

THE KNIGHT'S TALE <1>

WHILOM*, as olde stories tellen us, *formerly
There was a duke that highte* Theseus. *was called <2>
Of Athens he was lord and governor,
And in his time such a conqueror
That greater was there none under the sun.
Full many a riche country had he won.
What with his wisdom and his chivalry,
He conquer'd all the regne of Feminie,<3>
That whilom was y-cleped Scythia;
And weddede the Queen Hippolyta
And brought her home with him to his country
With muchel* glory and great solemnity, *great
And eke her younge sister Emily,
And thus with vict'ry and with melody
Let I this worthy Duke to Athens ride,
And all his host, in armes him beside.

And certes, if it n'ere* too long to hear, *were not
I would have told you fully the mannere,
How wonnen* was the regne of Feminie, <4> *won
By Theseus, and by his chivalry;
And of the greate battle for the nonce
Betwixt Athenes and the Amazons;
And how assieged was Hippolyta,
The faire hardy queen of Scythia;
And of the feast that was at her wedding
And of the tempest at her homecoming.
But all these things I must as now forbear.
I have, God wot, a large field to ear* *plough<5>;
And weake be the oxen in my plough;
The remnant of my tale is long enow.
I will not *letten eke none of this rout*. *hinder any of
Let every fellow tell his tale about, this company*
And let see now who shall the supper win.
There *as I left*, I will again begin. *where I left off*

This Duke, of whom I make mentioun,
When he was come almost unto the town,
In all his weal, and in his moste pride,
He was ware, as he cast his eye aside,
Where that there kneeled in the highe way
A company of ladies, tway and tway,

Each after other, clad in clothes black:
But such a cry and such a woe they make,
That in this world n'is creature living,
That hearde such another waimenting* *lamenting <6>
And of this crying would they never stenten*, *desist
Till they the reines of his bridle henten*. *seize
"What folk be ye that at mine homecoming
Perturben so my feaste with crying?"
Quoth Theseus; "Have ye so great envy
Of mine honour, that thus complain and cry?
Or who hath you misboden*, or offended? *wronged
Do telle me, if it may be amended;
And why that ye be clad thus all in black?"

The oldest lady of them all then spake,
When she had swooned, with a deadly cheer*, *countenance
That it was ruthe* for to see or hear. *pity
She saide; "Lord, to whom fortune hath given
Vict'ry, and as a conqueror to liven,
Nought grieveth us your glory and your honour;
But we beseechen mercy and succour.
Have mercy on our woe and our distress;
Some drop of pity, through thy gentleness,
Upon us wretched women let now fall.
For certes, lord, there is none of us all
That hath not been a duchess or a queen;
Now be we caitives*, as it is well seen: *captives
Thanked be Fortune, and her false wheel,
That *none estate ensureth to be wele*. *assures no continuance of
And certes, lord, t'abiden your presence prosperous estate*
Here in this temple of the goddess Clemence
We have been waiting all this forteneight:
Now help us, lord, since it lies in thy might.

"I, wretched wight, that weep and waile thus,
Was whilom wife to king Capaneus,
That starf* at Thebes, cursed be that day: *died <7>
And alle we that be in this array,
And maken all this lamentatioun,
We losten all our husbands at that town,
While that the siege thereabouten lay.
And yet the olde Creon, wellaway!
That lord is now of Thebes the city,
Fulfilled of ire and of iniquity,

He for despite, and for his tyranny,
To do the deade bodies villainy*, *insult
Of all our lorde's, which that been y-slaw, *slain
Hath all the bodies on an heap y-draw,
And will not suffer them by none assent
Neither to be y-buried, nor y-brent*, *burnt
But maketh houndes eat them in despite."
And with that word, withoute more respite
They fallen groff,* and cryden piteously; *grovelling
"Have on us wretched women some mercy,
And let our sorrow sinken in thine heart."

This gentle Duke down from his courser start
With hearte piteous, when he heard them speak.
Him thoughte that his heart would all to-break,
When he saw them so piteous and so mate* *abased
That whilom weren of so great estate.
And in his armes he them all up hent*, *raised, took
And them comforted in full good intent,
And swore his oath, as he was true knight,
He woulde do *so farforthly his might* *as far as his power went*
Upon the tyrant Creon them to wreak*, *avenge
That all the people of Greece shoulde speak,
How Creon was of Theseus y-served,
As he that had his death full well deserved.
And right anon withoute more abode* *delay
His banner he display'd, and forth he rode
To Thebes-ward, and all his, host beside:
No ner* Athenes would he go nor ride, *nearer
Nor take his ease fully half a day,
But onward on his way that night he lay:
And sent anon Hippolyta the queen,
And Emily her younge sister sheen* *bright, lovely
Unto the town of Athens for to dwell:
And forth he rit*; there is no more to tell. *rode

The red statue of Mars with spear and targe* *shield
So shineth in his white banner large
That all the fieldes glitter up and down:
And by his banner borne is his pennon
Of gold full rich, in which there was y-beat* *stamped
The Minotaur<8> which that he slew in Crete
Thus rit this Duke, thus rit this conqueror
And in his host of chivalry the flower,

Till that he came to Thebes, and alight
Fair in a field, there as he thought to fight.
But shortly for to speaken of this thing,
With Creon, which that was of Thebes king,
He fought, and slew him manly as a knight
In plain bataille, and put his folk to flight:
And by assault he won the city after,
And rent adown both wall, and spar, and rafter;
And to the ladies he restored again
The bodies of their husbands that were slain,
To do obsequies, as was then the guise*. *custom

But it were all too long for to devise* *describe
The greate clamour, and the waimenting*, *lamenting
Which that the ladies made at the brenning* *burning
Of the bodies, and the great honour
That Theseus the noble conqueror
Did to the ladies, when they from him went:
But shortly for to tell is mine intent.
When that this worthy Duke, this Theseus,
Had Creon slain, and wonnen Thebes thus,
Still in the field he took all night his rest,
And did with all the country as him lest*. *pleased
To ransack in the tas* of bodies dead, *heap
Them for to strip of *harness and of **weed, *armour **clothes
The pillers* did their business and cure, *pillagers <9>
After the battle and discomfiture.
And so befell, that in the tas they found,
Through girt with many a grievous bloody wound,
Two younge knightes *ligging by and by* *lying side by side*
Both in *one armes*, wrought full richely: *the same armour*
Of whiche two, Arcita hight that one,
And he that other highte Palamon.
Not fully quick*, nor fully dead they were, *alive
But by their coat-armour, and by their gear,
The heralds knew them well in special,
As those that weren of the blood royal
Of Thebes, and *of sistren two y-born*. *born of two sisters*
Out of the tas the pillers have them torn,
And have them carried soft unto the tent
Of Theseus, and he full soon them sent
To Athens, for to dwellen in prison
Perpetually, he *n'olde no ranson*. *would take no ransom*

And when this worthy Duke had thus y-done,
He took his host, and home he rit anon
With laurel crowned as a conquerour;
And there he lived in joy and in honour
Term of his life; what needeth wordes mo'?
And in a tower, in anguish and in woe,
Dwellen this Palamon, and eke Arcite,
For evermore, there may no gold them quite* *set free

Thus passed year by year, and day by day,
Till it fell ones in a morn of May
That Emily, that fairer was to seen
Than is the lily upon his stalke green,
And fresher than the May with flowers new
(For with the rose colour strove her hue;
I n'ot* which was the finer of them two), *know not
Ere it was day, as she was wont to do,
She was arisen, and all ready dight*, *dressed
For May will have no sluggardy a-night;
The season pricketh every gentle heart,
And maketh him out of his sleep to start,
And saith, "Arise, and do thine observance."

This maketh Emily have remembrance
To do honour to May, and for to rise.
Y-clothed was she fresh for to devise;
Her yellow hair was braided in a tress,
Behind her back, a yarde long I guess.
And in the garden at *the sun uprist* *sunrise
She walketh up and down where as her list.
She gathereth flowers, party* white and red, *mingled
To make a sotel* garland for her head, *subtle, well-arranged
And as an angel heavenly she sung.
The greate tower, that was so thick and strong,
Which of the castle was the chief dungeon<10>
(Where as these knightes weren in prison,
Of which I tolde you, and telle shall),
Was even joinant* to the garden wall, *adjoining
There as this Emily had her playing.

Bright was the sun, and clear that morrowning,
And Palamon, this woful prisoner,
As was his wont, by leave of his gaoler,
Was ris'n, and roamed in a chamber on high,

In which he all the noble city sigh*, *saw
And eke the garden, full of branches green,
There as this fresh Emelia the sheen
Was in her walk, and roamed up and down.
This sorrowful prisoner, this Palamon
Went in his chamber roaming to and fro,
And to himself complaining of his woe:
That he was born, full oft he said, Alas!
And so befell, by aventure or cas*, *chance
That through a window thick of many a bar
Of iron great, and square as any spar,
He cast his eyes upon Emelia,
And therewithal he blent* and cried, Ah! *started aside
As though he stungen were unto the heart.
And with that cry Arcite anon up start,
And saide, "Cousin mine, what aileth thee,
That art so pale and deadly for to see?
Why cried'st thou? who hath thee done offence?
For Godde's love, take all in patience
Our prison*, for it may none other be. *imprisonment
Fortune hath giv'n us this adversity'.
Some wick'* aspect or disposition *wicked
Of Saturn<11>, by some constellation,
Hath giv'n us this, although we had it sworn,
So stood the heaven when that we were born,
We must endure; this is the short and plain.

This Palamon answer'd, and said again:
"Cousin, forsooth of this opinion
Thou hast a vain imagination.
This prison caused me not for to cry;
But I was hurt right now thorough mine eye
Into mine heart; that will my bane* be. *destruction
The fairness of the lady that I see
Yond in the garden roaming to and fro,
Is cause of all my crying and my woe.
I *n'ot wher* she be woman or goddess, *know not whether*
But Venus is it, soothly* as I guess, *truly
And therewithal on knees adown he fill,
And saide: "Venus, if it be your will
You in this garden thus to transfigure
Before me sorrowful wretched creature,
Out of this prison help that we may scape.

And if so be our destiny be shape
By etern word to dien in prison,
Of our lineage have some compassion,
That is so low y-brought by tyranny."

And with that word Arcita *gan espy* *began to look forth*
Where as this lady roamed to and fro
And with that sight her beauty hurt him so,
That if that Palamon was wounded sore,
Arcite is hurt as much as he, or more.
And with a sigh he saide piteously:
"The freshe beauty slay'th me suddenly
Of her that roameth yonder in the place.
And but* I have her mercy and her grace, *unless
That I may see her at the leaste way,
I am but dead; there is no more to say."
This Palamon, when he these wordes heard,
Dispiteously* he looked, and answer'd: *angrily
"Whether say'st thou this in earnest or in play?"
"Nay," quoth Arcite, "in earnest, by my fay*. *faith
God help me so, *me lust full ill to play*." *I am in no humour
This Palamon gan knit his browes tway. for jesting*
"It were," quoth he, "to thee no great honour
For to be false, nor for to be traitour
To me, that am thy cousin and thy brother
Y-sworn full deep, and each of us to other,
That never for to dien in the pain <12>,
Till that the death departen shall us twain,
Neither of us in love to hinder other,
Nor in none other case, my leve* brother; *dear
But that thou shouldest truly farther me
In every case, as I should farther thee.
This was thine oath, and mine also certain;
I wot it well, thou dar'st it not withsayn*, *deny
Thus art thou of my counsel out of doubt,
And now thou wouldest falsely be about
To love my lady, whom I love and serve,
And ever shall, until mine hearte sterve* *die
Now certes, false Arcite, thou shalt not so
I lov'd her first, and tolde thee my woe
As to my counsel, and my brother sworn
To farther me, as I have told befor.
For which thou art y-bounden as a knight

To helpe me, if it lie in thy might,
Or elles art thou false, I dare well sayn,"

This Arcita full proudly spake again:

"Thou shalt," quoth he, "be rather* false than I, *sooner

And thou art false, I tell thee utterly;

For par amour I lov'd her first ere thou.

What wilt thou say? *thou wist it not right now* *even now thou

Whether she be a woman or goddess. knowest not*

Thine is affection of holiness,

And mine is love, as to a creature:

For which I tolde thee mine aventure

As to my cousin, and my brother sworn

I pose*, that thou loved'st her befor: *suppose

Wost* thou not well the olde clerke's saw<13>, *know'st

That who shall give a lover any law?

Love is a greater lawe, by my pan,

Than may be giv'n to any earthly man:

Therefore positive law, and such decree,

Is broke alway for love in each degree

A man must needes love, maugre his head.

He may not flee it, though he should be dead,

All be she maid, or widow, or else wife. *whether she be*

And eke it is not likely all thy life

To standen in her grace, no more than I

For well thou wost thyselfe verily,

That thou and I be damned to prison

Perpetual, us gaineth no ranson.

We strive, as did the houndes for the bone;

They fought all day, and yet their part was none.

There came a kite, while that they were so wroth,

And bare away the bone betwixt them both.

And therefore at the kinge's court, my brother,

Each man for himselfe, there is no other.

Love if thee list; for I love and aye shall

And soothly, leve brother, this is all.

Here in this prison musten we endure,

And each of us take his Aventure."

Great was the strife and long between these tway,

If that I hadde leisure for to say;

But to the effect: it happen'd on a day

(To tell it you as shortly as I may),

A worthy duke that hight Perithous<14>

That fellow was to the Duke Theseus
 Since thilke* day that they were children lite** *that **little
 Was come to Athens, his fellow to visite,
 And for to play, as he was wont to do;
 For in this world he loved no man so;
 And he lov'd him as tenderly again.
 So well they lov'd, as olde bookes sayn,
 That when that one was dead, soothly to sayn,
 His fellow went and sought him down in hell:
 But of that story list me not to write.
 Duke Perithous loved well Arcite,
 And had him known at Thebes year by year:
 And finally at request and prayere
 Of Perithous, withoute ransom
 Duke Theseus him let out of prison,
 Freely to go, where him list over all,
 In such a guise, as I you tellen shall
 This was the forword*, plainly to indite, *promise
 Betwixte Theseus and him Arcite:
 That if so were, that Arcite were y-found
 Ever in his life, by day or night, one stound* *moment<15>
 In any country of this Theseus,
 And he were caught, it was accorded thus,
 That with a sword he shoulde lose his head;
 There was none other remedy nor rede*. *counsel
 But took his leave, and homeward he him sped;
 Let him beware, his necke lieth *to wed*. *in pledge*

How great a sorrow suff'reth now Arcite!
 The death he feeleth through his heart smite;
 He weepeth, wailleth, crieth piteously;
 To slay himself he waiteth privily.
 He said; "Alas the day that I was born!
 Now is my prison worse than beforne:
 Now is me shape eternally to dwell *it is fixed for me*
 Not in purgatory, but right in hell.
 Alas! that ever I knew Perithous.
 For elles had I dwelt with Theseus
 Y-fettered in his prison evermo'.
 Then had I been in bliss, and not in woe.
 Only the sight of her, whom that I serve,
 Though that I never may her grace deserve,
 Would have sufficed right enough for me.

O deare cousin Palamon," quoth he,
"Thine is the vict'ry of this aventure,
Full blissfully in prison to endure:
In prison? nay certes, in paradise.
Well hath fortune y-turned thee the dice,
That hast the sight of her, and I th' absence.
For possible is, since thou hast her presence,
And art a knight, a worthy and an able,
That by some cas*, since fortune is changeable, *chance
Thou may'st to thy desire sometime attain.
But I that am exiled, and barren
Of alle grace, and in so great despair,
That there n'is earthe, water, fire, nor air,
Nor creature, that of them maked is,
That may me helpe nor comfort in this,
Well ought I *sterve in wanhope* and distress. *die in despair*
Farewell my life, my lust*, and my gladness. *pleasure
Alas, *why plainen men so in commune *why do men so often complain
Of purveyance of God*, or of Fortune, of God's providence?*That giveth them full oft in many a guise
Well better than they can themselves devise?
Some man desireth for to have richness,
That cause is of his murder or great sickness.
And some man would out of his prison fain,
That in his house is of his meinie* slain. *servants <16>
Infinite harmes be in this mattere.
We wot never what thing we pray for here.
We fare as he that drunk is as a mouse.
A drunken man wot well he hath an house,
But he wot not which is the right way thither,
And to a drunken man the way is slither*. *slippery
And certes in this world so fare we.
We seeke fast after felicity,
But we go wrong full often truely.
Thus we may sayen all, and namely* I, *especially
That ween'd*, and had a great opinion, *thought
That if I might escape from prison
Then had I been in joy and perfect heal,
Where now I am exiled from my weal.
Since that I may not see you, Emily,
I am but dead; there is no remedy."