagery. WBT, too, features an unnamed knight who displays primitive behaviors. Images connecting wilderness to inhumanity occur in Chaucer's romances to highlight how outlawry often stems from conflict between knights and a lord but transitions into the fight for the love of a woman.

Arcite, Palamon, and the unnamed knight undergo experiences that force them to forge new identities. When the outlaw must reconstruct his identity in the flux of the world outside the law, he may renew a flawed community, as when Palamon's marriage to Emelye heals the breach between Athenian Theseus and Theban Palamon. But in WBT, Chaucer's knight emerges in what Hood describes as "love trickery." Questions of consent surround Chaucer's portrayal of the unnamed knight, depicting knights as possessing the potential to partake in illicit sexual interaction; this results in their being made outlaws. In WBT, Chaucer omits the maiden's response, and her family's reaction to the loss of her virginity remains equally hidden. What is most shocking is that we do see the knight ultimately rewarded for his violent behavior.

Chaucer's outlaw knights descend from psychological soundness and chivalric society into instability and exile, reshaping his characters once they are outside the court's protection. Each knight I have examined struggles with reframing his identity upon his being branded status as outlaw and outsider. Chaucer's contribution to the development of this literary figure, in an age marked by respect for authority, appears in his tales of knights who defy the law in recurrently violent ways. As Chaucer employs the outlaw figure, readers can see the malleability of romance as a genre, its development over time, and its longstanding entanglement with the outlaw narrative.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Gonzalez, Carolyn. "Chaucer's Treatment of Outlawry in *Wife of Bath's Tale* and *Knight's Tale*". *Anglo Saxonica*, No. 18, issue 1, art. 2, 2020, pp. 1–9. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/as.12>

Submitted: 18 October 2019

Accepted: 23 January 2020

Published: 24 March 2020

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