

The Code of Duelling: Historical Echoes of Duelling in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*

Düello Yasası: Chaucer'in Şövalyenin Hikâyesi'nde Düellonun Tarihî Yansımaları

Sinan KIYAK*

Öne Çıkanlar:

- Çalışma, *Şövalyenin Hikâyesi*'ndeki romantik düello anlatısını tarihî kaynaklarla karşılaştırmaktadır.
- Chaucer'in düello kurgusunun yalnızca edebî değil, tarihî bir gerçekliğe de dayandığı gösterilmektedir.
- Eserde Dük Theseus, şövalyelik hukukunu dönemin klasik düello anlatılarından farklı biçimde uygular.
- *Şövalyenin Hikâyesi*'nin Orta Çağ düello pratiklerine ilişkin tarihî kayıtlara katkı sunabileceği ileri sürülmektedir.

Öz: *Şövalyenin Hikâyesi*, okuyucuların İngiliz Orta Çağ toplumunun sosyal yapısını kavramalarına olanak tanıyan, tarihî açıdan zengin bilgi birikimi sunmaktadır. Şövalye, Dük Theseus tarafından tutsak edilen ve tutsaklıkları sırasında Emily'e âşık olan Palamon ve Arcite'in hikâyesini anlatmaktadır. Her iki şövalye de, aralarındaki husumeti şövalyelik kurallarına uygun bir düello ile çözme yoluna gider. Bu çalışmada, hikâyedeki bu iki şövalye arasında geçen düelloya ilişkin düzenlemelerin, "Şövalyelik Müessesesi" (Court of Chivalry) adlı gerçek bir kurumdan ne şekilde alındığı incelenmektedir. III. Edward, şövalyeler arasındaki davaları görmek amacıyla 1348 yılında "Şövalyelik Müessesesi"ni kurmuş, bu tarihten sonra da şövalyeler arasındaki düellolar bu kurum tarafından yönetilmeye başlanmıştır. Bu kurum, düelloların yeri ve zamanının yanı sıra kullanılacak silahların türüne de karar verme yetkisine sahiptir. Bu bağlamda, Dük Theseus'un hikâyede anlatılan düelloya yaptığı müdahaleler, İngiliz tarihinde gerçekleşen gerçek düellolara ilişkin yasal düzenlemelerle benzerlikler göstermektedir. Sonuç olarak bu çalışmada Chaucer'in kendi toplumundaki güncel sosyal meselelere ışık tutma biçimi incelenerek, *Şövalyenin Hikâyesi*'nin (*The Knight's Tale*) romantik düello kavramını tarihî bir kayda dönüştüren ve kurgusal unsurlarla harmanlanmış bir anlatı olduğu öne sürülmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Chaucer, *Şövalyenin Hikâyesi*, düello, şövalyelik, Şövalyelik Müessesesi, tarihî güvenilirlik

Highlights:

- This study compares Chaucer's depiction of chivalric duels in *The Knight's Tale* with historical sources.
- It argues that chivalric duel was not merely a fictional motif but also a historical reality.
- The study shows that Duke Theseus applies the rules of the Court of Chivalry within the narrative.
- *The Knight's Tale* is considered as a potential historical source in addition to its literary value.

Abstract: *The Knight's Tale* offers historical information, which enables readers to grasp the social structure of Medieval British society. The Knight tells the story of Palamon and Arcite, who are imprisoned

* Ph.D. Student, Ankara University, Graduate School of Social Sciences, Ankara, Türkiye, sinankiyak@ankara.edu.tr
ORCID: 0009-0001-6902-7178

by Duke Theseus, and who fall in love with the Duke's sister Emily, while in prison. Both knights seek to resolve their dispute via chivalric duel. This essay examines the ways in which the regulations on the duel between the two knights in the Tale take their roots from a real institution named the "Court of Chivalry". Edward III established the Court of Chivalry in 1348 to hear the cases between knights, and duels were organised by the Court. The Court had the right to determine the place and time of the duels as well as the type of weapons to be used. Duke Theseus' interventions on the duel presented in the Tale show similarities with the regulations of the court regarding historical British duels. This study seeks to explore how Chaucer sheds light to the current social affairs in his society and argue that *The Knight's Tale* is a representation of historical reality juxtaposed with fictional elements that reshapes the romantic concept of duelling into a historical record.

Keywords: Chaucer, *The Knight's Tale*, duelling, chivalry, The Court of Chivalry, historical reliability

Genişletilmiş Özet: Geoffrey Chaucer'ın, *Canterbury Hikayeleri*'nde okuyuculara sunduğu karakterlerin tamamı psikolojik derinliğe sahip karakterlerdir. Bu durum, eserin ortaya çıktığı İngiliz Orta Çağ toplumuna ait belirli olguların hem anlatıcılar hem de hikâyeler üzerinden okuyucuya ulaşmasına olanak tanır. Hikâyelerin sahip olduğu sosyokültürel zenginlik, toplumsal güvenilirliğini artırmanın yanısıra, edebiyattan bağımsız olarak var olan toplumsal dinamikleri de yansıtmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, sosyokültürel derinliği ile ön plana çıkan hikâyelerden biri *Şövalye'nin Hikayesi*'dir. Diğer anlatıcılardan farklı olarak, Şövalye'nin karakter tasarımı herhangi bir ironik olgu içermez ve birçok eleştirmen tarafından Orta Çağ toplumunun saygıdeğer aristokrat sınıfının ideal bir temsili olarak değerlendirilir. Dolayısıyla onun hikâyesi okuyuculara edebî bir anlatı sunmanın yanında, kurgusal olmayan kültürel ve tarihî gerçeklikleri de yansıtmaktadır. Şövalye, hikâyesinde Atina Dükü Theseus tarafından savaş sonrasında esir alınan Palamon ve Arcite adında iki şövalyenin, Theseus'un kız kardeşine âşık olmalarını ve onun rızasını elde edebilmek için yaşadıkları olayları anlatır. İdeal şövalyelik tanımının birer timsali olarak, Palamon ve Arcite geleneksel bir düello ile aşkı kavuşmayı hak edenin kim olduğunu belirleme yoluna gider. Bu çalışma, anlatıda iki şövalye arasında gerçekleşen düelloya ilişkin düzenlemelerin, kökenini "Şövalyelik Müessesesi" (Court of Chivalry) adlı tarihî bir kurumdan ne şekilde aldığını tartışmaktadır. Şövalyelik geleneklerinin bir kısmı toplum tarafından bilinen ama yazılı olmayan kurallardan oluşurken, diğer kısmı devlet tarafından resmî hukuk kuralları çerçevesinde denetlenmektedir. III. Edward, şövalyeler arasındaki anlaşmazlıkları sonuca bağlamak amacıyla 1348 yılında "Şövalyelik Müessesesi"ni kurmuş; bu tarihten sonra şövalyeler arasındaki düellolar bu kurum tarafından sınıflandırılarak resmî bir statüde düzenlenmeye başlanmıştır. Bu kurum, düelloların yeri ve zamanının yanı sıra kullanılacak silahların türüne de karar verme yetkisine sahiptir. Kurumu bilgilendirmeksizin gerçekleştirilen her türlü eylem, yasa dışı kabul edilmektedir. Bu bağlamda, Dük Theseus'un hikâyede anlatılan düellonun, yasalara uygun şekilde gerçekleşmesi amacıyla yaptığı düzenlemeler, İngiliz tarihinde gerçekleşen düellolara ilişkin yasal düzenlemelerle örtüşmektedir. Bu çalışmada, öncelikle tarihi 14. yüzyıla uzanan Chaucer'ın çağdaşları tarafından yazılmış olan eserler incelenerek, Şövalyelik Müessesesi'ne ait kanuni düzenlemelerin edebî anlatılardaki eksikliğine dikkat çekilmektedir. Dönemin diğer yazarları, kurgusal anlatılarını romantize etmek amacıyla şövalyeler arasındaki düelloları gerçeklikten uzak bir bağlamda, eğlence unsuru olarak betimlemişlerdir. Dönemin tarihî kaynaklarında ise 'şövalyelik düellosu' adı verilen yargılama usulünün detaylı bir şekilde anlatılmadığı, dolayısıyla bu düello türünün varlığına dair şüphelerin oluşmasına zemin hazırlandığı görülmektedir. Tarihçilerin, ekonomik veya politik kaygılar sebebiyle, şövalyelerin aşk uğruna canlarını tehlikeye attıkları 'şövalyelik düellolarını' kayda geçirmeyi tercih etmedikleri anlaşılmaktadır. Chaucer'ın *Şövalyenin Hikâyesi* eserindeki anlatılar, ilgili düello türünün ideal bir örneğini tarihî bir kuruma dayandırarak, hem tarihî kaynaklardaki belirsizlikleri ortadan kaldırmakta hem de hikâyenin anlatıcısı olan Şövalye'nin dürüstlüğü ve güvenilirliğini kanıtlamaktadır. Sonuç olarak bu çalışmada, tarihî kayıtlar ile edebî anlatılar karşılaştırmalı olarak incelenerek, Chaucer'ın yaşadığı dönemdeki toplumsal unsurları yansıtmaya biçimi tartışılmakta ve *Şövalyenin Hikâyesi*'nin romantik düello kavramını tarihî bir kayda dönüştüren ve kurgusal unsurlarla harmanlanmış gerçekliğe sahip bir anlatı olduğu öne sürülmektedir.

Introduction

In Medieval England, chivalry was not merely a fictional concept inserted in texts to pander to the interests of readers. It was rather officially recognised by the authorities as a culturally embraced expression of honour. Historians such as Maurice Keen and Robert Baldick provide historical records of judicial duels considering the disputes of aristocrats. However, they did not particularly include any records of chivalric duels in their historical writings, which aroused a misconception that chivalric duels are only fictional inventions. Re-evaluating the fictional representations of duelling through the lens of historical documents might not only substantiate the existence of the chivalric duels but also strengthen the historical reliability of the relevant works of fiction. Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, on the other hand, can be considered as a literary representation with historical plausibility about chivalric duelling, and the text, in this respect, can be viewed as one of the most successful reflections of this cultural phenomenon. The distinguished characterisation of Duke Theseus as a chivalric representative is preferably one of the best characterisations regarding the literary representations with historical basis of the knightly principles. The Tale's depiction of the duel of chivalry reflects historical realities rather than pure fiction. In a sense, the practices shown in the Tale are based on the regulations of a historical institution named The Court of Chivalry. Therefore, this study aims to clarify the bonds between the fictional articulation of duelling in *The Knight's Tale*, and the real-life dynamics controlled by the Court of Chivalry through a close examination of historically confirmed practices on duelling from a new historicist perspective which were often overlooked by Chaucer's contemporaries.

Before focusing on *The Knight's Tale* directly, it is essential to grasp the fundamental concepts, such as honour and chivalry, within which the chivalric duel was deeply rooted. Even though often overlooked as a social construct, chivalry was in fact both a moral and a social phenomenon in late Medieval England. In this sense, it can be argued that this concept was reshaping the behaviour of knights in the course of time under the traditionally official name known as "The Code of Conduct." In simple terms, chivalry can be defined as the collection of unwritten principles, such as loyalty to lord, protection of the weak, and displaying courage if needed (2005,1). This collection of rules gained importance after the establishment of the Court by Edward III in 1348. Therefore, chivalric customs transcended mere social traditions and became the codifying principles of knights. Duelling was mainly divided into two types: judicial and chivalric duels. While the first category included matters of heraldry, the second one, being the focal point of this essay, included duels exercised due to the harassment of a knight's honour. Having been romanticised by various storytellers, honour was a key moral value to be venerated, especially for the aristocracy. Thus, a knight always had the right to challenge 'his brother' for exculpation.

Due to the high demand for Arthurian romances in late Medieval England, most critics had a natural tendency to examine the discourse between Palamon and Arcite as a dramatic reflection of their courtly love. Inevitably, the interference of Theseus as an authority figure, who smoothly resolves their discourse, is often ignored to foreground the romantic elements as densely as possible. Thus, the legal aspect of chivalric duelling remained unexplored. This obscurity led the audience to view chivalric duelling as an apocryphal form of entertainment. A prominent Medieval scholar Maurice Keen shed light on the administrative responsibilities of the Court by providing references to the historical records of duels taking place in Europe (1996, 106). However, Keen did not particularly analyse the literary reflections of the institution due to a strong bias that held literary records as not reliable sources to be taken into consideration since their

context often consists of fictional narratives. Albeit fictional, these narratives can nevertheless be verified through a comparative reading of historical and literary sources through new historicist lens, evaluating literary and historical texts as co-existing materials, which reflect the social dynamics through different methods of narration. Another critic, Stewart Justman stated that Chaucer somehow failed to portray figures of authority in his *Canterbury Tales* considering that there is no unified understanding of authority due to the plurality of personalities trying to impose their individual authoritative power (1976, 95). This study, on the other hand, aims to offer a historical outlook on Chaucer's position as a historian to consolidate Chaucer's contribution to historical documentation of chivalric duels. In this way, by exploring Chaucer's depiction of chivalric duelling, this study solidifies the affinity between Chaucer's depiction of chivalry and the chivalric practices. This approach does not only provide a unique perspective for the critical reading of the poem but also reinforces the reliability of Chaucer's writings as canonical records of late Medieval England thereby implying that his works shine among the others not only with its poetic uniqueness but also with social reliability.

The Court of Chivalry and Medieval Duels

The Court of Chivalry was established by Edward III in 1348 to hear the cases between knights. Before the official establishment of the Court, knights tried to solve the disputes between themselves by arbitrarily attempting to fight which, caused bloodshed and military chaos, especially during wartime. This issue was also often criticised by the Church officials, claiming that these duels became one of the reasons for the death of Christians. Thus, as Robert Baldick, a well-known Medievalist, reports in his book *The Duel: A History of Duelling* that Edward III decided to form an institution to solve the disputes under civil law:

In England, too, the duel of chivalry thrived in spite of the Church's disapproval. Although introduced into this country in the twelfth century, it did not become really established until the reign of Edward III (1327-77), who set the seal of royal approval on the practice by himself challenging the French King Philippe to a duel in 1340. He also instituted a Court of Chivalry which not only decided matters of precedence, coats of arms, and so on, but also had summary jurisdiction in all cases of offences committed by knights (1970, 27).

As stated above, the judicial duels were generally concerned with disputes between aristocrats who held feudal titles. Edward III not only established a formal institution to regulate the principles of duels but also showcased the ideal, practical employment of the code of duelling by inviting Philippe for a duel. Rarely seen in such historical records, direct involvement of a monarch to a case held in the Court substantially increases the historical reliability of the source and corroborates the impact of the Court's decisions on chivalric disputes.

The Court of Chivalry was governed by the Constable and the Marshal, both of whom were assigned directly by the King. There were several officials practicing the monarch's authority over Britain. Despite being responsible for the local areas under their dominion, they represented the authority of the monarch in their decisions. Regarding their position, George Drewry Squibb briefly summarised their duties as follows: "The Constable and the Marshal had a joint court and that it had jurisdiction over disputes relating to armorial bearings seem to be the only facts upon which all modern authors who have touched upon the subject are agreed" (1959, 3). The protection of 'armorial bearings' was a matter of honour during the Middle Ages. Therefore, the issue of organising duels or tournaments gained official ground with the establishment of the

Court. Therefore, it went beyond the fictional narrations of duelling.

Generally, the Court was responsible for deciding whether the case was eligible for an official duel. As Maurice Keen notes, the Court of Chivalry was the authority to arbitrate martial issues, prescribing “the time, place, and weapons to be used in formal combats” and validating their legitimacy according to knightly law (2005, 204). The chivalric duels were organised as public contests, which made them function like a system for public entertainment, therefore enabling the state to provide communal satisfaction. In this case, if these duels were carried out without the permission of the Court, serious sanctions could have been imposed on those involved. Apart from the official penalties, this attempt would have been severely criticised by other knights as well.

When the historical records are examined carefully, focusing on the types of duels recorded in medieval manuscripts, it comes to light that many of them were the records of the judicial duels narrating hereditary discourses. Victor Kiernan clarifies that it was a matter of life and death for a knight to defend his hereditary rights with the following words:

Enmity between great families inevitably involved their retainers or vassals as well as kindred, and turned into a species of private warfare, which was indeed for long a cherished feudal right. It was the same at bottom as that claimed by the latter-day duellist, of putting himself above the law whenever honour, or pride, called for blood (2016, 32).

This “enmity” was usually nourished from the feudal rivalries, such as the issues on landowning or the protection of coats of arms. Besides, they were ready to die for their honour or pride, showing no hesitation even if their life was at the stake. Therefore, historians naturally tended to celebrate the judicial duels in their writings, being well aware that the aristocrats involved in those disputes would have paid them generously. Thus, chivalric duels, which were concerned with issues of love, were overshadowed in the historical records of judicial duels despite being one of the significant categories of medieval duels. A duel, which dates back to 1371, is underscored by J.G. Millingen in his book *The History of Duelling: Including Narratives of the Most Remarkable Personal Encounters*, which narrates the discourse between the ‘dog’ of Aubry de Montdidier, a French courtier of Charles V, and Macaire (1841, 44). Rivetingly, this duel became very famous and has been told through generations despite involving a dog as one of the competitors. In other words, the pervasive political power of certain aristocrats encouraged historians even to hold such ridiculous records under the category of duelling. Millingen also mentions more than fifteen duels, none of which were related to love affairs in any sense.

Additionally, false accusations were one of the main causes leading to the occurrence of judicial duels, especially depending on the title held by the accused person. M.J. Russell cites an example of judicial duels by referring to *Calendar of the Patent Rolls* belonging to the Public Record Office of Edward III (2008, 338). However, it would not be wrong to argue that those records recalling judicial duels mainly covered rivalries between knights themselves rather than romantic affairs arising from their disputes over ladies as represented in medieval romances. However, Robert Baldick directly refers to the duels of chivalry under the name of ‘Duels of Honour’ in his book entitled *The Duel* (1970, 32). Although he mentions certain duels of honour, which were initiated as a result of protection of women’s honour, these records include neither a detailed description of the settings which duels took place nor the procedures of duelling covering the rules to be followed. Thus, having a closer look at the literary descriptions narrating the

regulations of the Court becomes a necessary attempt to invigorate the official recognition of chivalric duels under civil law. To carry out this mission, literary pieces of the 14th century should firstly be taken into consideration.

Notable works written by Chaucer's contemporaries focused a great deal on the romantic aspects of duels engulfed in emotional density, having refused to uncloud the official customs of single combats or tournaments. Long neglected by authors, the absence of these reflections created historical gaps to be debated, especially under contemporary practices of literary criticism, under which every detail of a literary text becomes a matter of closer inspection. For instance, *The Green Knight*, a famous narrative of chivalric customs approximately coincides with the *Canterbury Tales*, therefore it provides a good example to put stress on the absence of the rules enacted by the Court to successfully execute the duels. Below is an extract from the original text narrating the Arthurian lovesickness of Sir Gawain:

*As I am, oþer euer schal, in erde þer I leue,
Hit were a fole fele-folde, my fre, by my trawþe.
I wolde yowre wylnyng worche at my myzt,
As I am hyzly bihalden, & euer-more wylle
Be seruauant to your-seluen, so saue me dryztyn!"
Þus hym frayned þat fre, & fondet hym ofte,
Forto haf wonnen hym to woze, what-so scho þozt ellez,
Bot he de fended hym so fayr, þat no faut semed,
Ne non euel on nawþer halue, nawþer þay wysten...*

*Will ever be, even if we live long lives—
That would be stupid, esteemed lady, in the extreme.
I'll grant your other requests to the best of my skill
For I am deeply beholden, and will always be
Your loyal servant, may the Lord save me.'
This way, whatever other motive she had in mind,
The lady lured him on, enticing him to sin.
But he held himself back so well no blemish appeared.
There was no sin on either side, nothing but innocent
pleasure (Cooper 2004, 1544-52).*

As can be inferred from the extract above, the behaviour of Arthur's knight towards the lady is a complete embodiment of the courtly love concept, as also defined in Chaucer's writings. Nevertheless, the duel between Sir Gawain and The Green Knight uncovers no detail regarding the rules enacted by the Court of Chivalry, which actually risks turning this chivalric duel into an illegal attempt. The duel takes place in "bi a bonke, þe brymme by-syde" / "on a slope by a flowing stream" (2004, 2172) without any officer from the Court or an audience to witness the event. Here, the absence of an officer indicates that this duel is unofficial and therefore the participants should face serious penalties stated by the Court of Chivalry.

Another example taken from the same era is Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* with peculiar jousting scenes of the knights in variety of different occasions. Despite the definition of multiple scenes of duelling within the work, neither King Arthur nor the Knights of the Round Table appear to embrace the regulations traditionally prescribed by the Court of Chivalry, nor is there any discernible representation of such an authority within these chapters of the book. Below is an extract from Chapter XII of the first book, describing Arthur's duel with a knight, showcasing his

lack of order:

...Anon he took his horse and dressed his shield and took a spear, and they met so hard either in other's shields, that all to-shivered their spears. Therewith anon Arthur pulled out his sword. Nay, not so, said the knight; it is fairer, said the knight, that we twain run more together with sharp spears. I will well, said Arthur, an I had any more spears. I have enow, said the knight; so there came a squire and brought two good spears, and Arthur chose one and he another; so they spurred their horses and came together with all their mights, that either brake their spears to their hands. Then Arthur set hand on his sword. Nay, said the knight, ye shall do better, ye are a passing good jouter as ever I met withal, and once for the love of the high order of knighthood let us joust once again... (Malory 2024, 80).

In this scene, Arthur suddenly draws his sword without giving any chance to his opponent to pick himself up and is warned by the knight couple of times for this reason. This scene neither contains any authoritative character to represent the Court, nor does it include any elements of courtly love to be defined as a scene of chivalric duel. At this point, Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* stands out as the only remaining piece for closer examination to find out if there is any literary record on the Court of Chivalry. Because, both historical and literary depictions fail to portray the functions of the Court, and leaves the following question unanswered: How were the regulations of the Court on duelling practiced by knights in chivalric duels?

Chaucer's Knight and the Ideology of Chivalry

To establish connections between the Court and *The Knight's Tale*, the Narrator's reliability on chivalric customs becomes an important point through which the articulations on chivalric duels or tournaments might be evaluated as literary depictions with historical plausibility. If one can say that the Knight is an ideal representative, acting in line with the Code of Conduct, his tale becomes historically significant to be referred as a supportive source while discussing a non-fictional institution that is the Court of Chivalry. "The Prologue" provides information on the Knight's personality traits as follow:

*A Knyght ther was and that a worthy man,
That fro the tyme that he first bigan
To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.*

*There was a Knight, a most distinguished man,
Who from the day on which he first began
To ride abroad had followed chivalry,
Truth honour, generousness and courtesy (Black et al. 2014, 43-46).*

Chaucer inserts certain clues with irony while describing the personalities of his narrators to unearth their immoralities. However, according to most authorities, Chaucer had a realistic tone while portraying the Knight, deviating from the usual ironic depictions as seen in the portrayals of other narrators. As an honourable and loyal person, the Knight is expected to articulate his tale in line with the principles to which he pays respect. Derek Pearsall highlights how both the Narrator and Theseus strongly reflect the ideals of chivalry in their character portrayals. In a way, Theseus was created by Chaucer to represent the Knight's views on the Code of Conduct, and this

deliberate attempt is explained by Pearsall as follows:

The tale is appropriate to the Knight in a broad and obvious way. The Knight's life, as we have seen it described in the General Prologue, has been mostly spent fighting, and the portrayal of his character is devoted to an exhibition of the typical traits of the chivalric ideal of the fighter: he was a verray, parfit gentil knight. (1-72) His tale contains more formal fighting, both hand-to-hand combat (1649-60) and ceremonialised melee (2599-651), than all the rest of Chaucer's poetry put together, and the values associated with chivalry in the description of the Knight, Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie (1.46) are the values embodied in Theseus, forgotten by Palamon and Arcite... (1985, 115)

Relying on this argument, it would be quite natural for Chaucer's audience to expect a socially consistent tale, which sheds light on the realities of Medieval England. Also, the hierarchical position of the Knight in the frame narrative increases the value of his sayings. Being positioned as the first narrator not only emphasises his personal superiority over the other narrators but also shows that the social class he belongs to (aristocracy) was considered superior in England at the time. Taking the social and historical facts into account stated above, the Knight can fairly be accepted as the most suitable person to tell a tale presenting chivalric ideals.

Besides, chivalry was not only a folkloric or fictional term, functioning as a key element in the fancy folktales of Medieval England. Far from being such a word, chivalry was seen as the guardian of an ideal social order that was respected for the mutual benefit of the English society. Maurice Keen notes that "chivalry was as much about social order and political utility as it was about personal valour or moral refinement" (2005, 2), and this argument on the reliability of the Knight's strong commitment to the chivalric ideals create a strong basis for the historical validity of his characters' actions. Thus, it is worth noting that the resemblance between the legal regulations of an institution and the rules set by a fictional character cannot be arbitrary. Viewed in this context, *The Knight's Tale* sets a legitimate example to justify this semblance, which, arguably, must have been formed by Chaucer on purpose to fill the historical gap in the execution of chivalric duels under civil law.

Duke Theseus, the fictional embodiment of the knightly ideals, demonstrates how the officials of the Court were interfering with the chivalric disputes by laying down the rules of the duel of chivalry between Palamon and Arcite. In the second part of the *Knight's Tale*, Palamon and Arcite, both of whom are exasperated with the excessive love and admiration of Emelye's sacred beauty, decide to duel in the forest without any prior consent of Theseus, who is the ultimate authority, representing the Court. After a while, Theseus encounters the knights in the forest and commands them to stop duelling immediately. This section, although it does not seem to indicate any rules, provides the main reason for Theseus to intervene as follows:

*Namoore, upon peyne of lesynge of youre heed!
By myghty Mars, he shal anon be deed
That smyteth any strook that I may seen.
But telleth me what mystiers men ye been
That been so hardy for to fighten here
Withouten juge or oother officere
As it were in a lystes roially.*

*No more on pain of death! Upon your head!
 By mighty Mars, he is as good as dead
 That dares to strike a blow in front of me!
 Tell me, what sort of fellows may you be
 That have the impudence to combat here
 Without a judge or other overseer,
 Yet as if jousting at a royal tilt? (849-55)*

Having been informed in the beginning, the readers know that Palamon and Arcite are the prisoners of Theseus. Therefore, his way of calling them 'fellows' refers to their belonging to knighthood rather than their personal relationships with him. With this nuance, he underscores the significance of their loyalty towards the knightly principles. Therefore, his precautions appear to have an official basis, which establishes a bond between his authority and the Court of Chivalry. He states that it would not be appropriate to hold a duel without a judge to keep the event under official control. Only seen in *The Knight's Tale* among many portrayals of knights in the frame narrative, this warning has no function other than indicating the bailiwick of the Court, since "[i]t of felony, was then for the judge to consider whether the duel was competent and proper in the case" (Neilson 1891, 37). Consequently, Theseus stops the event due to the absence of a legal authority, that is the judge, to decide whether the case is eligible to hold a chivalric duel.

The eligibility of the case was highly dependent on the type of harassment committed by one of the knights. In the second part of the frame narrative, Palamon accuses Arcite of breaking his oath, also referred as the 'Pentecostal Oath', by falling in love with Emelye, whose consent has already been given to Palamon even though she does not know that yet. Thus, Palamon addresses Arcite's betrayal forming an acceptable basis for the duel as given below:

*As I ful ofte have seyde thee heer biforn,
 And hast byjaped heere Duc Theseus
 And falsly chaunged hast thy name thus—
 I wol be deed or elles thou shalt dye!
 Thou shalt nat love my lady Emelye!*

*As I have told you many times before,
 And you have cheated Theseus with this game,
 False as you are, of a pretended name!
 Let it be death for you or death for me.
 You shall not love my lady Emily! (726-30)*

Attempting to deceive his lord for the sake of love, Arcite is rightfully accused by Palamon as a traitor and thus invited to a duel. Maurice Keen clarifies the debate on the validity of such duels by underlining that "[a] knight's worth was measured by his honor in arms and his devotion to a lady. A rival's claim to the same lady was often a cause of both poetic lament and formal combat" (2005, 199). Moreover, another explanation carrying a similar perspective with that of *The Knight's Tale* is provided by Baldick merely focusing on the courtly love concept. He argues that "[f]or the man imbued with a chivalrous respect for the opposite sex, an injury or insult to a woman to whom he was related or attached was the gravest and most obvious reason for a duel" (1970, 32). Thus, it becomes inevitable for the Court of Chivalry to accept Palamon's accusation as a valid reason for duelling. In a fictional sense, this regulation successfully explains why Theseus decides to turn the dispute of the knights into a duel instead of severely punishing them. Apparently, he is forced by Chaucer to abide by the rules enacted by the Court.

The Tournament

Theseus, after stopping the unofficial duelling attempt of his knights, turns this single combat into a tournament by inviting two hundred knights to fight beside Palamon and Arcite. As mentioned earlier in this study, it was under the responsibility of the Court of Chivalry to organise a tournament for the satisfaction of society. As expected, Chaucer's fictional narration continues to reveal connections to the historical realities. The scene narrating related preparations points out a royal ritual of which every detail is carefully inserted by the Knight. Therefore, this scene should be examined comparatively to determine whether those details are entirely fictional or reshaped by the realities of the day. Theseus commands his knights to prepare for the fight in fifty weeks (992), which approximately equals a year. In doing so, he intentionally decides the time of the event as the judge acting on behalf of the Court. Additionally, some details given to the reader just before the beginning of the event certainly remark the fact that this organisation would be more than a carnival taking place in medieval times. On the day of the tournament, Theseus' theatrical depiction reflects the unmatched authoritative power employed in the event:

*The grete Theseus that of his sleepe awaked
With mynstralcie and noyse that was maked
Heeld yet the chambre of his paleys riche
Til that the Thebane knyghtes, bothe yliche
Honored, were into the paleys fet.
Duke Theseus was at a wyndow set,
Arrayed right as he were a god in trone.
The peple preesseth thiderward ful soone,
Hym for to seen and doon heigh reverence
And eek to herkne his heste and his sentence.*

*The great Duke Theseus, from sleep aroused
By the music and the hubbub of the crowd
Outside his palace gates, kept to his chamber,
Till—for they treated them with equal honour—
They brought the Theban knights to the palace.
Duke Theseus was at a window seat,
Just like a god in splendour on his throne.
Thither the press of people hurried in
To see him, and to pay due homage, and
Listen to his directives and commands (1665-74).*

The lines above present a double-edged portrayal that cuts across the usual portrayals of monarchs in the *Canterbury Tales*. Deviating from the previous norms in the frame narrative, Chaucer calls Theseus 'God' in this part, manifesting his enormous authority both as a monarch and a chivalric arbitrator at the same time. This construction of identity clarifies his political position because the 'directives and commands' were only given by the Constable and the Marshall as indicated before.

In this sense, Theseus carefully exercises the responsibilities of the Court officials and the sacred right of jurisdiction. In addition, deciding on time and place were usually under the responsibility of the Court as well. Theseus' imposing physical position on the throne, haughtily observing the crowd, showcases complete similarities with the historical records narrating the regulations of the Court concerning monarch's rituals during tournaments and duels (Russell 2008, 339). Precautions taken to prevent any harm should be examined to solidify the connections

between historical records and literary narration since it is already acknowledged that the Church severely opposed the judicial and chivalric duels due to the increase in the number of deaths of Christian souls. Thus, the authorities of the Court made significant changes on the duelling procedures to prevent any unintentional deaths, allowing duels to be widely practiced. Similarly, Theseus forewarns the combatants regarding the use of weapons and actions to be taken under certain circumstances to prevent deaths as given below:

*No maner shot, polax, ne short knyf
 Into the lystessende ne thider brynge,
 Ne short swerd for to stoke with point bitynge
 Ne man ne drawe ne here by his syde
 Ne no man shal unto his felawe ryde
 But o cours with a sharpe ygrounde spere;
 Foyne, if hym list, on foote hymself to were.
 And he that is at meschief shal be take
 And noght slayn, but be broght unto the stake.*

*No cross-bow darts, no poleaxes or knives
 May pass into the lists or be conveyed
 Thither, no stabbing-sword with pointed blade
 Be drawn or even carried at the side.
 Further, no pair of combatants shall ride
 More than one course with spears, descending thence
 To thrust on foot only in self-defence.
 If any man be injured, none shall take
 His life; he shall be carried to the stake (1685-94).*

Here, Duke Theseus deliberately emphasises the need to decide on the weapons to be used in the tournament. Therefore, this extract illustrates how exactly Chaucer assigned Theseus to the place of the Constable or the Marshall to demonstrate how these officials would be regulating the rules if this tournament had taken place in real life. It would be more striking to the audience, without doubt, if Chaucer had chosen to construct a scene of a tournament during which many combatants cruelly massacred each other or at least caused a considerable amount of bloodshed for the sake of fictional tension. However, Theseus' interventions often aimed at taking the potential chaos under control as expected from an ideal representative of knightly principles. Keeping the edges of the swords blunt and forbidding the usage of long-ranged weapons were exactly the written rules of chivalric and judicial duels enacted by the Court (Millingen 1841, 75, 281). Also, the repetition of jousting is prohibited by Theseus to prevent any party from gaining a strategic advantage to wear the opponents out as much as possible.

Despite not being mentioned in the Tale directly, those rules on the prohibition of many weapons were substantially enforced due to the frequent warnings of the religious authorities. Naturally, Chaucer had no obligation to refer to those laws since the story often revolves around pagan motifs and non-Christian rituals, mostly excluding the Catholic worldview. But his concealed mission to correctly represent the chivalric code somehow encouraged Chaucer to highlight the regulations on chivalric duels practiced in his days.

Conclusion

In *The Knight's Tale*, Chaucer structures a realistic depiction of the duel of chivalry. He carries

this phenomenon beyond the fictional narrations of his time by constructing strong ties with the Court of Chivalry to provide an official ground for duelling. Through Palamon and Arcite's dispute, Chaucer reflects the ideal form of duelling by placing Theseus as an ultimate mediator in the Tale as the rules enacted by the Court of Chivalry are represented through Theseus' warnings while organising an official tournament.

The historical documents dating back to the 14th century fell short of documenting any records of chivalric duels or tournaments, indicating the authority of the Court. Therefore, Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale* is reliable enough to be accepted as a historical writing, which refers to the regulations of the Court of Chivalry. By comparing the fictional elements of *The Knight's Tale* with the historical records of the Court of Chivalry from a new historicist perspective, this study shows that Chaucer not only reveals the judicial and cultural notions of his time but also reimagines the ritual of duelling as a tool through which authority, love, and knightly identity are discussed within both legal and literary aspects. Therefore, Chaucer manages to fill the historical gap regarding the effects of civil law on the duels of chivalry during medieval times. Eventually, this study clarifies that Chaucer was not only an author narrating pure fiction, but also a scholar contributing to the historical documentation of English society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baldick R. 1970. *The Duel: A History of Duelling*. London.
- Black J. 2014. "The Knight's Tale". *The Broadview Anthology of British Literature Volume 1: The Medieval Period - Third Edition*. Canada.
- Cooper H. 2008. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Oxford.
- Chaucer G. 2011. *The Canterbury Tales*. Oxford.
- Justman S. 1976. "Medieval Monism and Abuse of Authority in Chaucer". *The Chaucer Review*, 95-111.
- Keen M. 2005. *Chivalry*. London.
- Keen M. 1996. *Nobles, Knights and Men-at-Arms in the Middle Ages*. London.
- Kiernan V. 2016. *The Duel in European History: Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy*. London.
- Malory T. 2024. *Le Morte d'Arthur: Volume I*. Illinois.
- Millingen J.G. 1841. *History of Duelling: Including Narratives of the Most Remarkable Personal Encounters*. London.
- Neilson G. 1891. *Trial by Combat*. New York.
- Pearsall D. 1985. *The Canterbury Tales*. London.
- Russell M.J. 2008. "Trial by Battle in the Court of Chivalry". *The Journal of Legal History* 29, 335-357. doi: 10.1080/01440360802462006
- Squibb G.D. 1959. *The High Court of Chivalry: A Study of the Civil Law in England*. Oxford.