

The Knight's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer



Here begins the Knight's Tale.

“And now Theseus, drawing close to his native land in a laurelled chariot after fierce battle with the people, is heralded by glad applause and the shouts of the people flung to the heavens and the merry trump of warfare that has reached its end.”¹

Long ago, as old histories tell us, there was a duke called Theseus, lord and ruler of Athens, and in his time such a conqueror that there was none greater under the sun. He had subdued many rich countries, and with his wisdom and his knighthood had conquered all the realm of the Amazons, the land of women, which formerly was called Scythia. He wedded the Queen Hippolyta and brought her home with him to his country in great glory and pomp, and her young sister Emily with her. And thus with victory and melody I leave this noble duke riding on to Athens, with his entire host in arms with him. 874

And if it were not too long to hear, surely I would have told you fully how the realm of the Amazons was won by Theseus and his knightly valor; and, while I was about it, of the great battle between the Athenians and the Amazons; how Hippolyta was besieged, the fair, hardy queen of the Scythians; of her wedding-feast, and of the tempest at her homecoming. But all that I must withhold now; God knows, I have a large field to plough, and my oxen are weak. The remainder of my tale is long enough, and I would also not hinder any of this company; let every comrade in turn tell his tale, and let us see who shall win the supper. And where I left off I will begin again. 892

When this duke had come close to the town in all his triumph and highest pomp, he cast his eye at one side and noticed a company of ladies, clad in black, kneeling in the highway, two by two. But they made such a cry and woe that no living creature in this world ever heard another such one; nor would they

¹ The opening quote is from Statius' *Thebiad*, one of Chaucer's sources of the *Knight's Tale*.

stop this crying until they had caught the reins of his bridle. 904

“What people are you who disturb the festival of my homecoming thus with lamentations?” said Theseus. “Have you so great ill-will toward my honors that you so complain and cry? Or who has done you ill? Tell me if it may be amended. And why you are thus clothed in black? 911

The eldest lady of them all spoke (but first she swooned with such a deathly look that it was pitiful to see): “Lord, to whom Fortune has granted victory and to live as a conqueror, your glory and honor grieves us not. We beg for aid and for mercy upon our woe and distress. From your nobility let some drop of pity fall upon us wretched women; for surely, there is none of us, lord, who has not been a queen or a duchess. Now are we poor wretches, as you may see, thanks to Fortune and her false wheel that does not ensure prosperity to any estate. And surely, lord, here in the temple of the goddess Clemency we have been this entire fortnight awaiting your coming. 929

“Now help us, lord, since it is within your power! I, wretch that I am, thus weeping and wailing, was once wife to King Capaneus, who perished at Thebes-- cursed be the day! And we who are in this plight and make this lament all lost our husbands while the siege lay about that town. And now, alack, old Creon who is now lord of Thebes, full of anger and iniquity, by his tyrannical malice has drawn the dead bodies of our slain lords upon a heap, to do them indignity, and will allow them by no means to be either buried or burned, but in scorn gives them to hounds to eat.” 947

And with that word, without more ado, they all fell on their faces and cried piteously, “Have some mercy upon us wretched women, and let our woe sink into your heart!” 951

The noble duke sprang from his charger with a pitying heart, when he heard them speak; his heart nearly broke when he saw them who had once been of high degree so piteous and cast down. And he raised them all up in his arms and comforted them kindly, and swore an oath that, as he was a true knight, he would strive to take such vengeance upon the tyrant Creon that all the people of Greece should tell how he was treated by Theseus, as a man that had well merited his death. And very swiftly, without more delay, he unfurled his banner and rode forth to Thebes with his entire host. No nearer to Athens would he travel, nor take his ease half a day, but spent that night along the route to Thebes, and sent

Hippolyta the queen and Emily her fair young sister to wait in the town of Athens; and then onward he rode. There is no more to be told. 974

The red image of Mars² with spear and shield so shone upon his broad white banner that all the fields glittered all over. And by his banner was borne his pennant of rich gold, on which was hammered out the Minotaur, which he had slain in Crete. Thus rode this duke, this conqueror, and in his host all the flower of chivalry, until he came to Thebes and dismounted in a beautiful open field where he thought to fight. To tell shortly of this matter, he fought with Creon, King of Thebes, like a worthy knight, and slew him in manly fashion in open battle, and put his people to rout. And then by assault he won the city and tore down wall and beam and rafter. He restored to the ladies the bones of their husbands, to perform their rituals which were then the custom. But it would be entirely too long to tell the clamor and lament of the ladies at the burning of the bodies, and the great honor done them by the noble conqueror Theseus, when they departed from him. To be brief is my entire wish. 1000

When this worthy duke had slain Creon and thus won Thebes, he took his rest in the field all that night and then dealt with all that country as he wished. 1004

After the battle and defeat, the pillagers were busy to search through the heaps of dead, to strip them of harness and garments; and so it happened that in the heap they came upon two young knights, lying near each other, pierced through and through by many grievous, bloody wounds, both bearing arms of one style, richly fashioned; of these two, the one was called Arcite and the other knight Palamon. They were not fully alive nor fully dead, but by their escutcheons and their accoutrements the heralds knew them among the rest to be of the royal blood of Thebes and born of two sisters. Out of the heap the pillagers dragged them, and bore them softly to Theseus' tent. And he dispatched them immediately to Athens to dwell in prison perpetually; he would take no ransom. And when this worthy duke had done this, swiftly he rode homeward with his entire host, crowned with laurel like a conqueror, and there in joy and honor he lived to the end of his life; what need of more words? And Palamon and Arcite in a tower dwelt in anguish and woe; no gold could free them. 1032

² Mars. The god of war.

This passed on by day and by year until it happened, once upon a May morning before daybreak, that Emily, who was fairer to see than the lily upon its green stalk, and fresher than May with its new flowers (Her cheeks competed with the rose--I know not which was the fairer.) Emily, I say, as was her custom, had arisen and was already dressed, for May will have no sluggishness at night. The season pricks every gentle heart and arouses it out of sleep and says, "Arise, and make your observance." Thus Emily remembered to rise and do honor to May. She was freshly clothed and her yellow hair was braided in a tress behind her back, a yard long, I believe; and in the garden at sunrise she walked up and down gathering the red and white flowers at will, to make a delicate garland for her head; and she sang heavenly, like an angel. 1055

This great tower so thick and strong, where the knights were imprisoned, was the chief dungeon of the castle and joined with the wall of the garden where Emily was amusing herself. Clear was the morning and bright was the sun, and Palamon, the woeful prisoner, had risen and by his jailer's permission, as was his habit, was pacing in a chamber on high, from which he saw all the noble city, and the garden as well, full of its green branches, where this fresh Emily was walking and rambling up and down. Palamon, the sorrowful prisoner, went about pacing to and fro in the chamber, complaining to himself of his misery. Often he cried, Alas that he was born! And so it happened, by chance or luck, that through a window set thick with many iron bars, great and square as any beam, he cast his eye upon Emily, and therewith he started and cried "Ah!" as though he were stricken through the heart. 1079

And at that cry Arcite quickly started up and said, "Dear cousin, what ails you that you are so pale and deathlike to look upon? Why did you cry out? Who has done you harm? For the love of God, take our prison all in patience, for it may not be otherwise. This adversity was given to us by Fortune. Some evil aspect or disposition of Saturn by some constellation has given us this, though we had vowed it should not be. So stood the heavens when we were born, and we must endure it; this is all." 1091

This Palamon answered then, "Cousin, in truth this thought of yours is vainly imagined. This prison caused not my groan. I have received just now a wound through my eye into my heart, one that will be my death. The fairness of that lady, whom I see yonder in the garden roaming back and forth, is the cause of all my crying and pains. I know not whether she is a woman or a goddess; but in truth I believe it

is Venus³. With that he fell upon his knees and said, "Venus, if it is your will to transfigure yourself here in this garden thus before me, a sorrowful wretched creature, help us to escape out of this prison. But if my destiny is decreed by eternal word that I shall die in prison, have some compassion upon our lineage that is brought so low by tyranny." 1111

And upon that, Arcite observed where this lady roamed here and there, and the sight of her beauty so hurt him that, if Palamon was sorely wounded, Arcite was hurt as much or worse; and he said piteously with a sigh, "The fair beauty of her who roams in yonder spot suddenly slays me, and if I will not have her pity and her grace, at least to see her, I am dead; there is no more to say." 1122

When Palamon heard these words, he looked at him furiously and answered, "Do you say this in earnest or sport?" 1125

"No, in earnest, by my faith," said Arcite. "So God help me, I have very little stomach for sport!" 1127

This Palamon began to knit his brows. "It would be no great honor to you," he said, "to be false or a traitor to me your cousin and one who is sworn deeply to be your brother; as each of us is pledged that never, until death may part us two, even if we die by torture, shall either of us hinder the other in love or in any case, dear brother; but that you should faithfully further me in every case, as I shall further you. This was your oath, and, surely, mine also; I know very well, you dare not deny it. Thus you are pledged to be my trusty friend, and now you would falsely be about loving my lady, whom I love and serve and ever shall until my heart may die. Now, surely, false Arcite, you shall not do so. I loved her first and told you my pain, as if to my trusty friend and my brother who has pledged to help me, as I said. Therefore you are bound as a knight to help me if you can, or you are false, I dare say." 1151

Arcite spoke again proudly: "You will be seen to be false before I am; and you are false, I tell you flatly. For with earthly love I loved her before you did. What will you say? You did not know even now whether she were a goddess or a woman. Yours is affection for holiness, and mine is love for a living creature; for this I told you my case, as if to my cousin and sworn brother. You make the case that you loved her first. Do you not know well the old clerk's saying, "Who sets a law on a lover?" By my skull, love is a greater law than can be given to any

³ Venus. The goddess of love.

man on the earth. And therefore all human law and decrees and similar things are broken every day for love by people in every station of life. A man must love in spite of all he could do! He cannot flee it, even if he should die, whether she is a maiden, married, or widow. And you are not likely as well to stand in her grace all your life, and no more shall I; for you know full well that you and I are doomed to prison perpetually, and no ransom shall help us. We strive like the hounds that fought all day for the bone and won nothing; amid all their rage a kite came and bore away the bone from between them. Therefore at the king's court each man for himself is the only rule, my brother. Love if you will, for I love and ever shall, dear brother, and truly this is all. We must remain here in this prison and each of us must take his chance!" 1186

Great and long was the strife between them, if I had the leisure to tell it; but to the point. It happened one day, to tell it you shortly, that a worthy duke named Perotheus, a friend to duke Theseus since they were little children, had come to Athens to visit his fellow, as he was accustomed, and to amuse himself. For he so loved no other man in this world, and Theseus loved him as tenderly. So well they loved that when the one was dead, in very truth his friend went and sought him down in hell, as the old books say⁴. But I do not wish to write that story. Duke Perotheus loved Arcite well, and had known him at Thebes many years. Finally, at the prayer of Perotheus, Duke Theseus released him from prison without ransom, to go freely where he wished on such terms as I shall tell you. This in short was the agreement of Arcite, that if ever in his life he were found by day or night in any realm of Theseus and were caught, he should lose his head by the sword. There would be no better remedy or course of action; but he took his leave and hurried homeward. Let him beware, his neck lies as a pledge! 1219

How great is Arcite's sorrow now! He feels death stab him through his heart. He weeps, wails, piteously cries, and watches for a time to slay himself in private. He said, "Alas, the day that I was born! Now is my prison worse than ever; now I am doomed forever not to purgatory but to hell. Alas, that ever I knew Perotheus; otherwise I would have dwelt with Theseus evermore fettered in his prison. Then I would have been in bliss, not woe. Though I would never win the grace of her whom I serve, only the sight of her would have sufficed me well enough. O dear cousin Palamon, yours is the victory in this

⁴ Down in hell. It is Theseus who sought out Perotheus in Hades.

thing. Blissfully may you dwell in prison. In prison? No, in paradise, surely. Well has Fortune cast the die for you, who have the sight of her, as I only have the absence! For it is possible, since you are near her and are a knight, a worthy and an able one, by some chance of changeful Fortune you may sometime attain your desire. But I who am exiled and so barren of all grace and hope that neither earth, water, fire nor air, nor any creature made of them, can help or give me comfort, well may I die in distress and despair! Farewell, my life, my joy and gladness! 1250

“Alas, why do people complain so generally of God’s providence or of Fortune, who so often gives them in many ways better luck than they could choose for themselves? One man desires riches, which become the cause of his murder or great sickness. Another would gladly be out of prison; and at home he is slain by his household. In this is infinite peril; we do not know here what thing we pray for. We manage like a man drunk as a rat; a drunken man knows well that he has a house, but not the right way to that place, and for him the path to it is slippery. 1264

“Surely, so we get along in this world. We seek diligently after felicity, but in truth often go wrong. Thus may we all say, and chiefly I, that supposed and had a great notion that if I could escape from prison I would in well-being and perfect joy, where now I am exiled from my happiness. Since I cannot see you, Emily, I am but dead; nothing can cure me.” 1274

On the other hand, Palamon, when he knew Arcite was gone, made such sorrow that the great tower resounded with his clamor and lament, and even the fetters about his great shins were wet with his bitter, salt tears. “Alas!” he said, “my cousin Arcite, the profit of all our strife is yours, God knows. You walk now at large in Thebes, and give little thought to my woe. With your wisdom and manhood you may assemble all the people of our kindred and make such sharp war upon this city that by some chance or treaty you may have her as wife and lady for whom I must die. For by way of possibilities, your advantage is great, since you are a lord and at large and free from prison, above mine, since I die here in a cage. While I live I must weep and wail with all the woe of a prisoner, and with the pain that love gives me as well, which doubles all my torment.” With that the fire of jealousy blazed up within his breast and seized him so madly by the heart that he was livid as a box-tree to look upon, or as the dead and cold ashes. 1302

Then he said, “O cruel gods, that govern this world with the bond of your eternal word, and write your laws and eternal decrees upon tables of adamant, how is mankind more bound unto you than the sheep that cowers in the fold? Man is slain like any beast, and dwells in prison and constraint, and is sick and in adversity, and often guiltless, in faith. What just governance is in this Providence that so torments the innocent? And yet this increases all my pain, that man is bound to his duty, for God’s sake to refrain from his desires, where a beast may fulfill all its pleasure. And when a beast is dead, its trouble is past, but after death a man must weep and lament though he has had worry and woe in this world. Without doubt it may be thus; the answer to all this I leave to theologians, but well I know that on this earth there is great sorrow! Alas! I see a serpent or a thief, one that has done mischief to many faithful men, go at large and where he wishes. But I must be in prison on account of Saturn⁵ and the jealous rage of Juno⁶, who has destroyed nearly all the blood of Thebes and laid waste its wide walls. And on the other hand, Venus slays me for jealousy and fear of Arcite.” 1333

Now for a time will I leave Palamon ever lying in prison, and will tell you now of Arcite. 1336

The summer passed, and the long nights doubled both the bitter pain of the lover and of the prisoner. I know not which has the more woeful occupation! For, to tell shortly, Palamon is perpetually doomed to prison, to die in chains and fetters; and Arcite is exiled on pain of death from that country for evermore, and nevermore shall he see his lady. You lovers, I ask now the question, which is in the worse case, Palamon or Arcite? The one may see his lady daily, but must dwell ever in prison. The other may ride or walk where he wishes, but shall never see his lady more. Now you that know how, judge as you wish, for I will tell now as I began. 1354

Here ends the first part.

Here begins the second part.

When Arcite had made his way to Thebes, he languished many days and said “Alas!”, for never again should he see his lady. And shortly to conclude about his woe, no creature that is or shall be while the world shall last ever had so much sorrow. He was

⁵ Saturn. God of the harvest, also known as Cronos; father of Jupiter (Zeus), Juno (Hera), Ceres (Demeter), Pluto (Hades), and Neptune (Triton).

⁶ Juno. Wife of Zeus and patron of married women. Her jealousy, in one sense, is a function of Zeus’ profligacy.

bereft of sleep, food, and drink, and grew lean and dry as a stick; his eyes hollow, grisly to see, and his hue sallow, pale as cold ashes; and he was always solitary, wailing all night and making his complaint. 1366

If he heard songs or instruments of music, then would he weep and could not be consoled. So feeble and low and changed were his spirits, that nobody could recognize his speech or his voice even if they heard them. And in his behavior he acted not only as if he had the lover's sickness of Eros, but rather like madness sprung from melancholy in the cell of imagination in his brain. In short, both the disposition and habits of this woeful lover, lord Arcite, were turned all upside-down. 1379

Why should I describe all day his woe? When he had endured a year or two of this cruel torment in his country Thebes, one night as he lay in his sleep the winged god Mercury seemed to stand before him, and told him to be cheerful. In his hand he bore upright his wand of sleep, and upon his bright hair he wore a hat; in such fashion he came, Arcite took note, as when Mercury put Argus to sleep. And thus he spoke to him: "You shall go to Athens; there an end of your woe is prepared." 1392

And at that word Arcite started up. "Now truly," he said, "howsoever I pay for it, I will go straightway to Athens. Not for the fear of death will I fail to see my lady whom I love and serve. If I behold her once, I do not care if I should die!" 1398

And with that word he picked up a great mirror and saw that his entire hue was changed, and his face was entirely of another fashion; and it ran into his mind then that since his face was so disfigured with his malady, he might well, if he bore himself humbly, live in Athens unknown evermore and see his lady almost daily. And quickly he changed his clothing to that of a poor laborer, and all alone except for a squire, who was disguised poorly as Arcite was and knew Arcite's secret, he took the shortest way to Athens. 1413

And soon he went to the court, and at the gate offered his service to drudge and draw whatever men should tell him. And shortly to end this matter, he fell into service with Emily's chamberlain, who was wise and could well detect a good servant. Well could Arcite hew wood and carry water, for he was young and mighty in that, and strong and big of bones to do whatever he was bid. A year or two he was in this service as page of the chamber to Emily the bright, and he called himself Philostrate. But there was never

in the court a man of his station who was half so well beloved as him; for he seemed so noble a person that his renown spread throughout the court. 1432

They said that it would be a charity for Theseus to raise his station, and put him in worshipful service, where he might employ all of his powers. Thus within a while the report of his deeds and fair tongue was so spread about that Theseus took him as squire of his chamber, with gold enough to maintain his station. And from year to year men brought him secretly his revenue from his own country as well; but this he spent in such fitting and cunning fashion that no man wondered from where it had come. And three years he led his life in this fashion, and bore himself so in war and in peace that Theseus held no man dearer. And in this bliss I now leave Arcite, and will speak a little of Palamon. 1450

Seven years in darkness in this horrible fortified prison has Palamon sat, worn away with woe and hardship. Who feels now a double wound and heaviness but Palamon, whom love so torments that he goes out of his wit for woe! And he is a prisoner also, not just for a year but perpetually. Who could properly in English set to rhyme his martyrdom? Not I, in truth. Therefore I pass it over as lightly as I can. 1461

Now in the seventh year, on the third night of May, as the old books tell which relate this history more fully, whether it was by chance or by destiny (as thus, that when a thing is decreed, it shall be), it happened that Palamon, soon after midnight, by the help of a friend broke from his prison and fled the city as fast as he could go. For he had given his jailer a drink of a cordial, made of a certain wine with narcotics and fine opium of Thebes, so that all that night, even if men should strike him, he could not awake, but remained asleep. And thus Palamon fled away as fast as he ever could. The night was short and dawn was at hand; he had to hide, and to a nearby grove he crept with fearful foot. For in short this was his intent: to hide himself in that grove all day and at night to take the road toward Thebes, and pray his friends to help him war upon Theseus; and in brief, either he should lose his life or win Emily in marriage. This is the sum of it, and his full intent. 1487

Now will I return again to Arcite, who little knows how near his trouble was until Fortune had brought him into the snare. The busy lark, messenger of day, saluted with her song the gray morning; and Phoebus rose up so fiery that all the orient laughed because of the light; and with his beams he dried in the thickets

the silver drops hanging on the leaves. And Arcite, dwelling in the royal court with Theseus, as chief squire, had risen and looked out upon the merry morning. To do observance to May, and keeping in mind the point of his desire, he rode out of the court upon a charger, leaping about like the fire, into the fields a mile or more to occupy himself. And into that grove of which I have told you he began by chance to take his way, to make him a garland of sprigs, either of woodbine or hawthorn leaves. And loud he sang in the bright sun, 1509

“May, with your flowers and your green,
So welcome are you, fair fresh May,
I hope to get some green this day.” 1512

With lusty heart he sprang from his charger into the grove, and wandered up and down along a path, where by chance Palamon was behind a bush, so that nobody might see him, for he was sorely afraid of his death. He knew not at all that it was Arcite--God knows he would have hardly believed it. But the truth was said, many years ago, “The field has eyes, the wood has ears,” A man does well to bear a steady spirit, for ever do people meet at unexpected times. Little does Arcite know of his old comrade, who was so near to hear all that he said, for Palamon sat silently in the bush. 1527

When Arcite had roamed his fill, and sung his roundel⁷ lustily, he fell then into a study, as these lovers do in their odd, changeful way, sometimes in the tree-tops, sometimes down among briers, sometimes up, sometimes down, like a bucket in a well. Even as on the Friday sometimes it shines and sometimes it rains hard, so can fickle Venus overcast the hearts of her followers; even as her day is changeful, so changes she her aspect; seldom is the Friday like all the rest of the week. 1539

When Arcite had sung he began to sigh, and without more ado sat himself down. “Alas,” he said, “alas the day that I was born! How long through your cruelty will you war upon Thebes, O Juno? Alas! all the royal blood of Cadmus and Amphion is brought to confusion. I am of the lineage of Cadmus, the first man that built Thebes and founded the city, and was crowned first king of it; I am offspring of his true line, and of the royal stock. And now I am such a wretch and slave that I serve my mortal enemy as his poor squire. And yet Juno does me this indignity as well, so that I dare not acknowledge my own name. Where I used to be called Arcite, now am I Philostrate, not worth a farthing! 1558

⁷ Roundele. (Or Rondeau.) Form of short poetry in which the opening phrase or line is repeated as a refrain in the second and third stanzas.

“Alas, cruel Mars! Alas, Juno! Thus has your anger undone all our kindred, except me only, and wretched Palamon whom Theseus martyrs in his dungeon. And over all this, Love has shot his fiery arrow through my true, anxious breast so full of fire, to make a final end of me, so that my death was shaped for me before my first shirt was sewn! You slay me with your eyes, Emily; you are the cause of my dying. I set not the value of a peascod upon all the remnant of my care, if only I could do anything to your pleasure!” And with that word he fell down in a trance for a long time. 1574

Palamon, who thought he felt a cold sword glide suddenly through his heart, quaked for anger and could hesitate no longer; but when he heard Arcite's words, started as if he were a madman up out of the thick bushes with a pale, deathlike face, and “Arcite,” he said, “false wicked traitor, now are you caught, who love my lady for whom I have all this pain and woe! You are my own blood and sworn to my confidence, as I have told you often before. And you have deceived Duke Theseus and falsely changed your name. Either you or I shall die. You shall not love my lady; I alone will love her and none other. For I am your mortal enemy Palamon, and though I have no weapon here, but have escaped by grace of Fortune from prison, I doubt not that either I shall slay you or you shall not love Emily. Choose whichever you will, for you shall not escape me.” 1595

When Arcite knew him and had heard his tale, with full savage heart he pulled out a sword and as fierce as a lion he spoke: “By the God Who sits in heaven, were it not that you are sick and mad for love and have no weapon here, you should never pass out of this grove unless you were to die by my hand. For I defy the pledge and bond that you say I have made to you. What, you fool--you know that love is free, and that I will love her in spite of all your power. But have here my word, for as much as you are a worthy knight and would gladly contend for her by battle, I will not fail, but without the knowledge of any I will be here tomorrow, by my knightly honor, and bring armor sufficient for you, and you shall choose the best and leave the worst for me. And this night I will bring you meat and drink enough, and clothes for your bedding. And if it so happens that you win my lady and slay me in this wood, you may well have your lady, for all me. 1619

Palamon answered, “I agree.” And thus each of them pledged his faith and parted from the other until the

morning. Ah, Cupid⁸, who has no charity! Ah, kingdom that will have no fellow! Truly is it said that neither love nor lordship will have a partner; and that indeed Arcite and Palamon found. 1627

Arcite rode quickly to the town; and in the morning before daylight he secretly prepared two suits of armor, each sufficient and worthy for the battle in the field between them. And as he was alone, he carried this armor before him on his horse, and in the grove, at the appointed time and place, this Arcite and Palamon met. Then the color in their visages began to change. Just as the hunter in the realm of Thrace stands at a gap in the forest with a spear, when bear or lion is hunted, and hears him come rushing through the branches, breaking boughs and leaves, and thinks, "Here comes my mortal foe; without fail, either he or I must die, for I must slay him at this moment, or he me, if ill comes to me;" so were they, and so their hue altered, as far off as each could know the other. 1648

There was no "Good-day," no salutation, but straightway, without word or rehearsing, each helped the other to arm, as courteously as if he were his dear friend; and after that they thrust at each other for an amazingly long time with spears sharp and stout. You might judge that Palamon in his fighting were a mad lion and Arcite a cruel tiger. They struck against each other like wild boars that froth white as foam in mad anger; up to the ankles they fought in blood. And in this way I leave them fighting, and will tell you forth of Theseus. 1662

Destiny, God's general vicar, who executes over all the world the providence which He has foreordained, so strong it is that even if the world swore the contrary of a thing, yes or no, yet it shall happen on that day which will not happen again in a thousand years. For certainly our wills here, whether they are on war, or peace, of love or hate, are all ruled by the eye above us. I am put now in mind of this by the mighty Theseus, who is so zealous on the hunt, and chiefly in May for the great hart, that no day dawns upon him in bed, that he is not clad and ready to ride with huntsman and horn, and hounds before him. For in hunting he has such delight that all of his joy and passion is to be himself the great harts' destroyer, or after Mars now he serves Diana⁹. 1682

Clear was the day, as I have told, and Theseus in all joy and mirth rode a-hunting royally, with his fair

⁸ Cupid. The god of love.

⁹ Diana. Goddess of the moon; a huntress; the patron of virgin women.

Hippolyta and Emily clothed all in green; and to the grove, not far away, in which men told him was a hart, he held the straight course, and over a brook and so forth on his way toward the glade where the hart was accustomed to have his flight. The duke would have a run or two at him with hounds such as he might wish to order. 1695

When he had come to the opening he shaded his eyes from the sun and looked about, and immediately noticed Palamon and Arcite who fought furiously, as if they were two boars. The bright swords went back and forth so hideously that with the least blow it seemed they would fell an oak; but who they were he knew not at all. The duke smote his charger with his spurs and at a bound was between the two, and pulled out a sword and cried, "Hoo! No more upon pain of losing your heads! By mighty Mars, he whom I see strike another stroke shall die immediately! But tell me what sort of men are you who are so bold as to fight here without a judge or other officer, as if you were in a legal duel?" 1713

Palamon answered hastily, "Sire, what need is there of more words? Both of us have deserved the death. We are two woeful wretches, weary of our own lives, and as you are a just lord and judge, grant us no mercy nor escape, but slay me first, for the love of holy charity; but slay my fellow as well. Or slay him first, for though you little know it, this is your mortal foe; this is Arcite, who is banished from your land on pain of death, for which he deserves to die; this is he who came to your doors and called himself Philostrate. Thus he has deceived you many years. And you have made him your chief squire, and this is he who loves Emily. 1731

"And since the day of my death is come, I fully confess that I am that woeful Palamon who wickedly broke from your prison. I am your mortal foe, and it is I who bear so hot a love to Emily the bright that I will die here before her eyes. Therefore I ask my death and my judgement. But slay my companion in the same way, for we both have deserved to die." 1741

The worthy duke answered then, "This is a speedy judgement. Your own mouth by your confession has condemned you, and I bear witness to it. There is no need to torture you on the rack. You shall die, by mighty Mars the red!" 1747

The queen on account of her true womanliness began to weep, and so did Emily and all the ladies in the troop. It was great pity, as they all deemed, that ever such a mischance should occur, for they were gentle

youths, of great station, and only for love was this combat. They beheld their bloody wounds wide and sore, and one and all they cried, "Have mercy upon us women, lord!" and upon their bare knees down they fell, and would have kissed his feet where he was, until at the last his mood was softened, for pity runs soon into a noble heart. 1761

And though at first he quaked for anger, yet he considered in brief the trespass of them both and the cause of it; and although his anger arraigned them of guilt, yet his reason held them excused. Thus he considered that every man will help himself in love, if he is able, and deliver himself from prison as well. And his heart had pity upon the women as well, who continued weeping, and at that moment he thought in his noble heart, and said softly to himself, "Fie upon a lord who will have no mercy, but be a lion in word and deed to those who repent and tremble, as well as to a proud, scornful man who ever upholds what he has done. That lord has little of discernment who knows no difference in such a case, but measures pride and humility alike." 1781

And, in brief, when his anger was thus departed, he began to look up with shining eyes and spoke these words aloud: "Ah, the God of Love! God bless! How mighty and great a lord he is! Against his might no obstacles can help; well may he be called a god by reason of his miracles, for of every heart he can make what he will. Lo, here are this Palamon and this Arcite, who have freely left my prison, and might have lived royally in Thebes, and know that I am their mortal foe and that their death lies in my power; yet love, in spite of their two eyes, has brought them here both to die! Look now, is not that a high folly? Who can be a fool unless he is in love? Behold how they bleed, for God's sake in heaven! Are they not well arrayed? Thus has their lord, the god of love, paid their wages and their reward for serving him! And yet they who serve love deem themselves wise, for anything that may happen! 1805

But this is the best sport of all, that she for whom they have this mirth thanks them therefore no more than me; for she knows no more of this heated display than a cuckoo or a hare! But all things must be attempted, both good and bad; young or old, a man must sometimes be a fool. I know it by myself, for in my time, years ago, I was a servant of love. And therefore, since I know of love's pain, as one often caught in his snare, and how sorely it can clutch a man, I forgive you this trespass entirely, at the request of the queen kneeling here and of Emily as well, my sweet sister; and you shall both now swear to me never again to hurt my country nor war upon

me by day or night, but be my friends in all that you can. I forgive you this trespass, every bit!" 1825

Fairly and well they swore to him as he asked, and prayed him for mercy and to be their good lord; and he granted them his grace and said thus: "To speak of royal lineage and riches, each of you is worthy, doubtless, to wed in due season, either a queen or a princess; but nevertheless, to speak of my sister for whom you have all this strife and jealousy, you know yourselves she may not wed two at once, though you fight forevermore. One of you, willy-nilly, must go whistle in an ivy-leaf; this is to say, she may not have both of you, no matter how jealous you may be. And therefore I give you these terms, that each of you shall have his destiny as it is ordained for him, and hear now in what manner. 1843

"Lo, here I set your terms! My will is this, for flat conclusion, not to be replied to, and take it for the best, if you like it; that each of you go where he would like, freely, without ransom or control, and this day fifty weeks, neither more nor less, each of you shall bring a hundred knights, armed in all perfection for the lists, ready to contend for her in battle. And this I promise you, without fail and upon my word as a knight, that whichever of you both that has the strength, that is to say, whether he or you with your hundred that I spoke of can slay your adversary or drive out of the lists, to him shall I give Emily, to that one whom Fortune grants so fair a grace. The lists I shall make here, and God so surely have mercy upon my soul as I shall be an even and faithful judge! No other terms shall you make with me, but that one of you shall be either dead or prisoner. And if this seem to you well said, speak your mind, and be content. This end and conclusion I set you!" 1869

Whose look is light now but Arcite's? Who springs up for joy but Palamon? Who could tell or write of the joy there when Theseus granted so fair a grace? But down on their knees went every creature and thanked him with heart and soul, and most chiefly the Thebans many times over. And thus with good hope and joyful hearts they took their leave, and rode homeward to Thebes, with its broad old walls. 1880

Here ends the second part.

Here follows the third part.

I believe I would be judged negligent if I forget to tell of Theseus' outlay, who went busily to work to build up royal lists; such a noble theatre I dare to say was nowhere in this world. The circuit was a mile around, with a wall of stone and a ditch outside of it. Round

was the shape, in a circle, full of steps to the height of sixty paces, so that when a man was set on one step he hindered not his neighbor behind from seeing. Eastward stood a gate of white marble, and even such another opposite westward; and, to conclude briefly, within a similar space was no such fabric on the earth. For there was no crafty man in the land that knew geometry or arithmetic, nor any cunning portrayer nor carver of images, that Theseus gave him not meat and hire to plan and build the theatre. And to do his rites and sacrifice, he built an oratory and an altar eastward above the gate, in honor of Venus, goddess of love; and westward, in commemoration of Mars, he built even such another, that cost a huge load of gold. And northward, in a turret on the wall, Theseus ordered to be made in noble fashion an oratory rich to behold, of white alabaster and coral red, in honor of Diana the chaste. 1913

And I have yet forgotten to describe the noble carving, the portrayals, the devices, the emblazonings and the figures in these three oratories. First, in the temple of Venus you might have seen created upon the wall, in imagery piteous to behold, the broken sleeps and cold sighs, the sacred tears and lamentations, the fiery pangs of desire that love's servants endure in this life; the oaths which secure their covenants; Pleasure and Hope, Desire and Foolhardiness, Beauty and Youth, Mirth, Riches, Love-charms and Violence, Deceits, Flattery, Extravagance, Anxiety and Jealousy (who wore a garland of yellow marigolds, with a cuckoo sitting on her hand); feasts, instruments or music, singing with dancing, pleasures and gay garments, with all the circumstance of love which I have explain and shall explain, were painted by order upon the wall, and more than I can make mention of. 1935

In truth all the mount of Citheron, where Venus has her principal dwelling, was drawn upon the wall, with all the garden and the lustiness of it. Idleness, the porter, was not forgotten, nor Narcissus the fair of long ago, nor the folly of King Solomon, nor yet the great strength of Hercules; the enchantments of Medea and Circe, nor the hardy fierce heart of Turnus, nor the rich Croesus, captive and in servitude. Thus may you see that neither wisdom nor riches, beauty nor cunning, strength nor hardihood can hold rivalry with Venus, for she can guide all the world as she wish. Lo, all these folk were so caught in her snare until for woe they cried often "Alas!" One or two examples shall suffice here, though I could explain a thousand more. The naked statue of Venus, glorious to look upon, was floating in a great sea, and from the navel down all was covered with

green waves, bright as any glass. She had a lyre in her right and, and on her head a rose-garland, fresh and fragrant, and seemly to see. Above her head fluttered her doves, and before her stood her son Cupid, blindfolded, as he is often shown, with two wings upon his shoulders. He carried a bow and bright, keen arrows. 1966

Why should I not tell you as well the portrayals on the wall in the temple of mighty Mars the red? The walls were painted, in length and breadth, just as the inner parts of the grisly, great temple of Mars in Thrace, in that cold, frosty region where Mars has his supreme habitation. On the wall was painted first a forest, in which dwelt neither beast nor man, with barren old trees, knotty and gnarled, with sharp and hideous stumps. 1978

Through the forest ran a rumbling and a rushing noise, as though every bough should break in the tempest. Beneath a hill, under the slope, stood the temple of Mars mighty in arms, forged all of burnished steel, the portal deep and narrow, ghastly to see; and out from it came such a raging blast as made all the gates to shake. 1986

The light from the north shone in at the door, for there was no window in the wall through which one could discern any light. The doors were all of everlasting adamant, bound across and length-wise with tough iron, and every pillar that strongly held the temple aloft was the size of a tun and of bright and shining iron. 1994

There I saw first the dark contriving of Felony and all the compassing thereof; cruel Anger, red as a coal; the pick-purse and pale Dread as well; the smiler with a knife under the mantle; the stable burning in its black smoke; the treacherous murder in the bed, and open war with wounds all bleeding, and strife with bloody knife and sharp menace. That sorry spot was all full of shrieks. 2004

Further on I saw there the slayer of himself with his hair bathed in his heart's blood; the nail driven in the temples by night; cold death upon his back, with mouth gaping. In the midst of the temple sat Misfortune, with dejection and sorrowful face. Farther yet I saw Madness laughing in his frenzy, armed complaint, outcry and fierce fury; the corpse in the bushes with throat cut; a thousand slain, but not by pestilence; the tyrant with his prey taken by force, and the town utterly left in ruins. Yet again I saw the dancing ships burned, the hunter strangled by the wild bears, the sow devouring the child in the very cradle, the cook scalded, despite his long spoon.

Nothing was forgotten that comes by the evil aspects of Mars. The carter run over by his cart lay low under the wheel. There were also, of Mars' clan, the barber, the butcher, and the smith forging sharp swords upon his anvil. And above, in a tower, was depicted conquest sitting in great state, with the sharp sword hanging above him by a subtle thread of twine. The slaughter of Julius Caesar was painted there, and of great Nero and Antony. Albeit they were unborn at that time, yet so long before were their deaths through the menacing of Mars depicted in clear heraldry. So was it shown in those portrayals even as it is drawn at large in the stars of heaven, who shall be slain and who die for love. One or two examples from old histories shall suffice; I cannot describe them all even though I would. 2040

The statue of Mars stood armed upon a chariot, grim as a madman, and over his head shone two figures of stars called in clerks' writings Puella and Rubeus; in this guise was the god of arms shown. A wolf stood before him at his feet, red-eyed and devouring a man. With subtle pencil were these figures depicted, to the glory of redoubtable Mars. 2050

Now to the temple of Diana the chaste I will get me as fast as I can, to tell you all the description if it. The walls up and down were painted with examples of hunting and of modest chastity. 2055

There I saw how woeful Callisto, when Diana was angered with her, was turned from a woman to a bear (and she was made the lode-star afterwards). Thus was it painted, I can tell you no more; her son is a star also, as men may behold. There I saw Daphne, turned into a tree; I mean not the goddess Diana, but the daughter of Peneus, that was named Daphne. There I saw Actaeon transformed into a hart, for vengeance because he saw Diana naked; I saw also how his hounds caught and devoured him because they knew him not. There was painted also how Atalanta hunted the wild boar, with Meleager and many others, for which Diana wrought woe for him. There I saw many other wondrous stories, which I wish not call to mind. 2074

This goddess sat high on a hart, with small hounds about her feet, and underneath her feet she had a waxing moon that would soon wane. Her statue was clothed in green, bow in hand and arrows in a quiver. Her eyes she cast down low, where Pluto¹⁰ holds his dark region. Before her was a woman in labor, and because her child was so long unborn she called

¹⁰ Pluto. God of the underworld.

piteously upon Lucina¹¹, "Help, for you can aid me better than any other." He who depicted her could make his likenesses beautiful and lifelike, and he paid many florins for his colors. 2088

Now were these lists all made, and Theseus, who at his own great cost had thus every bit appointed the temples and the theatre, was very well pleased. But I will pass on a little from Theseus, and speak of Arcite and Palamon. 2094

The day of their returning approached, when each should bring a hundred knights to contest in battle as I told you; and to Athens each of them came to keep his covenant, with a hundred knights all well and duly armed for the combat. And truly many men said that never since the world began, as far as God has made sea or land, was so noble a fellowship, of a few men, in the knightly exploits of their hands. For every creature that loved chivalry and would gladly have an exalted name had prayed to be in those jousts. Joyful was he who was chosen. For you know well that, if such a case presented itself tomorrow, every lusty knight that had his strength and was acquainted with love would be eager to be there. To fight for a lady, God bless, it would be a enjoyable sight to see! 2116

And so it was with many knights that came with Palamon. One would be armed in a coat of mail, a breastplate and a light tunic; some would wear a pair of broad plates on front and back; some would have a Prussian shield or target; some would be armed well on their legs, and have an ax or a steel mace. There is no new guise that is not old. Armed they were, even as I have said, each one in his own fashion. 2127

There you might have seen, coming with Palamon, the great king of Thrace, Lycurgus himself. Black was his beard and manly his face. His eyes glowed of a hue between yellow and red, and like a griffin he looked about, with shaggy hairs in his dogged brows, his limbs great, his brawn hard, his shoulders broad, his arms round and long. And as the manner was in his country, high he stood upon a chariot of gold, with four white bulls in the harness. Instead of an armorial tunic over his harness, he had an ancient bearskin, coal-black, with yellow nails bright as any gold. His long hair was combed down behind, and shone black as any raven's feather; on his head was a diadem of gold as great as an arm, of huge weight, set full of bright stones, of fine rubies and diamonds. About his chariot marched white mastiffs, twenty and more, as great as any steer, to hunt the lion or hart,

¹¹ Lucina. Goddess of childbirth; a form or manifestation of Diana.

and they followed him with collars of gold and ringed leashes filed smoothly, and muzzles fast bound. He had a hundred well-armed lords in his troop, with stern and stout hearts. 2154

With Arcite, as one may read in the histories, came riding, like Mars, the god of arms, the great Emetreus, king of India, upon a bay steed trapped in steel and covered with a diapered cloth of gold. His tunic, blazoned with his arms, was of cloth of Tartary¹², laid with pearls, white, round, and great. His saddle was of burnished gold, freshly forged. A short mantle hung upon his shoulders, stiff with red rubies sparkling as fire. His crisp hair ran in rings, yellow, glittering as the sun. His nose was high, his lips full, his eyes bright citron, and his color sanguine, with a few freckles between yellow and black sprinkled in his face; and as a lion he cast his looking about. His age I estimate at five-and-twenty; his beard was well begun to spring, and his voice as a thunderous trumpet. Upon his head he wore a garland of green laurel, fresh and lively to see; and upon his hand he bore for his pleasure a tame eagle, white as any lily. He had with him a hundred lords, all armed richly in all their gear, except for their heads. Dukes and earls and kings were gathered in this noble company, trust me well, for the advancement of knighthood and for love's sake. On every side about this king ran many tame lions and leopards. 2186

And in this way on that Sunday about prime¹³ these lords one and all arrived in the city and alighted. This worthy Duke Theseus, when he had brought them into his city and lodged them, each according to his rank, took such pains to feast and entertain them and do them all the honor that even now men deem that no man's wit could improve upon it. The service at the banquet, the minstrelsy, the great gifts to high and low, the rich array of Theseus' palace, what ladies were fairest and best on the dance, or which could best dance and sing, or who spoke of love most tenderly, who sat first or last on the dais, what hawks were perched above, what hounds lay on the floor--of all this I make no mention now, but only the pith of it, that it seems to me is best to tell. Now comes the point; listen if you will. 2208

Sunday night, before daybreak, when Palamon heard the lark sing (though it would not be day for two hours, yet the lark sang, and Palamon as well), he arose with holy heart and high spirit to go on his pilgrimage to the blessed and gracious Cytherea, I

¹² Tartary. Russia or Siberia. Most editors suggest that the cloth was likely from imported from China via Tartary.

¹³ Prime. 9 am.

mean Venus, worthy of all reverence; and in her hour he walked forth on foot to the tournament grounds, and into her temple. And down he kneeled, and with humble bearing and aching heart he spoke as I shall tell you. 2220

"Fairest of fair, daughter to Jove and spouse to Vulcan¹⁴, O Venus my lady, you who gladdens the mount of Citheron, have pity on my bitter burning tears and receive my humble prayer at your heart, by that love you bore to Adonis. Alas, I have no language to express the torments of this hell! My heart cannot reveal my woes, I am so bewildered that I can say nothing. But mercy, lady bright, who well knows my thought and sees my pain; consider all this and have pity, and so surely shall I evermore be your true servant with all my might, and hold warfare ever with chastity. That vow I make, so you will help me. 2237

"I care not to boast of arms, nor ask tomorrow to have victory, nor renown in this combat nor vain praise for my exploits trumpeted up and down. But I wish fully to have possession of Emily and die in your service. Choose yourself the manner how; I know not whether it would be better to have victory of them, or they of me, so long as I have my lady in my arms. For though Mars may be the god of battle, your virtue is so great in heaven that, if you wish, I shall have my love. Your temple evermore will I honor, wherever I go, and on your altar I will maintain a fire and do sacrifice. And if you deny me, my sweet lady, then I pray that tomorrow with a spear Arcite may bear me through the heart. Then, when I am dead, I care not if Arcite should win her as his wife. This is the sum and end of my prayer: grant me my love, blessed lady." 2260

When his prayer was done, Palamon immediately made his sacrifice very devoutly, with all ceremony, though I tell not his rites now. But at last the statue of Venus shook, and made a sign by which he understood that his prayer that day was accepted. For though the sign showed delay, yet he knew well that his gift was granted and went home with a glad heart. 2270

About the third hour after Palamon set forth for Venus' temple, up rose the sun, and up rose Emily, and hastened forth to the temple of Diana. Her maidens she had with her prepared the fire, the incense, the vestments, horns full of mead, as was the custom, and all the rest that appertained to the sacrifice; nothing was lacking. While the temple, full

¹⁴ Vulcan. Smith to the gods; also a god himself.

of beautiful hangings, smoked with sweet odors, this Emily with mild heart washed her body with water from a spring. But how she performed her rite, unless it were something in general, I dare not tell. (Yet it would be a pleasure to hear more. For a man of blameless mind there would be no harm; it is good that a man be unrestricted in his speech.) Her bright hair was combed and loose, and on her head was set a crown of green oak, fair and pleasing. 2291

She kindled two fires on the altar, and completed her rites as one may read in Theban Statius¹⁵ and these old books. When the fire was kindled she spoke thus to Diana with pious expression. 2296

“Chaste goddess of the green woods, to whom heaven and earth and sea are visible, queen of the deep, dark realm of Pluto, goddess of maidens, who many years has known my heart and what I desire, keep me now from your wrath and vengeance, which Actaeon cruelly bore. Chaste goddess, you well know that I desire to be a maiden until I die, never do I wish to be a lover or wife. I am a maiden, you know, yet of your band, and love hunting and the chase and to walk in the savage woods, and not to be a wife and to be with child. I wish to know nothing of the company of men. Now lady, I ask you by your own three forms: help me, since you can, and grant me this one grace; send love and peace between Arcite and Palamon, that love me so sorely; and so turn away their hearts from me that all their hot desire and love and busy torment and flames be quenched or turned elsewhere. 2321

“And if you will not favor me, or my destiny be ordered that I must have one of the two, send me the one who desires me most. Goddess of pure chastity, behold the bitter tears that drop from my cheeks. Since you, a maiden yourself, are protector of us all, keep and defend my maidenhead, and as long as I live I will serve you as a maiden.” 2330

The fires burned steadily upon the altar while Emily was thus praying, but suddenly she saw a marvelous sight. For just then one of the fires was quenched and restarted again, and soon after that the other fire was quenched and quite extinct. And as it was extinguished it made a whistling as these wet brands do when they burn, and at the end of the brand out ran as it were many bloody drops. At this Emily was so sorely aghast that she began to cry aloud and was nearly mad; for she knew not what it signified, but

¹⁵ Theban Statius. Roman poet and author of the *Thebaid*, indirectly one of Chaucer's primary sources for *Troilus and Criseyde*.

only called out for fear and so wept that it was pitiful to listen. 2345

And at this moment Diana appeared in the guise of a huntress with bow in hand and said, “Daughter, cease your heaviness. It is decreed among the high gods and written and confirmed in eternal words, that you shall be wedded to one of those who has had so much care and woe for you; but to which one I may not tell. Farewell, I may remain no longer. The fires burning on my altar, before you leave here, shall declare to you your lot in this love matter.” 2357

And with that word the arrows in the goddess' quiver clattered and rung aloud, and she forth went and vanished. At this Emily was astonished, and said, “Alas! What does this signify? I put myself in your protection, Diana, and in your control.” And she went straight home. This is the sum of it; there is no more to say. 2366

In the next hour of Mars after this Arcite went forth on foot to the temple of fierce Mars, to do his sacrifice with all the rites of his pagan faith. With devout heart and high reverence he said his prayer to Mars thus. 2372

“O strong god, who in the cold realms of Thrace¹⁶ are honored and held as lord, and in every country and every realm has the entire bridle of war in your hand, and disposes fortune in war as you wish, accept from me my devout sacrifice. If my youth may have such merit, and my might be worthy to serve your godhead, and I may be one of yours, then pity my pains, I pray. For that pain and those hot flames in which you once burned for desire, when you had at will all the beauty of fair, young, fresh Venus (although one time it went amiss with you, when Vulcan caught you in his cords, alas!), for that sorrow that was in your heart then, pity my bitter pains as well. 2392

“You know I am young and unlearned, and hurt more with love, I believe, than ever was any living creature. For she who gives me all this woe cares never if I sink or float. And well I know I must win her with force of arms upon the field, before she will promise me mercy; and well I know without help or grace from you my strength cannot avail. Then help me tomorrow in my fight, and recall for yourself that fire that once burned you, lord, as this fire now burns me; and grant that tomorrow I may conquer. 2405

¹⁶ Thrace. The southeast tip of the Balkan Peninsula, including northeastern Greece, Bulgaria, and Turkey.

"May mine be the travail, yours be the glory! Your supreme temple will I most revere of any place, and ever most toil in your strong calling and to do your pleasure; and in your temple I will hang up my banner and all the arms of my fellows, and evermore until the day I die I will maintain an eternal fire before you. And I will bind me to this vow also; my beard and my hair I will give you, that now hang down long and never yet felt offence of razor or shears, and I will be your true servant while I live. Now, lord, have pity on my bitter sorrows, and give me victory; I ask of you no more." 2420

The prayer of Arcite the strong being done, the temple-doors and also the rings that hung on them clattered loudly, at which Arcite was somewhat aghast. The fires burned brightly upon the altar and illumined all the temple, and then the ground gave out a sweet smell. And Arcite lifted his hand and cast more incense into the fire, and did other rites. And at last the statue of Mars began to ring his hauberk. And with that sound Arcite heard a low and dim murmur which said "Victory!", for which he gave laud and honor to Mars. Thus with joy and high hope of faring well, Arcite went immediately to his lodging, as glad as a bird is for the bright sun. 2437

Immediately such strife for that grant began in heaven between Venus, goddess of love, and Mars, the stern god mighty in arms, that Jupiter was hard at work to calm it, until the pale and cold and hostile Saturn, who knew so many earlier dealings, soon found in his vast experience a plan to content both sides. Truth to tell, age has great advantage; in age is both wisdom and experience. One can outrun the old, but not outwit them. Now, to appease strife and dread, albeit that is against his nature, Saturn began to find a remedy. 2452

"My dear daughter Venus," he said, "my course which circles so widely has more power than any mortal comprehends. Mine is the drowning in the pale sea, mine the imprisoning in the dark cell, mine the strangling and the hanging by the throat; the murmurs, the groaning, the churls' rebellion, the secret poisoning. I make vengeance and full chastisement when I dwell in the sign of the Lion¹⁷. Mine is the ruin of high mansions, the falling of towers and walls on the miner and the carpenter. When Samson¹⁸ shook the pillar, it was I who slew

¹⁷ Lion. Zodiacal sign of Leo.

¹⁸ Samson. Old Testament Israelite strongman whose strength was in his hair (or his promise to God that he would not cut his hair). When his hair had grown again, after Delilah betrayed him and cut it off, he knocked down

him. And mine are the cold maladies, the dark treasons and ancient plots; my aspect begets the plague. 2469

"Weep no more now, I will do my duty that your own knight Palamon shall have his lady as you have promised him. Though Mars may help his knight, nevertheless at last there must be peace between you; albeit you are not of one nature, which always causes such division. Weep you no more; I am your grandfather, ready at your command, and I will fulfill your pleasure." 2478

Now will I leave the gods of heaven, Venus, goddess of love, and Mars; and tell you as plainly as may be the main substance, for which I began. 2482

Here ends the third part.

Here follows the fourth part.

Great was the festival in Athens, and for that lusty season of May every creature was in such mirth that they jousted and danced all that Monday, and spent it in Venus' high service. But because all should be up early to see the great tourney, they went to rest early that night. 2490

When day began to spring in the morning, there was clattering and noise of horses and armor in the lodgings everywhere, and to the palace rode many troops of lords upon steeds and palfreys. There you could have seen armor devised rare and richly, and wrought well in gold-work, embroidery, and steel; bright shields, horses' trappings, steel caps, gold-beaten helmets, hauberks, armorial tunics; lords on their chargers in splendid vestiture above their armor; knights-retainers, and squires nailing on spearheads, buckling helms, strapping shields and lacing with thongs. 2504

Where there was need, none were idle. Foamy steeds were gnawing on golden bridles, armorers were spurring to and fro in haste with file and hammer; there were yeomen on foot, and many burgesses, with short staves in hand, as thick as they could crowd; pipes, trumpets, drums, clarions, that sound bloody blasts in battle; the palace up and down full of people holding talk, here three, there ten, surmising about these two Theban knights. 2515

the temple pillars, killing his enemies (the Philistines) and himself. The story of his troubles with Delilah is told in Judges 16. 15 and retold in the Monk's Tale 2015-94.

Some said it shall be so, some said thus, some sided with him of the black beard, some with the thick-haired, some with the bald; some said that one looked grim and would fight indeed, and that one had a battle-ax that weighed twenty pound. Thus the hall was full of conjecture from the time the sun began to spring. 2522

The great Theseus, awoken from his sleep with the minstrelsy and noise, held yet his chamber in his rich palace until the Theban knights with equal honor were fetched there. Duke Theseus was seated at a window, arrayed as if he were a god on his throne. The people pressed in that direction to see him and pay him high reverence, and to hear his pronouncement and behest. A herald on a scaffold proclaimed silence until all the people's noise was hushed, and then he declared the mighty duke's will. 2536

"The lord duke, of his high prudence, has considered that it would be mere destruction to noble blood, if men should now in this event fight in the fashion of mortal battle. Therefore, to ordain that they shall not perish, he will modify his first purpose. On pain of death, therefore, no man shall send or bring into the lists any manner of missile, or pole-ax, or short knife; no man shall draw or bear by his side any short sword with sharp point for stabbing; no man shall ride against his adversary with a sharply ground spear more than one run, but on foot he may thrust, if he will, to defend himself. He who is bettered shall be captured, not slain, but brought to the stake that shall be ordained on either side; to that place he must go by the rules and remain there. And if so happen that the chieftain on either side be taken, or else be slain, the tournament shall last no longer. God speed you! Go forth, lay on hard! With maces and long swords fight your fill. This is the lord duke's decree, and now go your ways." 2560

The voice of the people reached the sky, so loud they cried with joyful voice: "God save so good a lord, who will have no bloody destruction!" Up go trump and melody, and the bands of knights ride to the tournament grounds in order through the broad city, which was all hung with no serge¹⁹ but with cloth of gold. Like a lord indeed rode this noble duke, the two Thebans on either side; next rode Emily and the queen, and then another company ordered according to their station. 2573

Thus they passed through the city and came early to the tournament grounds. It was not yet full prime of

¹⁹ Serge. Worsted wool.

day when Theseus was set down in high state, and Hippolyta the queen, and Emily, and the other ladies in rows of seats. All the crowd pressed to their seats. And then through the western gates, under the shrine of Mars, Arcite and his hundred entered now with a red banner; and at the same moment Palamon and his men entered from the east under the shrine of Venus, with a white banner and hardy bearing and face. In the entire world, if one should seek up and down, there would be no two such companies, so even, without inequality. None was so discerning who could say that either had advantage of other in valor, rank or age. And they arranged themselves in two fair ranks. 2594

When all their names had been read, so that there might be no deception as to their number, then were the gates shut and a herald cried on high, "Do now your duty, proud young knights!" 2598

The heralds stopped their spurring about, trumpets and clarions rang aloud; there is no more to say but that in either line the spears were put firmly in their resting place, in went sharp spurs into flanks, and men saw who could ride and who could joust. Shafts were shivering upon thick shields, one man felt the stab through the breast-bone, up sprung spears twenty foot on high, out came swords bright as silver, and hewed and split helms, out burst the blood with stern red streams, with mighty maces they crushed bones. One thrust through the thickest of the throng, there stumbled mighty steeds and down went knight and all, one on foot thrust with his spear-stump. One was hurtled down with his horse, and rolled like a ball under foot. One was hurt through the body, and then seized and, against his will, brought to the stake, and there he must remain by agreement; and there one was brought from the other party. 2620

At times Theseus made them rest and refresh themselves, and drink if they wished. Often in that day those two Thebans met together and each created woe for his adversary; each unhorsed the other twice. There is no tiger in the vale of Gargaphil, when her little whelp is stolen, so cruel on the hunt as Arcite's jealous heart was against Palamon. Nor is a lion in Belmary so vicious after the blood of his prey, when he is hunted or mad with hunger, as Palamon to slay Arcite his foe. The jealous strokes bit on their helmets, and out ran the red blood on both their flanks. 2635

Some time there must be an end of every deed. For before the sun went to rest, the strong king Emetreus took the opportunity to seize upon Palamon as he fought, and made his sword to bite deeply into his

flesh; and by the arms of twenty he was drawn, ever resisting, unto the stake. Striving to rescue him, the strong king Lycurgus was borne down, and for all of his valor king Emetreus was knocked a sword's length out of his saddle, so Palamon hit him before he was overpowered. But it was all for nothing, as Palamon was dragged to the stake. His hardy heart could not help him; when he was caught he had to obey, by force and by agreement as well. Who but woeful Palamon sorrows now, who may now no more go to the fight? 2654

And when Theseus had seen it, he cried to the people who continued to fight, "Ho! No more, it is done! I shall be a faithful judge and not a partial one. Arcite of Thebes shall have Emily, whose good fortune has granted him to win her nobly." And straightway for joy of this began such an uproar among the people, so loud and high, it seemed the tournament grounds would fall. 2662

What now can fair Venus in heaven do? What can she say? What can this queen of love do? She wept so, for lack of her desire, that her tears fell into the ground. "I am ever disgraced, without doubt," she said. 2667

"Hold your peace, daughter," Saturn replied. "Mars has his will, and his knight all that he prayed for, and you shall be eased before long, by my head!" 2670

The trumpets, the heralds that called and cried on high, and all the loud minstrelsy, made high festival for joy of Lord Arcite. But hold your peace a little now, and hearken what miracle occurred just then. 2675

This fierce Arcite had doffed his helmet to show his face, and on a charger spurred down the long field, looking upward at Emily. And she cast a friendly eye on him in return, for women, to speak generally, follow ever the favor of fortune. And in his heart she made all his joy. 2683

Out of the ground burst an infernal Fury, sent from Pluto at the request of Saturn, for fear of which Arcite's horse suddenly turned and leapt aside and, as he leapt, foundered and, before Arcite could notice, pitched him on the crown of his head. He lay on the ground as if lifeless, his breast all crushed by his saddle-bows; as black was his face as any raven or coal, just as the blood that run in it. Quickly he was carried away with mourning to Theseus' castle. Then was he carved out of his harness, and brought fairly and soon into a bed, for he was yet alive and conscious, crying always for Emily. 2699

Duke Theseus with his entire retinue and guests had come home to his city of Athens with all pomp and great festivity. Although this misadventure had occurred, he would not dishearten them all. Men said also that Arcite should not die; he should be healed of his hurt. And they were as glad of another thing, that of them all none was killed, though they were sorely wounded, and especially one whose breast-bone was pierced by a spear. For other wounds and for broken bones some had charms and some had salves; they drank sage and remedies of herbs to preserve their limbs. 2714

For all this, the noble duke cheered and honored every man, as he well could; and made revelry all night long, as was due, for the foreign lords. Nor was there held to have been any defeat, but only as in a joust or a tourney; there was no defeat, in truth, for it is but a misadventure to fall, or to be held by twenty knights and carried unyielding and by force unto the stake, one man alone without a defender, dragged forth by arm, foot and toe, and his steed also driven forth with staves by yeomen and pages on foot. It could not mark him with disgrace; none could call it cowardice. 2730

Therefore, to stop all rancor and malice, Duke Theseus then bade it to be proclaimed that the victory belonged to both sides equally, and either side as alike as the other's brother, and gave gifts to all according to their station, and held a high festival for three days. And he honorably escorted the kings out of his town a full day's journey. And every man went home directly; there was no more than, "Farewell, have a good day!" Of this battle I will speak no more, but tell of Arcite and of Palamon. 2742

The breast of Arcite swelled, and the malady around his heart increased more and more. The clotted blood corrupted, in spite of any doctor's aid, and remained so in his trunk that neither blood-letting nor cupping²⁰ nor drink of herbs could help him. 2748

The animal or expulsive virtue, which derives from that force called natural, availed not to expel or drive out the venom. The pipes of his lungs began to swell, and every muscle in his breast and below was sorely harmed with venom and corruption. Neither vomit upward nor other medicine would help to save his life. Crushed was that entire region; Nature no longer had dominion. 2758

²⁰ Cupping. Taking blood from the patient by using a cupping glass.

And certainly wherever Nature will not act, farewell medicine! Go bear the man to church! This is the sum of it: Arcite must die; therefore he sent after Palamon, his dear cousin, and after Emily, and then said as you shall hear. 2764

“The woeful spirit in my heart cannot declare one point of all my bitter sorrows to you my lady, that I love most; but since my life can last no longer, to you above every creature I bequeath to you the devotion of my soul. Alas, for the woe! Alas, for the strong pains that I have suffered for you, and for such a long time! Alas, the death! Alas, my Emily! Alas for our parting! Alas my heart's queen! Alas my bride, my heart's lady, ender of my life! What is this world? What does one ask for? At once with his love, at once in his cold grave alone, without any company! Farewell, my Emily, my sweet foe, and for the love of God take me softly in your two arms and listen to my words. 2782

“Many days I have had strife and rancor here with my cousin Palamon, for the love of you and for jealousy. And may Jupiter, so wise, guide my soul, to speak kindly of a lover and faithfully on all points, that is to say, of fidelity, honor and knighthood, prudence, humility, station and noble lineage, nobility and all such virtues--so may Jupiter have concern for my heart, as I know of none now in this world so worthy of love as Palamon, who serves you and will his entire life. And if you shall ever wed, forget not the noble Palamon.” 2797

With that word his speech began to fail, for from his feet up to his breast had crept the cold of death that had vanquished him; and in his arms likewise the vital strength was lost and entirely gone. The intellect that dwelt in his sick and sore heart began to wane just as the heart felt death. Dusk grew before his two eyes, and breathing failed, but yet he cast his eye on his lady. His last word was “Mercy, Emily!” His spirit changed house and went to a place where I have never been--I cannot tell where. 2810

Therefore I leave off; I am no diviner; I find nothing about souls in this volume that I follow. Nor do I care to repeat the opinions of those who write where spirits dwell. Arcite is cold. May Mars guide his soul. Now I will tell more about Emily. 2816

Emily shrieked and Palamon roared, and Theseus took his swooning sister and bore her away from the corpse. What good is it to take all day to tell how she wept both morning and night? At such times, when their husbands have departed from them, that mostly they grieve, or fall into such sickness, to such a

degree that at last they certainly die. Infinite were the sorrow and tears of people both old and of tender age throughout the town for the death of this knight; children and adults wept for him. There was not such great weeping, surely, when Hector was brought, freshly slain, to Troy. Alas for the piteous sight--scratching of cheeks, rending of hair! “Why should you be dead,” these women cried, “if you had plenty of gold, and Emily?” 2836

No man could cheer Theseus except Aegeus, his old father, who knew this world's transmutation as he had seen it change back and forth, joy after woe, woe after gladness; and he showed them examples and similar instances. “Just as a man never died that had not lived on earth in some station, so too a man never lived in all this world,” he said, “that had not died at some time. This world is but a thoroughfare full of misery, and we are pilgrims that pass back and forth; death is an end to every pain and grief in this world.” Above this he said much more to the same effect, wisely exhorting the people to be consoled. 2852

Duke Theseus deliberated with all anxious care where the sepulchre of good Arcite might best be made and most honorably to his rank. And at last his conclusion was that where first Palamon and Arcite had the battle between them for love, in that same sweet and green grove where Arcite made his complaint and bore his amorous desires and the hot flames of love, Theseus should make a fire in which the funeral rite should be performed. Then he gave orders to hew and hack the aged oaks, and lay them on rows in pieces well disposed for burning. With swift feet his officers ran and rode quickly at his command. 2869

And then Theseus sent after a bier and overspread it all with cloth of gold, the richest that he had, and in the same he clad Arcite, with white gloves on his hands, a crown of green laurel on his head, and in his hand a bright sharp sword. He laid him on the bier with uncovered face, weeping all the while, as it was a pity to behold. And so that all the people might see the corpse, when it was day it was brought into the hall, which resounded with the sound of lament. 2881

Then came this woeful Theban Palamon, with torn beard and rough hair all sprinkled with ash, and then Emily, surpassing others in weeping, the most pitiful in all the procession. So that the service might be the richer and more noble, Duke Theseus ordered that three steeds be led forth, with trappings of steel all glittering and bearing the armor of Lord Arcite. Upon these large white steeds sat people, of whom one bore his shield, another held his spear upright in his hands,

and the third bore his Turkish bow, with quiver and trappings of burnished gold; and all rode forth slowly with sorrowful manner toward the grove. 2898

The noblest of the Greeks there present carried the bier upon their shoulders, with slow pace and eyes wet and red, through all the city via the chief street, which was spread all with black, and hung very high with the same black. On the right hand went Aegeus the old, and on the left Duke Theseus, with vessels of pure gold in their hands full of honey, milk, wine and blood. Then came Palamon, with a great troop, and then woeful Emily, with fire in her hand, to do her duty at the funeral, as was then the custom. 2912

Much labor and great preparation was there for the service and the making of the pyre, which reached heaven with its green top and stretched its arms twenty fathoms in breadth; that is to say, the boughs reached that far. First there were laid many loads of straw. But how the pyre was built up on high, the kinds of the trees as well (such as oak, fir, birch, aspen, alder, holm, poplar, willow, elm, plane, ash, box, chestnut, linden, laurel, maple, thorn, beech, hazel, yew, cornel), and how they were felled I shall not tell! 2924

And how the gods ran up and down, disinherited of their habitation, in which they had long time dwelt in peace and rest, nymphs, fauns, and hamadryads of the woods; and how all the beasts and birds fled for fear when the wood was felled; and how the ground was aghast of the light that was not accustomed to see the bright sun; and how the fire was laid first with a bed of straw, and then with dry sticks cloven in three, and green wood, and then with spicery and cloth of gold and gems, and garlands hanging with many flowers, and myrrh and incense and sweet odors; and how Arcite lay among all this and amid what treasures; and how Emily, as was the custom, applied the funeral torch, how she swooned when men made the fire and what she spoke and what she thought; what jewels men cast into the fire when it was burning high; how some cast shields and some spears and certain of their vestments, and cups full of wine, milk and blood into the furious fire; and how the Greeks in a huge company rode three times around the fire toward the left with loud shouts, clattering their spears three times; how the ladies cried aloud three times, and Emily was led homeward; how Arcite was burned to cold ashes; and how the wake was held all that night, and how the Greeks played in the funeral games--all this I care not to tell, nor who wrestled best, naked and anointed with oil, nor who bore him best in a hard clinch; nor will I tell how they went home to Athens when the games were done. 2966

But I will go shortly to the point and make an end of my long tale. In the process of certain years all the lament and mourning of the Greeks was ended by one general accord. 2969

Then, as I find, a parliament was held in Athens upon certain matters and cases, among which points there was consultation concerning an alliance with certain countries, and how to have full submission of the Thebans. Thereupon this noble Theseus sent after gentle Palamon, who little knew what was the cause; but in his black clothes and with his sorrow he came hastening at the command. 2979

Then Theseus sent for Emily. When they were seated and all the place hushed, and Theseus had delayed a moment, before a word came from his wise bosom, he fixed his eyes where he wished, and sighed softly with a grave face, and then spoke his will thus. 2985

“When the great First Cause and Mover created the fair chain of love, great was the deed and high His intent; well He knew why, and what He designed in that. For with that fair chain of love He bound, to certain limits that they could not flee, the water and the earth, the fire and the air. That same Prince and Mover” he said, “has established in this wretched world below for all who are engendered here a certain duration of days, beyond which they may not pass, albeit indeed they may shorten those days. There is no need to cite authority here, for it is proven by experience; I wish to declare only that which is in my mind. Then may men well perceive by this order of things that this same Mover is stable and eternal. 3005

“Well may a man know, unless he is a fool, that every part derives from its whole. Therefore Nature took not her origin from any fragment or part of a thing, but from a being stable and perfect, descending from there so far until she would become corruptible. Therefore by His wise providence He has so well ordered His works that species and courses of things shall endure only by succession and not eternally. That this is true you may well understand and plainly see. 3016

“Lo, the oak, which has such a long span of youth after it first begins to spring, and, as we may see, has so long a life, yet at last it wastes away. Consider also how the hard stone under our feet, on which we tread and pass, still wears down as it lies along the way. The broad river at last grows dry. The great towns we see diminish and pass. Then you may see that all

these earthly things come to an end. Of man and woman we see well also that at one time or another, in youth or age, they must die, king and serving-boy alike; one in the deep sea, another on the broad plain, another in his bed. Nothing helps; all go that same way. I may well say then that all things must die. 3034

“Who has ordained things in this way but Jupiter the king, prince and cause of all creatures, converting all things again to their proper source from which they were derived? And to strive against this helps no creature on earth of any degree. 3040

“Then it seems wise to me to make a virtue of necessity, and to accept well what we cannot avoid, and most chiefly that which is decreed for us all. And whoever complains commits folly and is a rebel against the governor of all things. 3046

“And certainly it is the greatest honor to a man to die in the flower of his excellence, when he is secure of his fair reputation and has brought no shame to himself or his friend. And when he has breathed his last in honor, his friend ought to be gladder about his death than if his name had grown pale with age and his valor all forgotten. For a man's glory, then, is it best to die when he is highest in fame. 3055

“To think the contrary of all this is stubbornness. Why would we complain? Why are we filled with sadness because good Arcite, the flower of chivalry, has departed in the course of duty and in honor from this life, this foul prison? Why do his bride and cousin complain here about the welfare of one who loved them so well? Will he thank them for it? No, God knows, not a bit! They hurt both his soul and themselves as well, and profit themselves not at all. 3066

“How shall I conclude after this long discourse, except to say that that after woe I counsel that we should be merry and thank Jupiter for his grace! And, before we depart from here, I counsel that of two sorrows we make one perfect joy that shall last evermore; and look now to where there is the most sorrow, for there will we first begin and make amends. 3074

“Sister,” he said, “with the full agreement of my parliament, this is my decree: that by your grace you shall have pity on noble Palamon, your own knight, who serves you with will, heart, and strength, and always has since first you knew him, and that you shall take him for your lord and husband. Extend to me your hand, for this is our mandate. Show now

your womanly pity. In faith, he is a king's brother's son; and though he has been a poor squire, he has served you so many years in such great adversity, believe me this ought to be considered. For gentle mercy ought to go beyond mere justice.” 3089

Then he said directly to Palamon, “I believe there is need of little preaching to make you agree to this. Draw near, take your lady's hand!” 3093

Quickly there was made between them the bond called marriage or matrimony by all the council and all the baronage. And thus with all bliss and melody has Palamon wedded Emily, and may God what created all this wide world send all the joy and love to him who has paid for it so dearly. 3100

Now Palamon is living in complete happiness, in bliss, in wealth, and in health. And Emily loves him so tenderly, and he serves her so gently, that never was there a word between them of jealousy or any other displeasure. Thus ends Emily and Palamon. 3107

And may God save all this lovely company! Amen. 3108

Here is ended the Knight's Tale.

Translated and Edited by Gerard NeCastro
© Copyright, 2007, All Rights Reserved

Citation. Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Knights Tale*. NeCastro, Gerard, ed. and trans. eChaucer:
<http://www.umm.maine.edu/faculty/necastro/chaucer>