CHAPTER 2

Normative longing in the *Knight's Tale*

In chapter one I characterized the Miller's naturalism as a species of normative nostalgia, a longing for grounds of action and identity which seem perpetually to reside in some fantasized past – in this case the "past" of an "animality" foregone by the Miller's very need to lay claim to it. Normative nostalgia, of course, is hardly local to the *Miller's Tale*. The myths of the Golden Age and the Fall depend on it, and it is a long-standing interest of Chaucer's: as he puts it in his lyric poetry, the "Former Age" of wholeheartedness, simplicity, and peace has been replaced by duplicity, tyranny, undisciplined appetite, and a general "Lak of Stedfastnesse." Chaucer begins the *Canterbury Tales* with a tale in which this interest is wide-ranging and explicit. As the long speech with which Theseus concludes the *Knight's Tale* suggests, for the Knight all of life is in some sense a "fall" into materiality and individuation, a loss of the pure, unified, unimpeded activity of the Prime Mover; and this metaphysical nostalgia mirrors a social and ethical nostalgia for a lost chivalric ideal which the Knight projects on to the tale's classical setting.[1] In this chapter and the two to follow I will continue exploring Chaucer's interest in normative nostalgia. In doing so I will move beyond the trope of nostalgia to try to understand the broader structures of normative longing that inform it. I will argue that for Chaucer and the intellectual tradition to which he belonged, normative nostalgia is so powerful because it captures what they took to be fundamental features of normativity itself, features that make normativity necessarily an object of longing.

My argument thus continues to focus on the way Chaucer's philosophical interests can help us understand the metaphorical and psychological structures that inform his poetry. At the same time, I will argue

that the ultimate source of normative nostalgia is nothing peculiar to medieval culture or its Christian and classical inheritances. I think there is something about the way agency depends on the ambition of autonomy that makes such nostalgia, if not inevitable, at the very least deeply compelling. In other words, Chaucer and his main intellectual interlocutors were substantially right about the source of normative nostalgia, even if they understood that source in historically determined metaphysical and theological terms which we may not share. As I will argue most pointedly in chapter three, Chaucer understood this problem concerning agency and autonomy from his reading of Boethius; and as I will argue in chapter four, Chaucer learned from the *Roman de la Rose* an interest in how this problem structures not only ethical normativity but erotic normativity as well. The historical and conceptual dimensions of my argument thus quite directly depend on each other. I think we can learn something philosophically and theoretically from this historical engagement with normative longing; and in order to make out the form of that engagement, we must try to provide our own best account of the sources of such longing.

One purpose of these chapters is thus to elaborate and clarify an argument I began, mostly by way of example, in chapter one, concerning the relation between ethical and erotic normativity in Chaucer's poetry. In chapter one, I argued that in order to understand the nostalgic structures informing the Miller's unstable gender identifications and erotically charged fantasies of self-punishment, we need to see them as instances of a broader normative nostalgia informing his ethics and theory of action. Put broadly, my claim there and in the following chapters is that Chaucer understood his representations of gendered and erotic norms as part of an investigation of the structure of practical rationality, and of what it is about autonomy that resists grounding in a comprehensive theory. In pursuing this thought, for large stretches of the coming discussion I will more or less bracket gender and sexuality, and lay out some problems of ethical normativity on their own ground. That analytical move, as much as the many thematic and rhetorical links between the *Knight's Tale* and the *Miller's Tale*, provides the rationale for turning now to the Knight. For the Knight himself, while centrally concerned with the intersection of ethics, gender, and erotic life, and with the longing that informs each, seeks for large

stretches of his tale to bracket the erotic in favor of a focus on the ethical by itself. In doing so, the Knight develops a theory of action and autonomy that is about as good as Chaucer thought it was possible to produce, one that avoids many of the defects of naturalist theory. But for all the Knight's philosophical intelligence, he remains ideologically imbedded, and that imbeddedness finds expression, among other ways, in his attempt to bracket an erotics he finds deeply disturbing. In making the *Knight's Tale* the center of this chapter, then, I mean to make the bracketing of the erotic an object of analysis rather than simply to take it as an unquestioned rhetorical move. In doing so, I will try to remain true to Chaucer's sense of how sexuality provides both an impetus and an impediment to reflection.

ETHICAL AND EROTIC FORMALISM: PICTURING EMILY

I will begin with Emily, for as I suggested in the introduction to this book, her erotic function in the tale is deeply bound up with the philosophical work Chaucer means her representation to do. I claimed in the introduction that the apparent flatness and obviousness of the aestheticizing voyeurism in the scene of Emily in her garden needs further scrutiny: we may not know as well as we think we do what we recognize there, or what drives that all too familiar attitude.[2] The notion of Emily's aestheticization is partly meant to capture the way the wound of desire she generates in her male admirers is tied to the production of lyrical eroticism, as in Arcite's theatrical declaration that "the fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly / Of hire that rometh in the yonder place" (I.1118–19). More broadly, Palamon and Arcite's consuming obsession with Emily – their sense of being penetrated and overwhelmed by her, figured most obviously, but not solely, in the conventional courtly language of being stung unto the heart – suggests another feature of the aesthetic, its lavish excessiveness. Emily absorbs Palamon and Arcite not only in desire but in contemplation as well, and in so doing she exceeds the possibility of putting her to the merely instrumental function of providing them with erotic gratification. The point becomes clearer if we turn from Palamon and Arcite to the Knight himself. For an aestheticized and lyrical eroticism is central to the way the Knight imagines Emily's attractiveness from the moment he first

introduces her, as he describes the seamless integration of her floral beauty into the walled-off garden she inhabits. Emily

> fairer was to sene
> Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,
> And fressher than the May with floures newe —
> For with the rose colour stroof hir hewe,
> I noot which was the fyner of hem two.
> (I.1035–39)

While Alisoun's portrait in the *Miller's Tale* depends on appeals to the pleasures of taste and touch, and does so in a way that directs our attention to a world of pleasures beyond her, Emily's portrait depends almost exclusively on the visual, and her visuality directs us only to the garden that encloses her. More precisely, such visuality directs us to a group of nested formal structures, including the garden itself, its patterns of rose-red and lily-white, and the mirroring of those patterns in Emily's appearance. Emily is not so much contained in this structure as figuratively constituted by it; her beauty seems inseparable from the idea of a representational self-enclosure. Given the constitutive nature of this self-enclosure, the one element of strife in her portrait – the sense of competition between Emily's beauty and that of the flowers – only adds to the formal stasis of the scene. Here, in these antagonistic elements whose reflection of each other provides for their common participation in a beautiful aesthetic structure, we have the picture of woman as perfect formal object nearly at its purest.

The formalist visuality of Emily's portrait emphasizes her availability to the pleasures of looking, and so defines the desire for her, like that for Alisoun, as a species of scopophilia. But the scopophilia at issue here is purer than that in the *Miller's Tale*. For Emily's portrait, unlike Alisoun's, emphasizes her distance from her male desirers, her unavailability, and her unconsumability; there is no question here of anyone's touching or tasting her. The visual pleasure Emily provides is not that of an object that makes itself available as an instrument of pleasure, as Alisoun with her "likerous ye" might be said to do; it is rather that of a beauty indifferent to any desires that may be directed its way. Emily's unavailability thus links her beauty to the idea of the aesthetic object's autonomy; for her attractiveness depends on her uselessness, on the

impossibility of putting her to an instrumental function. The Knight figures this feature of Emily's aestheticization, among other ways, in the helpless longing she generates in Palamon and Arcite, who gaze at her through prison bars that ensure both their visual access to her and the impossibility of acting on their desires.[3] But it is already a feature of the Knight's appreciation of her, and that to which he invites his audience. To be sure, in the Knight's distanced, commanding, and relaxedly admiring production of Emily's portrait, her beauty seems to be simply that of the aestheticized feminine object perpetually available to the contemplative mastery of an overseeing masculine subject. But, as I will argue, the very possibility of a feminine beauty preserved in its unassimilable otherness depends on a fracture within the masculine subject that denies it the very mastery it seems already to have achieved.

One of the ways the Knight – and later, Palamon – imagines the otherness he wants to preserve is by hyperbolizing it: "as an aungel hevenysshly she soong" (I.1055), as though her expressive capacities were a marker of a special proximity to the divine. This suggests that Emily does not, in the manner of a work of art like Pygmalion's statue, simply exhibit in her perfection the signs of another's creative power; rather she gives voice to her condition in a way that enacts and enhances it. This tendency to imagine Emily as enacting rather than simply exhibiting her perfection appears in other features of the portrait as well. The Knight, for instance, represents her as a participant in the production of her formal completeness, as she literally fashions it while moving about the garden: "She gadereth floures, party white and red, / To make a subtil gerland for her hede" (I.1053–54), adorning herself in the very play of colors that marks her aestheticization. More than just a fantasy of a perfect object, then, Emily also represents a fantasy of a perfect subject and a perfect agent. The Knight's portrait of Emily, like the Miller's representation of Alisoun, is in part an attempt to imagine a normative ideal for the human, a perfectly ordered interiority that functions as an object of ethical as well as erotic desire. And, as in the *Miller's Tale*, the relations among these aspects of feminine perfection can help us see how the *Knight's Tale* engages two sets of intersecting normative problems: those concerning the normalization of gender and desire, and how that normalization is related to the production of the abnormal or perverse; and those concerning the construction and functioning of an

ethos, a normative ideal to which an agent grants authority. I want now to sketch rather quickly the way the intersection of these two aspects of Emily's normative function radiates out into the rest of the tale.

One of the problems Alisoun posed for the Miller was that normative hyperbole led to a confused inability to locate the space of her agency: since her agency was grounded in a perfect responsiveness to her "natural" desires, it was paradoxically an agency with a passivity at its heart. Something similar happens with Emily. In a peculiar passage in the middle of Emily's description, the Knight sets aside his emphasis on her artifactuality to describe the stirrings of desire in her heart:

> Er it were day, as was hir wone to do,
> She was arisen and al redy dight,
> For May wole have no slogardie anyght.
> The sesoun priketh every gentil herte,
> And maketh it out of his slep to sterte,
> And seith "Arys, and do thyn observaunce."
> This maked Emelye have remembraunce
> To doon honour to May, and for to ryse.
> (I.1040–47)

The Knight offers this utterly conventional scene to explain why Emily got up to engage in her usual springtime activities. One thing he wants is to explain how her doing so issues from her life as an agent: not only from her desires, but from her habits, what she was "wont to do," and from the way her desires and habits are inflected by her attentiveness to what she perceives as her duty, her "observaunce." And in associating her actions with the compulsory force of seasonal stirrings in the noble heart, he seems further to want to generalize this explanation to the status of a normative ideal, and to figure that ideal as natural. But this association has the effect of eliding his agent-centered explanation of what Emily does with another, quite different, one in which her desires are considered merely as phenomena in a causal sequence. From the perspective of this other explanation, there seems to be no space for considering Emily's actions as distinctively hers, or even as actions. Her "observaunce" appears less as something *she* can be said to *do* than as an instance of what happens to all noble hearts when seasonal prickings set them in motion: "this *maked* Emelye have remembraunce / To doon honour to May, and for to ryse."

As I argued in the introduction, action is necessarily available to both agent-centered and causal explanation, and there is no reason why one cannot be caused to do something of which one is nevertheless fully the agent. But these kinds of explanation can cut across each other in confusing ways. Perhaps the most familiar form of this confusion occurs when the perspective of causal explanation seems to exhaust the explanatory possibilities, making the language of agency seem like an obscure metaphysical redundancy we cannot justify, even if we may also feel we cannot do without it. The broadest exemplification of this crossing of perspectives in the *Knight's Tale* occurs in the way scattered comments on fate, together with the overall architecture of the plot, with its obsessive parallel narrative structures and its obscure divine conspiracies, serve to make Theseus's pretensions to the status of a little Prime Mover in human affairs look naïve. As readers of the tale we, it seems, are in the position to see that the deck is always already rigged, that the idea of effective historical agency is a sham, a failed gesture of protection from the fact that we are helpless before impersonal forces that determine our every move; and it seems that the Knight suspects or fears that this is the case as well.

This paranoia is a problem for the Knight, given his deep identification with Theseus as a redemptive political and ethical authority. But in Emily's case the Knight is in a somewhat odder bind. For with Emily he seems to think that the language of causal explanation, rather than exposing the language of agency as a sham, might inform it, as though Emily's passivity in being caused were what it meant for her to act as she does. The little allegory of May saying "arys, and do thyn observaunce" functions to personify May as an agentive figure that embodies the voice of normative authority; it is something like the voice of Emily's conscience, and so in effect represents the authority of the reasons Emily has for getting up and attending to her duties. Here then, as in the *Miller's Tale*, we have in the representation of the feminine an expression of the appeal of normative naturalism. For this is an image of action with a passivity at its base, and this passivity is supposed to figure a condition of pleasing naturalness, an unbroken continuity between natural processes and our actions. But while May's normative authority is supposed to effect this continuity by providing a figure for Emily's reasons, the causal explanation the May allegory provides

effaces the very territory of acting for reasons which it was supposed to ground.

In keeping with the characterization of Emily's objectification as aesthetically formalist, we might describe the problem in locating Emily's agency by saying that she functions as a formalist ethical ideal. She figures, that is, an ideal of ethical action as grounded in the agent's responsiveness to a perfect formal structure: Emily's appreciation of that structure is supposed to be what supplies her with her reasons for acting. Such a characterization would capture what I suggested earlier, that Emily's status as an ethical ideal is bodied forth in the aesthetic activity of her self-fashioning. It would also give weight to Kolve's notion that in looking at Emily from behind the bars of their prison Palamon and Arcite are seeing a figure of a beautifully stylized freedom – a figure, that is, for the very autonomy they lack, and lack not simply because of their practical circumstances, as the Boethian valence of that prison suggests. The longing the Thebans feel for Emily is in part the longing for an autonomy that calls to them as the perfected form of their humanity, which Emily, despite her self-fashioning activity, seems always already to have achieved; and which, in making its normative claims on their imperfect and fractured humanity, seems to turn away from them, making itself useless to them, imprisoning them in their privation and self-estrangement. This is the structure of the normative longing the Knight captures in Palamon's contrast between Emily's divinity and his own sorrowful, wretched creatureliness, and in Arcite's sense of being slain by Emily's beauty.

While Palamon and Arcite provide the initial occasion for the Knight to figure such a relation to a normative ideal – and while, as many critics have noted, they are supposed to stand in figurative opposition to the possibility of mastery Theseus represents – the Theban cousins are hardly alone in such longing. For on a Boethian account privation and self-estrangement are the routine conditions of human life. We are meant to see ourselves as implicated in the longing Palamon and Arcite feel for Emily, a longing for a perfection that simultaneously calls to us and turns away from us, or, as both Augustine and Boethius would put it, from which we willingly turn away. And this longing radiates out from Palamon and Arcite to the rest of the tale, for instance into the "Prime Mover" speech that is supposed to provide the tale with narrative and

conceptual closure. For both Theseus, in his failed attempt at the end of the tale to articulate a basis for action by imagining a place for human life within the formal order of the cosmos, and the Knight, in his identification with that attempt, long for precisely the kind of agency Emily represents: an agency imagined as gaining its structure and its motive energy – and finally, as that speech suggests, its freedom from death – from its seamless participation in a beautiful formal structure.

To emphasize Emily's function as a figure of autonomy is not, then, sentimentally to evade her objectification. It is rather to locate the desire for her in two mutually reinforcing structures of abjection. One is that of longing for erotic contact with an object constituted as desirable by its unassimilability to any use you might want to make of it. The linked divinizing and aestheticizing of the erotic object is the form taken by recognizing and desiring its autonomy, in the context of a scopophilia that tries to imagine a contemplative distance and insulation from the claim the other makes on you. That claim in effect reappears here as an unbridgeable distance between you and an erotic object useless to you and indifferent towards you, and that reveals you to yourself as base and unworthy. The other structure of abjection is that of a longing for a normative ideal that seems at once to found the possibility of a coherent agency and to close itself off from you, sealing itself as both the Prime Mover and Emily do into an idealized space of formal stasis, and sealing you into a world of change, decay, and death, a barren world in which the untouchable feminine is the one thing that gives your life value. Here the ideological work of Emily's representation appears as an attempt to deny the pressing reality of this death by imagining a masculine position of contemplative mastery from which the pleasures of an aestheticized feminine would be perpetually available. But the pleasures of that representation are not finally separable from the abjections it instantiates, from the glamor of insatiable longing for a perfection that, in its unbridgeable distance from you, leaves you wretched, at a loss, impotent. The desire for Emily, however objectifying and bound up in a fantasy of mastery, is also then the desire for such an impotence. Mastery and impotence here are not two opposed postures but two aspects of the same attitude.

Such a claim needs a good deal of unpacking, which this chapter and the two that follow it will provide, partly by way of an account of how

an interest in such structures of the will comes to Chaucer from the *Consolation of Philosophy* and the *Roman de la Rose*. But the first place to turn is to the figure of Theseus in the tale itself. For in the representation of Theseus as a normative ideal, something to which the Knight is even more explicitly and thoroughly committed than he is to the normative function of Emily, the Knight gives expression to the depth and intelligence of his *resistance* to formalist desire and the abjections it instantiates. If a Thesean ideal finally collapses into such a desire, then, we had better have a good account of what that ideal is, or our account of the collapse will be too hasty, and as a result we will miss the depth of the problems at issue here.[4]

THESEAN AUTONOMY

Let us begin with Theseus by returning briefly to one of the most obvious differences between the ethical imaginations of the first two *Canterbury Tales*. While the Miller's ethos turns on the conviction that a man should always act on his appetites, the Knight's turns on the conviction that a man should only act on proper reflection, that he should be prudent and judicious. What mainly annoys the Miller about the *Knight's Tale* – what gets that polemical burr stuck in his side – is what he sees as the perpetual refusal of the tale's male characters to stand up and be men, to stop turning their desires into objects of elaborate practical reasoning and theoretical speculation. The Knight's men seem to the Miller to be incapable of just acting and being done with it, and for this reason they seem to have no self-possession. For the Knight, however, reflection is essential to self-possession. As the Knight exhibits in the early characterizations of Palamon and Arcite, to act unreflectively on one's appetites – to act, that is, as the Miller will recommend – is to leave oneself open to individual and civic fragmentation. The impossibility of unreflective self-possession is evident not only in Palamon and Arcite, but in the Knight's ethical model Theseus. Theseus shows a habitual anger when he unexpectedly confronts perceived infringements on his honor, as when he accuses the obviously grieving Theban widows of enviously disturbing his triumphal homecoming (I.905–8), or when, confronting Palamon and Arcite battling in the grove, he announces the "short conclusioun" (I.1743) of their death sentence.

Theseus's embarrassing egocentrism in these moments of sudden surprise – his initial tendency to misperceive them as personal affronts – contributes to the Knight's attempt to imagine the goal of self-possession as that of reflective self-command, of the work of constituting a will whose coherence is never finally secured, since there will always be more surprises waiting, more lapses to be endured and overcome. Understanding the work of reflective self-command is the central goal that informs the Knight's representation of Theseus; he is, in effect, a figure for an antinaturalistic theory of autonomy.

While there is broad critical agreement on something like the above characterization of the Knight's Thesean ethos, there is also a widely shared view that this ethos entails an invidious form of rationalism.[5] I think there is something to this charge, but it needs to be put carefully, partly because the Knight's ethos is quite pointedly *resistant* to ethical rationalism. For one thing, however committed to prudential and judicious reflection the Knight may be, he consistently makes clear distinctions between the time for reflection and the time for action; and when the time for reflection is past, the Knight values above all else the aggressive pursuit of policy. Once Theseus brings himself to understand the motives and plight of the grieving widows, for instance, he heads for Thebes without delay and assaults the city until it can offer no resistance. By contrast, part of what makes Palamon and Arcite seem comical is their tendency to wallow in poorly directed reflection, as in the symmetrical speeches at the end of part one, in which each considers the hopelessness of his current situation at length while imagining the possibilities for action available to the other. The Thesean ethos of the tale, then, is properly understood as an ethos of decisive action rather than as one that privileges reflection for its own sake. Reflection is a value to the extent that it enables decisiveness, and it is a necessary value because without a notion of proper reflection one would be left, as in the Miller's theory, with no workable notion of decisiveness at all. For the Knight, significantly, proper reflection in a given instance can mean no reflection at all, as when Theseus simply "slough [Creon] manly as a knyght / In pleyn bataille" (I.987–88). The just reward for Creon's crimes is supposed to be self-evident, and the Knight thinks there could be no good reason to question it. What counts in defining the decisiveness of a course of action, then, is not that someone goes through any particular process of

thought before deciding to pursue it, but rather that it meets what we might call the condition of reflective endorsability.[6] According to such a condition, *if* the course of action in question were to be brought under reflective scrutiny, it would stand up as the right one. When you resist the urge to scream obscenities at an overly aggressive driver, for instance, your restraint would presumably meet such a condition. But that example suggests that part of what is involved in understanding the application of such a condition is knowing the difference between cases when you need to engage in reflective scrutiny and cases when you do not: if you had to think it through each time you exercised such restraint, that would be less a sign of self-command than an indication of a peculiar character defect.[7] The Knight is sensitive to such distinctions, and part of the point of Theseus's military adventures is to bring them out.

Theseus, then, does not march under the banner of Mars for nothing: he is less a figure of philosophical authority than one of martial virtue, the courageous and purposeful exercise of military and political power in the service of justice and civil order. This is the meaning of the schematic contrast between Thesean polity and the Theban civil war associated with Creon.[8] And Theseus does not serve justice in this way simply because he considers it rational to do so, nor does the Knight think he should. Some of Theseus's motivation simply stems from his Martian disposition: he relishes the display and exercise of violent military power, he is moved by anger and the love of battle. The Knight does not think there is anything wrong with this; he does not want to extirpate such passions so much as he wants to dominate them with a powerful will, and so to be able to give free rein to them where it is appropriate to do so. Nor does he think there is anything wrong with another aspect of Thesean motivation, his self-regarding love of honor. Theseus wants to be known as the man who took vengeance on Creon, the man to whom gratitude for a just political order is due: as he assures the Theban widows, "al the peple of Grece sholde speke / How Creon was of Theseus yserved / As he that hadde his deeth ful wel deserved" (I.962–64). As far as the Knight is concerned, these are a good ruler's normal attributes, without which he would not have the motivational structure to conduct himself as he should.[9]

As valuable as these attributes are to the Knight, it remains the case that a self-regarding concern for honor and a disposition to violence

leave Theseus vulnerable to displays of egocentrism and misdirected anger, as he shows when first confronting the Theban widows: " 'What folk been ye, that at myn homcomynge / Perturben so my feste with criynge?' / Quod Theseus. 'Have ye so greet envye / Of myn honour, that thus compleyne and crye?' " (I.905–8). Meeting a group of weeping, swooning, black-clad women kneeling two-by-two in the roadside, Theseus initially sees the public posture of grief as a personal affront, an envious resistance to the free display and celebration of his virtue. This embarrassing misperception is compounded by the fact that Theseus, as the just and merciful ruler, ought to understand this scene rightly, as in fact he does immediately afterwards, with seemingly nothing intervening to alter his perceptions: "And telleth me if it may been amended, / And why that ye been clothed thus in blak" (I.910–11). Part of the oddness of the moment for Theseus, then, is that everything he needs to see to know how to act rightly is in plain view before him; and he is the kind of person who can and does act rightly in the face of such things; but he somehow misses this, as though he had forgotten the most obvious truths about the world and about who he is in it. And this oddness is compounded by another. For Theseus's vulnerability to such a moment proceeds *not* from some weakness in his character that competes with the virtues I have been describing – as though this were Theseus's "dark side" coming out – but rather from features of his character which are *essential* to his being the virtuous figure that he is.[10] Since Theseus is driven to such forgetting by features of his character which he has no way of foregoing – and further, the foregoing of which would make him unfit for rule – the Knight must place a high ethical premium on considerations of prudence and judiciousness, which require the development of a reflective distance on one's immediate attitudes and the cultivation of a more objective view of the scene of action than those attitudes afford.

Since an appeal to the normative authority of objectivity is frequently taken to bring with it a great deal of conceptual baggage which it does not in this case have, and since the Knight himself is concerned to detail what the cultivation of an objective view entails, it is worth examining at length the passage where the Knight most directly elaborates on the relation between autonomy and objectivity. At the end of part two Theseus comes upon Palamon and Arcite battling in a grove, ankle-deep in blood. On hearing the Thebans confess that

they have violated his commands, Theseus immediately announces his "short conclusioun" (I.1743) that they be put to death, at which point the ladies in his company weep for pity and beg Theseus for mercy: "And on hir bare knees adoun they falle / And wolde have kist his feet ther as he stood; / Til at the laste aslaked was his mood, / For pitee renneth soone in gentil herte" (I.1758–61). By initially locating pity in the scene in the company of ladies surrounding the men, the Knight sets up an emblematic tableau in which Theseus's embodiment of the hard sentence of justice is opposed by a womanly show of feeling, the embodiment of mercy's softness. But with the quick movement of pity natural to Theseus's noble heart, the Knight leaves aside this emblematic mode of representation, and the conflict between mercy and justice takes place within Theseus. The point of this shift in representational mode seems to be to mimic the nature of the problem Theseus faces. At the moment of the scene's high emblematic mode, Theseus is captured by an anger which comes to him with the full force of a natural, even inevitable, response, and which brings with it a posture of judgment which he represents as definitive and final. As long as he imagines his identification with this posture to be total, the ladies' attitude appears as "wommanly pitee," no part of the proper manly (and lordly) response to what has happened. But Theseus responds to that display of feeling with the quick movement of pity that is proper to the noble, not just the womanly, heart – proper, that is, to the heart he both claims as his own and imagines as normative for anyone in his situation. The ladies' pity, then, represents a disposition to right feeling which Theseus already has, and one which is conducive to the judgment he will soon declare to be right: "Fy / Upon a lord that wol have no mercy" (I.1773–74). Theseus's problem is one of recognizing the normative claim this disposition has on him, the way it issues from an identity he recognizes as more deeply his than that of the merciless dispenser of justice. This requires him to see his distinctness from the posture he initially identifies himself with, to take a more objective view of himself and the scene than his subjective absorption in his anger initially allows him.

It should already be clear that the distinction between subjective and objective views here is not the dualist distinction between a

view from within some particular person's consciousness and a view from outside subjectivity altogether. Nor does it bring in its wake the related dualism between the irrationality of a mind clouded by passion, accidents of character, and egoistic motivation and a pure rationality unsullied by desire or the "merely personal." The view Theseus comes to, as he says, is appropriate to a certain kind of ruler with a certain kind of ethical character, rather than one belonging to a purely rational appraiser with no particular character at all; and his adoption of this view is quite deeply and personally motivated by his desire to be that kind of ruler, and even by the emotions of the moment such as pity and compassion. Theseus's mercy gets its objective character from two things: that it can stand up under reflective scrutiny, and that it allows Theseus to see his angry judgment as a partial response, driven by features of his subjective state which are both internally inadequate and insufficiently responsive to the scene before him.

Reason does of course have a central role here, as is suggested by the process of reflection that follows on Theseus's initial movement by pity:

> And though he first for ire quook and sterte,
> He hath considered shortly, in a clause,
> The trespas of hem bothe, and eek the cause,
> And although that his ire hir gilt accused,
> Yet in his resoun he hem bothe excused,
> As thus: he thoghte wel that every man
> Wol helpe hymself in love, if that he kan,
> And eek delivere hymself out of prisoun.
> (I.1762–69)

Through the exercise of his rational capacities Theseus moves from being sheerly possessed by the passion of anger to a state in which "his ire hir gilt accused," that is, in which Theseus has driven an initial wedge between himself and the angry accusation of guilt, seeing the accusation as issuing from the passion moving him rather than from himself as a totality. And through the further exercise of his rational capacities Theseus moves past feeling split into parts – moved by an anger and a pity which present him with incompatible pictures of the scene before him and of his own interior dispositions – and is able to

pull himself together and see the rightness of a merciful path of action. Theseus's reason enables him thus to move from being controlled by a passion which from the point of view of his own most authoritative identifications he does not want to be moved by, to being moved only by what from that same point of view he wants to be moved by. In a sense, then, the pity that finally moves him is not the same as the pity that initially appeared in conflict with his anger. For the pity that is the upshot of his deliberations is not in the same sense a passion, not something that simply arises in him as an event in his natural history, seizing and compelling him. At the end, the sheer *affect* of pity is not what compels him: if that were the only thing at issue here there would be nothing to get him past the point of a conflict of affects. What gives pity its final motive force is rather the fact that it belongs to a larger practical attitude that gives meaning to the desires, beliefs, reasons, and other psychic states that attend it – the attitude of mercy that has become normative for Theseus. And that attitude has become normative for him because it has stood the test of reflective endorsability. Theseus is moved by mercy because it is proper to the ends he has freely chosen, and so is expressive of his autonomy.[11]

If the Knight is in no way concerned to banish emotion, desire, and character from the scene of action, then, he remains concerned to banish passion in a technical sense. He wants to cast the sheer undergoing of subjective states, the fact that they can arise in us unwanted and move us whether we want them to or not, as the main threat to the achievement of autonomy. The Knight's favorite trope for this undergoing is that of "subjection to the animal": as Theseus says, the merciless lord who fails to exercise discretion is a lion; in effect, such a lord allows himself to be controlled by brute facts of the nature he shares with animals that do not have the capacity to choose their ends. The Knight indicates Theseus's alignment with this banishment from the beginning of the tale by having him march under the pennant of the Minotaur: Theseus is the slayer of the man-beast, restorer of the boundary between the human and the animal. The use of the trope becomes almost obsessive in the descriptions of Palamon and Arcite in the first half of the tale, particularly during their battle in the grove: "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"

(I.1655–58). It is important to note that the impulse to violence here remains to some extent an object of admiration, as it does later in the tournament Theseus organizes. The Knight's point in casting this violence as animalized, then, is to indicate a failure properly to direct a disposition to violence which is not in itself blameworthy, and which humans have in some form simply by virtue of being the kind of animal they are. To put the Knight's view most broadly, such failure to shape the animality that is necessarily part of being human is what constitutes a privation of autonomy, and what distinguishes the Thebans from Theseus.

We can more clearly see the difference between this view and the rationalism often attributed to the Knight if we notice that, while he locates this privation most obviously in what we ordinarily think of as passions – in the overwhelming power of erotic desire and military anger, for instance – he locates it as well in the way Palamon and Arcite undergo their rationality. And rationality, too – that is, the capacity for reflection and representation – is, on a standard classical and medieval definition, something that is necessarily part of being human simply by virtue of the kind of animal a human is. As I have already suggested, it is not as though the Theban cousins simply find themselves perpetually hurtled into rash action by uncontrolled emotion. For long stretches of the poem they become almost exclusively creatures of pointedly defective reflection, bound by imprisonment or exile to nearly hopeless and often incoherent deliberation, to overly florid expressions of their love for Emily which continually stop short of the lyrical expansiveness they aim for, to sententious efforts at consolation, and to contemplative immersion in their suffering. What these moments share with the moments of erotic and military passion is the quality of undergoing: here too Palamon and Arcite find themselves compelled by whatever subjective state happens to arise in them.

This feature of the representation of the Thebans reaches its comic extreme as Arcite multiplies legalistic and mutually exclusive defenses of his claim to Emily. Arcite argues that Emily is really his, because he loved her first "paramour" (I.1155), as a human creature, while Palamon did not love Emily, exactly, but only felt "affecciouN of hoolynesse" (I.1158), a passion for divinity. But, Arcite continues, suppose that Palamon did love Emily first, he should remember the old saw that no one can give

a lover any law, for love is a natural law which compels beyond the power of "positif lawe" (I.1167), mere human legislation – that is, Arcite just cannot help himself. And, in case his previous arguments do not hold, neither of them can get her anyway – an argument which serves to defeat Arcite's claim as much as Palamon's. Then, somehow as a logical conclusion, Arcite concludes that "therfore" (I.1181) it is each man for himself; and finally, nonsensically, that they have to endure their life in prison and each take his own chances, as though, considering their acknowledged powerlessness, there were any chances for them to take. While Arcite is unreservedly committed to the thought that one way or another Emily is his, the sententiousness, bogus technicality, and internal contradictions of his speech serve to rob any of its arguments of legitimate conviction, a lack which Arcite clearly feels, since he cannot rest with any of the reasons he trots out in his defense. But despite his own sense of the complete dispensability of any of his reasons, he is never able to engage in the minimal thought necessary to articulate a coherent basis for his claim, much less that required to hold up his underlying motives for appraisal and so potentially take command of himself in the way Theseus does. Instead he remains compelled by each of his reasons serially in the moment it comes up for him, as though his reasons were subjective states he merely undergoes, over which he exercises no authority. This is the sense in which Palamon and Arcite are "subjected to the animal": not that there is some animal nature lurking in them under a thin veneer of civilization, but that even those dispositions which most obviously depend on their distinctively human capacities – such as their capacity to form reasons – function for them solely in what we might describe as their animal aspect, under which they appear not as autonomous activities but as undergoings of the brute facts of human nature.

My point in elaborating the Knight's theory of autonomy at such length has been to suggest that it is a good theory, considerably better than the one usually attributed to him. As I have suggested, what makes an action, reason, or desire autonomous in this theory is its reflective endorsability. A person's rational capacities play a central role in the activity of reflective endorsement, but it is finally the person, not his or her reason, that determines what is endorsable and does the endorsing. The Knight does not imagine that reason constitutes a separate

metaphysical or psychological territory from that of desire or the passions: as we have seen, reasons can function in his theory as passions in the technical sense, and there is such a thing for him as a rational desire.[12] The Knight therefore cannot think that our job as agents is to submit one part of ourselves – the body, animality, desire – to another part that knows the truth or the law and administers it to the rest. Further, the notion of reflective endorsability allows for quite a supple sense of a person's agentive relations to the contents of his or her subjectivity. If Theseus were to engage in introspection he would find an opaque, shifting, and contradictory subjectivity; the Knight is quite clear that no reified subjective contents can either determine anyone's psychology or tell them what to do. Even the presence in Theseus of what he comes to recognize as the right disposition does not track out into action independently of a deliberative activity that goes well beyond mere observation. For, as I have shown, Thesean deliberation changes what it means to be moved in a particular way. Even though Theseus was moved by pity at all stages in the deliberative process, the pity that emerges as part of the larger attitude of rightful mercy is not the same thing as the more narrowly "passionate" pity with which Theseus began, precisely because it is now supported by authoritative reasons.

To return to the Knight's ethos of decisiveness: the reflective endorsability of an action is what makes it decisive, for that is what makes it expressive not merely of the reasons or desires of the moment but of the reasons and desires an agent wants to be his, in light of the kind of person he wants to be. These are the kind of deliberative considerations to which Theseus is generally open, and which Palamon and Arcite hardly allow to enter into their minds. The Knight's theory is therefore able to respond to what theories of autonomy often imagine as the "accidents" of character, the particular dispositions of particular persons, without depending on a reified, naturalistic notion of what being some particular person consists in. This is what makes his theory good: it allows him to appeal to something theories of autonomy must appeal to, a normative authority that orders an agent's dispositions, providing him with a basis for identifying with some dispositions rather than others, while preserving the sense in which that authority proceeds from the agent himself, from his own desires and reasons, and so takes the

form neither of an imposition or repression, nor of a demand issued from an abstract, impersonal source.

Through the Knight's representation of Theseus, Chaucer took the opportunity, right at the start of the *Canterbury Tales*, to lay out the contours of a theory of autonomy that is about as good as he thought it was possible to produce. It is a theory that, as I have argued, avoids the conceptual problems in naturalism and formalism which remain of such interest to Chaucer elsewhere in his poetry, including elsewhere in this very poem. Even here, however, Chaucer remains less interested in theory itself than in the situatedness out of which theory gets produced and the blindnesses that always attend its insights; he wants to understand what further thoughts about agency this theory cannot accommodate and, more ambitiously, he wants to understand why autonomy resists grounding in any comprehensive theory. For the Knight, these opacities and resistances emerge from the place of the erotic in the poem. As I have suggested, his articulation of a Thesean ideal depends on the bracketing off of an erotics to which the Knight remains quite deeply attracted. I will now turn to the ways erotic desire problematizes a Thesean ideal, linking it to the very formalism the Knight uses it to repudiate, and opening the tale to possibilities of autonomy which a Thesean ideal provides no terms for understanding.

EROS AND AUTONOMY

Much of what I have said so far about the contrast between Theseus and the Thebans depends on a widely shared critical view that the first half of the *Knight's Tale* pursues an essentially comic project, in which Palamon and Arcite are held up for ridicule and Theseus is imagined as embodying a clear alternative to Theban psychic and civil perversion.[13] This project more or less reaches its peak in Theseus's "God of Love" speech concluding the first half of the tale, a speech that diagnoses Theban folly from a supposedly secure position of Athenian wisdom. The second half of the tale, on such an account, exhibits the collapse of this comic project as the Thesean goal of rational self-governance and just polity begins in various ways to look unattainable. It is certainly true that the second half of the tale is full of moments that threaten such a project: examples would include the horrifying

description of the temple of Mars, Emily's terrified visit to Diana's temple, the unfolding of a divine conspiracy that supersedes all sublunary plans of action and seems to unmask them as a sham, the brute bodily subjection of Arcite to his mortal injuries, the obsessive *occupatio* of Arcite's funeral, and Theseus's failed attempt to offer a coherent philosophical consolation in the "Prime Mover" speech that concludes the tale. I agree, then, with those accounts of the tale that describe the first half of it as, at the very least, much more carefully managed than the second half. But the problems with Thesean autonomy that most clearly emerge in the second half of the tale are, I think, present even at the peak of the Knight's comic project and in the midst of his articulation of a Thesean ideal, however he may wish to obscure this through a rhetoric that initially keeps Theban perversion at arm's length. To see how, let us return to Theseus's deliberations on confronting Palamon and Arcite in the grove.

The success of Theseus's practical reasoning there depends, as I have said, on his not calling into question his basic understanding of who he is and what he admires. Theseus is a good, magnanimous ruler, a man of *megalopsychia*, proud, sure, and aggressive, prudent and just – in a word, noble. The normative authority of such a self-conception is what grounds his sense of autonomy: a free action, or for that matter a free desire or belief or other attitude, is one that can in principle stand the test of reflective endorsability, and the criterion of an attitude's endorsability is that it be appropriate to the noble person Theseus understands himself to be. But Theseus is also perfectly aware that such self-understandings can be questionable, and that not calling them into question can be disastrous; for that is just what he thinks is the case with Palamon and Arcite, who have been driven into what Theseus thinks is the deepest folly by their unquestioned commitment to a love that determines everything that counts for them. Theseus knows, then, that the danger of being overcome by the passion of the moment – as he himself is overcome when he angrily condemns the Thebans to death – is not the only, or even the main, threat to autonomy. A much greater threat comes from passions that you would identify not as alien to your proper will but as constitutive of it, but which seem nevertheless to take you away from yourself, leaving you devoted to the very loss you suffer. This is the structure of divided identification and normative

longing we have already seen in Augustine: "Surely I have not ceased to be my own self . . . and yet there is still a great gap between myself and myself . . . Oh that my soul might follow my own self . . . that it might not be a rebel to itself." And for the Knight, as for Augustine, that structure is associated paradigmatically with erotic desire. Upon concluding his deliberations in the grove, Theseus makes the association between eros and self-division in saying that Palamon and Arcite have become subject to a God of Love that "kan maken, at his owene gyse, / Of everich herte as that hym list divyse" (I.1789–90). It seems to Theseus, in other words, as though Palamon and Arcite are no longer in a position to give themselves a law, but are subject to the law of another; but this heteronomous law is heart-making, it constitutes their deepest identifications and desires. This is why, as Theseus mockingly says, "And yet they wenen for to been ful wyse / That serven love, for aught that may bifalle" (I.1804–05). However blindly moved by anger Theseus can be, he knows that he is not being wise in such moments, for he identifies wisdom with his characteristic capacity to rule justly, which such anger disturbs. The problem Palamon and Arcite present, however, is that of a folly that looks exactly like wisdom from the perspective of a person's deepest volitional characteristics, a folly that can only appear as such from outside the commitments that constitute the person's character. Neither love nor anger may constitute such a folly for Theseus, but that does not mean that nothing does; and whatever might constitute Thesean folly, on his own account the very character on which he relies for deliberative success would keep him from knowing it.

The Knight's theory of autonomy establishes an idealized version of Thesean character as the objective anchor for practical reasoning. But on Theseus's account of how folly gets its hold, autonomy depends on a much more ambitious reflective drive, one that does not stop when it reaches an agent's central projects and most characteristic concerns. The Knight does not have a very clear idea of where that drive might lead, and it makes sense that he would not, since, for all his ethical seriousness, both he and his hero Theseus are warriors, and reflection that extends much beyond the kind Theseus pursues in the grove might delay the military pursuit of policy in a way the Knight would find unmanly. But the Knight and Theseus do attempt to formulate a basis for autonomy in this more ambitious reflective drive, precisely when

forthright manly action has begun to look impossible, as Theseus, the Athenians, and even the Knight's narrative itself become transfixed by grief after Arcite's death. In this extreme case of motivational evacuation, in which both individuals and the polity need to move on but none of the reasons for doing so can reach through the sense of loss engulfing everyone, Theseus seeks grounds for action by looking not only beyond the perspective of a particular character, but beyond any partial creaturely perspective whatsoever. The core idea of Theseus's consolatory final speech is that if we could just see the universe as the "Prime Mover" does – as a "faire cheyne of love" (I.2988) – then death would appear not as a loss but as the return of materially differentiated finite substances to the perfect and stable whole from which they derive their essences, and from which they had originally descended into this world of corruption. As a number of critics have noted, Theseus is anything but successful at making the identificatory leap to such a perspective.[14] He keeps getting sucked back into the world of phenomenal appearances in which death *is* a terrible loss, and finally his metaphysical ambitions give way to contradictory attempts at pragmatic exhortation. Or rather, Theseus never really leaves that phenomenal world, and even his sweet dream of a fair chain of love is itself motivated by the pressure death continues to exert on his imagination. Far from providing an objective anchor for practical reasoning, the thought of a world ordered by its participation in a loving originary oneness remains unmoored from the space of action it is supposed to inform.

The first problem with the Knight's theory of autonomy, then, is that while he tries to ground it in the normative authority of an ethos he admires, he knows it requires something more ambitious; but he cannot formulate what that something might be in a way that retains meaningful contact with the scene of agency. This problem is one of the main sources of the ethical and erotic formalism I discussed earlier in the chapter. The only way the Knight can imagine a source of normativity immune from the possibilities of psychic and ethical fracture that grip Palamon and Arcite and haunt a Thesean ethos is to think of it as a perfect formal structure, like the chain of love that binds the elements into a cosmos expressive of divine oneness, or like the beautifully cultivated garden that mirrors the beautifully cultivated Emily within it. And the way he tries to imagine an agentive participation in such

a structure is through the production of a formally perfect reason, a reason that directly binds the agent's motive to normativity's source. For Theseus, having such a super-reason would involve articulating the principle that grounds autonomous action: if he could just "declaren [his] sentence" (I.3002) as he sets out to do at the beginning of that final speech, then he would be able to act freely in a way that even death could not compromise. For Emily, having a super-reason would involve having the voice of normative authority perpetually there whispering in her ear "arys, and do thyn observaunce." In both cases, having a super-reason – a reason that admits no subjective interference, but tracks straight through to the scene of action – would be like being infallibly caused to do the right thing, and somehow having this causedness function as a fulfillment of agency rather than an effacement of it. The Knight remains quite close here to the Miller's fantasy of an agency with a passivity at its base, not out of a Millerish refusal of the normative authority of reflection, but out of his frustrated attempt to imagine that authority in its most powerful form.

We can see how the ethical formalism that emerges from this attempt opens on to an erotic formalism by attending to the functions of gender and beauty in the Knight's fantasy of a super-reason. For Theseus, the reach for such a reason is full of masculine effort, and as he continues to contemplate a landscape marred by death, this masculinity remains as abject as that of Palamon and Arcite. For Emily, having such a reason is an accomplishment as effortless as knitting the floral garland for her head, and this effortlessness informs the beauty that ravishes that same abject masculinity, not only with the force of an impossible desire for erotic possession, but with the force of an impossible desire for normative completeness. And this dual impossibility adds a beauty of its own, a luster akin to that of a far-off place one contemplates inhabiting, or a garden one longs to enter but from which one is debarred. To revise a relevant Augustinian phrase, Emily might thus be thought of as a postcard from the "land of likeness."

But this function of Emily's beauty is inflected by something quite different, and this further inflection of the erotic gives rise to another and seemingly opposite problem with the Knight's theory. Palamon and Arcite see Emily and are overcome by desire. One thing this means, as I have just said, is that they are overcome by their desire for and

admiration of her "likeness" to herself, and so by their responsiveness to the ideal of a formally perfect ordering of the will. At the same time, however, in being overcome by desire Palamon and Arcite become passive, not in the Knight's idealized version of being moved by a super-reason, but in a way he finds damaging to autonomy. So for the Knight the problem of erotic desire and the beauty to which it responds is in large part the problem of what to do with this conflict of intuitions concerning the value of being overcome by love as Palamon and Arcite are.

I argued earlier that a Thesean self-possession is predicated on the banishing of passion in a technical sense. The Knight casts the sheer undergoing of subjective states as something to be avoided, and sees such undergoings as no fit part of an agent's motive, whether or not they are undergoings we would normally describe as "passions." But the Knight himself, as distinct from a critical reconstruction of his ethos at its clearest, mostly means one thing by this: that erotic passion, if not just aversible, is at least extremely suspect. The Knight may not seem to have such a restricted focus. After all, violence and its relations to anger and pride most immediately threaten to carry Theseus away from himself, and they are the focus of some of the Knight's most striking losses of narrative control, such as in the terrifying portraits in the temple of Mars and the obsessive description of Arcite's injuries. But the obviousness of the danger posed by violent passion allows the Knight to imagine its management, even if that management is not always sucessful. Theseus constantly reflects on the dangers inherent in violence, and his most dominant self-representation is that of the just servant of Mars, the one who directs his military impulses towards a rational end. Because Theseus devotes himself to noticing his tendency to excess in this regard, both he and the Knight seem confident that reflective endorsement, at least in principle, can provide a way for the individual agent to manage his violence; and they seem equally confident that forms of social regulation – tournaments, for instance – can do the same thing in the collective case, even if they cannot shield us from terrible accidents of fate.

But things are different with eros. Theseus serves and manages Mars, but he does not in parallel fashion serve and manage Venus. Instead he is devoted to Diana, and in his speech on the powers of the God of Love

he banishes eros to the past of a youthful folly from which he declares himself now to be immune. As several critics have recently argued, the Knight seems intent on shielding Theseus from eros in other ways that radiate out into the narrative's gender politics. In comparison to Boccaccio's treatment of the story, the Knight deeroticizes and generally deemphasizes the relationship between Theseus and Hippolyta, and suppresses Theseus's Ovidian history as a betrayer of women, something that quite interests Chaucer elsewhere.[15] Further, in the scene of Theseus in the grove, the shift in representational mode which articulates the Knight's theory of reflective endorsement has a disturbing double effect: it liberates Theseus from his emblematic identification with military anger, but fixes Hippolyta and the other women in the scene in their emblematic identifications with womanly pity. The women thus end up as quasiallegorical representations of one aspect of a universalized masculine subjectivity.[16] The Knight's short line on Palamon and Arcite is that they are fools for love. His short line on Theseus seems to be that he is wise because he is not a lover. Wisdom – and, as I have argued, autonomy itself – seems to the Knight to depend on preventing eros from being a passionate undergoing that might sweep you up and bear you away. And this contrast between Theban folly and Athenian wisdom depends on an impulse to allegorize the feminine and to efface feminine agency, something we have seen not just in the grove but in the initial representation of Emily as well.

This restriction of what is in the abstract quite a capacious understanding of passion suggests that there is something about erotic life which the Knight feels as a deep threat to his ideal of Thesean autonomy and his sense of the stability of gender difference. And the key to understanding this threat, I think, lies in the Knight's ambivalence over the value of Palamon and Arcite's being overcome by Emily's beauty, his way of casting their passion as both pathological and glamorous. The Knight wants to imagine that all decisive action – by which he also means all action expressive of a will that has freely chosen its ends – is, if not the actual upshot of a deliberative process, at least in principle open to reflective endorsement. He seems to imagine that the threat posed to autonomy by pride and military anger is that of being moved in ways that simply run counter to one's authentic ends. The danger here, in effect, is that of being caused to act by passions that,

however subject you are to them, can in principle be identified as alien to your own deepest identifications. But erotic compulsion of the kind figured in Palamon and Arcite is different. For it is not as though the desire for Emily simply subjects them to failures of self-command. It certainly does make them act in ways that violate principles of justice and self-interest to which they themselves are committed. It does so, however, *not* because it moves them in ways that run counter to their own deepest identifications, but rather because it generates an overwhelming new territory of identification. Erotic desire creates for Palamon and Arcite an ordering of the will that could never be the product of deliberation, and that might well not stand up to any process of reflective consideration. Loving Emily is not something they would choose prospectively or could argue themselves into, and even once they are committed to it, they might never be able to articulate a set of considerations in light of which it is the right thing to do. Palamon and Arcite are subject to a kind of necessity that violates the Knight's conditions of autonomous action, and that makes these lovers not even *care* whether they would choose the ends they now have. But nevertheless the Knight also makes it clear that such loving opens up a space of exhilarating freedom, a space in which these lovers confront a perfection that calls them out of the identities they had once seen as theirs, a space in which they care about something so deeply that it now serves as an organizing principle for everything in them and in the world they inhabit.[17] And, to return to the ordering of gender, this is not exactly feminization, but neither does it sort very well with anything the Knight is prepared to recognize as masculine, at least insofar as Theseus remains at the center of the Knight's masculine ideal.

The first problem eros presented to the Knight's theory of autonomy was that it revealed that theory's reliance on a more ambitious drive to reflective distance than it was able to accommodate. The second problem eros presents is that it reveals the Knight's ambivalence over relying on reflective distance at all. On the one hand, as the central tropes by which he represents Palamon and Arcite suggest, it looks to him as though erotic compulsion could not be anything but an imprisonment in desire, an exile from one's authentic self. This sense of the matter is backed by the Knight's commitment to a theory of autonomy of the kind outlined above. For Palamon and Arcite cannot be decisive in the

way Theseus is; they are not acting in ways that could in principle stand the test of reflective endorsability; and this makes it look as though their passion were a case of fixation in a condition like the one Theseus suffers momentarily when he is moved by anger and pride. The Knight tries to shore up this inadequate association between the passion involved in the cousins' loving and that in Thesean anger. This is the point of their fratricidal impulses, their incoherent self-understanding, and, allegorically, of their Theban genealogy: because they are moved in ways that cannot be accommodated to a Thesean autonomy, the Knight wants to suggest that there is nothing to distinguish them from a Creonlike monstrosity in which all possibilities of social and psychic order are destroyed. But it is also true that, in emerging "neither quick nor dead" from the undifferentiated mass of Theban bodies which is the result of Theseus's supposedly definitive destruction of that city and everything it represents, what they ultimately emerge into is the ongoing life of Thesean polity and of the Knight's narrative. And they emerge, not just as figures for a danger which Theseus and the Knight want, if not to destroy, then at least to contain, but also as figures for both the depth and the attractiveness of the compulsion they exhibit. This is captured in part by the Knight's attraction to the very features of Emily which occasion Palamon and Arcite's abjection, an attraction related to the glamor of the Thebans' suffering. If they are figures for a kind of psychic ill-health, it is an ill-health that involves the utter disregard for mere health because of the sheer weight of something that matters so much that it utterly abolishes the mattering of anything else. This is a possibility of authentic action and identity that the Knight neither can nor wants to do without, however difficult it is to accommodate in theory. And in fact the Knight's Thesean ethos depends on such a possibility in disavowed form; for, as we have seen, that ethos itself is the site of undeliberative commitments which the Knight knows might not stand up to reflection, but about which he cares so deeply that they constitute a locus of autonomy for him.

In the light of these problems, the Knight's Thesean ethos begins to look less like his basic ideal than a rather uneasy compromise solution, dependent on incompatible conceptions of the source of normativity, neither of which can be recognized as such without calling into question the Knight's notion of reflective endorsability. I do not think the

Knight's uneasiness or wish to compromise in this respect is peculiar to him, nor can its ultimate source be found in any of the various suspect ideologies in which he is implicated. In the next chapter, through a reading of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, I will argue that agency is necessarily structured around such an uneasy compromise. Understanding Boethius's interest in this compromise will thus help us understand better a common thought about the *Knight's Tale*, that Chaucer began the *Canterbury Tales* with it in order to engage head-on what he learned from Boethius. But before turning to Boethius I want to close this chapter with a few final thoughts on Emily.

One way to encapsulate my argument concerning Emily's beauty is that it embodies both of the Knight's radical promptings. On the one hand, the tug of her beauty on her admirers figures the way we can find freedom in the kind of specific passionate attachments that wither away under the drive to reflective distance. This is the thrilling freedom of a commitment to a desire that seizes you, and to which you devote yourself with no question of reflective endorsability entering your mind. You could never endorse it anyway, but what is more, you do not care: even if your love turned out to be a gross violation of prudence, as it does for Palamon and Arcite, you would devote yourself to it anyway. And not just because you cannot get over it; even if you could get over it, you would not want to. It would diminish your sense of a life worth living to get over it, or to turn it into a reflective consideration subject to endorsement or rejection. In this respect, "Emily" holds out the pleasures of a violation of the normative authority of reflective distance, the discovery of a normative ground and a kind of autonomy that does not derive from practical reason. Yet Emily's beauty, imagined as it is as a formal perfection that supplies practical reason with its ultimate guarantee, at the same time figures the attractiveness of the very normative authority whose violation it compels. Emily is at the center of the tale's normative imagination because her attractiveness simultaneously embodies the Knight's conflicted intuitions concerning autonomy and his fantasy of how those conflicts might be resolved.