

B A N T A M C L A S S I C

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer

Selected, with translations, critical introductions, and notes



Edited, introduced, and translated by Peter G. Beidler, building on an earlier edition by A. Kent Hiatt and Constance Hiatt

INTRODUCTION



THE KNIGHT'S TALE, which mostly takes place in ancient Athens, is the conflicted love story of two royal Theban cousins who love the same woman. Because "The Knight's Tale" is by far the longest and most complex of the *Canterbury Tales* presented in this volume, a quick summary of the action of the four parts of the tale may help readers encountering it for the first time:

Part I. On his way back to Athens with his bride, Hypolita, and his sister-in-law, Emily, Duke Theseus responds to the pleas of some grieving widows by defeating Creon, the tyrant of Thebes. Among the bodies of the defeated army, he finds near death the royal cousins Palamon and Arcite. Rather than kill them, Theseus takes them back to Athens and places them in prison. From their barred prison window, the two young men see the lovely Emily and both fall in love with her. Arcite after a time is released but banished from Athens on pain of death, while Palamon remains in prison. The two are envious of each other's condition.

Part II. Arcite disguises himself as a common laborer and comes back to Athens, where he gets a job working in Emily's household. Meanwhile, Palamon escapes from prison, and the rival cousins chance to meet in a grove near Athens. While Palamon and Arcite are fighting a bloody duel, Theseus, Hypolita, and Emily, out hunting, by chance come upon them in a grove. At first angry, Theseus soon relents, sets both of his enemies free, and invites them to return in a year, each

with a hundred knights, to take part in a glorious tournament, with Emily's hand going to the winner.

Part III. Theseus builds a splendid amphitheater in preparation for the tournament and places on its west, east, and north borders elaborately decorated temples to Mars, Venus, and Diana. When the two troops of warriors come back for the tournament, the three principals each pray to one of the planetary deities. Palamon prays to Venus, not for victory but for the hand of Emily. Emily prays to Diana to be spared marriage to either Palamon or Arcite, praying instead to remain a maiden always. Arcite prays to Mars for victory in the tournament.

Part IV. Just before the tournament begins Theseus declares that he wants no lives to be lost and restricts the kinds of weapons that may be used. He sets out the rules of the game, the primary one being that the winning side will be the one that takes the loser to a stake at the end of the field. After vigorous fighting, Arcite's men drag the wounded Palamon to the stake. No sooner is Arcite declared the winner than Saturn commands Pluto, god of the underworld, to send a diabolical fury to frighten Arcite's horse. Arcite is thrown and crushed by his own saddle bow. After an elaborate funeral and the passage of some years, Theseus tells Palamon and Emily to marry, and they happily do so.

Arching over the story of the warriors and lovers down on the earth below is a heavenly conflict among the gods or, more precisely, among the planetary or astrological influences that were thought to control the affairs of men. Indeed, a key feature of "The Knight's Tale" is the prayers of the three principal characters to these influences. Closely tied up with the question of whether Palamon or Arcite will get the young woman they both love is the question of how the powerful Saturn will settle the conflicting demands on him of Mars, Venus, and Diana.

Chaucer's main source for "The Knight's Tale" is Giovanni Boccaccio's several-hundred-page-long *Teseida*. Readers who

are upset at having to read Chaucer's long and leisurely story of Palamon, Arcite, and Emily should thank Chaucer for streamlining a story that is less than a quarter the length of Boccaccio's Italian story of Palemone, Arcita, and Emilia. Chaucer reduced the story in lots of ways, particularly by staying focused on the love story. He cut out, for example, Boccaccio's long opening description of Theseus's journey to the land of the Amazons, his defeat of them, and his acquiring as his bride the Amazonian queen Hypolita. But Chaucer did more than reduce the *Teseida*, which focuses on Arcite as the main character, who in Boccaccio is almost a tragic figure who makes the mistake of praying to the wrong deity. For Chaucer, Palamon is raised to equal importance, if not more importance, than his rival. And Chaucer transforms the vain and coquettish Emilia of his source into a more innocent object of the love of rival cousins.

One of Chaucer's most important changes was to give the story a philosophical overlay by introducing into it the ideas of the ancient philosopher Boethius. One of Boethius's key ideas was that there is a great God who designs a far better plan for human beings than they could possibly design for themselves. That design sometimes involves what looks like adversity, but the adversity is always (for Boethius) part of a design that leads to happiness. We should then, according to Boethius, not resist or fight against the troubles that come our way, but cheerfully accept them, trusting that in the end things will work out for the best. The ending of "The Knight's Tale," then, reflects this reassuring philosophy by showing that although the three principal characters all seem at first not to get what they want most, in the end all of them do get what they want, or perhaps something even better.

For this and the other tales in this volume, readers should reread the portrait of the teller given by Chaucer in the General Prologue. The portrait of the Knight (lines 43–78) shows him to be the idealized Christian soldier who fought with valor and honor at most of the important late-fourteenth-century battles against heathens. We know less of his marital than of his martial life, but he does have a son who is with

The Canterbury Tales

Geoffrey Chaucer

Lively, absorbing, often outrageously funny, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* is a work of genius, an undisputed classic that has held a special appeal for each generation of readers. The *Tales* gathers twenty-nine of literature's most enduring (and endearing) characters in a vivid group portrait that captures the full spectrum of medieval society, from the exalted Knight to the humble Plowman.

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US \$5.99 / \$7.99 CAN

ISBN 0-553-21082-3



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