

Romantic line in the knight's tale

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In Geoffrey Chaucer's famous satirical poem *The Canterbury Tales*, the author describes a pilgrimage which commences in the town of Southwark and continues to the burial sight of Saint Thomas Becket. The pilgrims are quite an assorted lot, comprised of members of all classes of the social spectrum in late-medieval England. At the head of the group is the "verray, parfit, gentil knight" (Chaucer GP 72) who has just returned from a Crusades battle and is now prepared to embark on yet another noble expedition. This ideal Knight is chosen to tell the first tale which will set the tone for the rest of the journey. Aptly, he chooses to relay a story of courtly romance in which two young knights vie for the affection of the same fair maiden. Chaucer's construction of love in *The Knight's Tale* proves to be much different from the modern notion of love in our society and probably also different from any love experienced by the other pilgrims on the journey. The Knight presents love in a very superficial manner and portrays it as a threat to the order and regulation which he deems extremely important in traditional society.

First, Chaucer describes the plight of Arcite and Palamon, two young knights who are locked up indefinitely in a tower in Athens by the duke Theseus. Their mundane lives as prisoners are instantly altered at the first moment they catch a glimpse of Emily, who "fairer was to sene / Than is the lillie upon his stalke grene" (Chaucer KT 177-178). Immediately the two men are overcome by the forceful strike of Cupid's arrow, and they fall hopelessly into a fit of uncontrollable love sickness. Palamon moans, "Love hath his fyry dart so brenningly / Y-striked thurgh my trewe careful herte" (Chaucer KT 706-707). Of course, they know nothing about this woman aside from her remarkable beauty, but this fact does not impede them from making highly

dramatic proclamations of their undying love and devotion for her. At the instant that love enters the picture, their typical days and simple friendship come to a halt, and Arcite and Palamon are thrust headlong into the capricious, precarious world of love. Order and stability are thus tossed to the wayside in favor of unrequited love.

Next, Arcite and Palamon begin their love-induced battle (first verbal, then physical) for the hand of unsuspecting Emily. Declaring “‘ who shal yeve a lover any lawe’” (Chaucer KT 306), they revoke their close-knit friendship and pine away miserably for the unattainable object of their affection. Arcite is released from imprisonment but banned forever from the city of Athens. However, “ his face was so disfigured” (Chaucer KT 545) as a result of the love sickness he had endured that he felt confident enough to return to the city in an attempt to satisfy his unavoidable love for Emily. After that, Palamon escapes the tower and the two are ready to engage in a battle to the death for their common beloved lady.

As love completely upends the organization and orderliness of society, it reduces men to the level of animals. Palamon and Arcite completely disregard notions of friendship, loyalty, and courtesy as they are utterly overcome by their passion. During their first battle, Chaucer writes that “
Thou mightest wene that this Palamon / In his fighting were a wood leoun, /
And as cruel tygre was Arcite: / As wilde bores gone they to smyte”
(Chaucer KT 797-800). Theseus, in a valiant attempt to preserve order, cuts short their battle and arranges a grander, more entertaining competition by which one of the knights will be definitively betrothed to Emily. Before their

final fight, Arcite implores Mars, the god of war, for assistance in battle, while Palamon seeks the aid of Venus, the goddess of love. In the end, love prevails, and Palamon ultimately receives the hand of fair Emily.

Love as portrayed by Chaucer is deliberately superficial, as it comes directly through the eye. The Knight's Tale never presents emotional engagement as being a necessary component of falling in love, thus taking away accountability for the irrational behavior of a man inflicted with this ailment. Love attacks a man so forcefully that the knight describes the process as a kind of martyrdom. Chaucer writes, " Who coulde ryme in English proprely / His martyrdom?" (Chaucer KT 601-602) and Palamon proclaims, "' Ye sleen me with your eyen, Emelye; / Ye been the cause wherefore that I dye" (Chaucer KT 709-710). Love is so powerful that it cannot be resisted, save from death, and even chivalrous, noble men are subject to the arrows it discharges.

Additionally, the active role of women in the process of love is noticeably absent. The female seems to exist solely as the desired object for a love-struck man, and in addition to much other obvious inferiority, she is unable to reject any suitor who has been chosen for her. As the two knights compete passionately for Emily, the lady is completely oblivious to their very existence. After she learns of their love for her, readers discover that she would prefer never to marry at all. She prays to Diana, "' Chaste goddesse, wel wostow that I / Desire to been a mayden al my lyf; / Ne nevere wol I be no love ne wyf" (Chaucer KT 1446-1448). However, while Emily may seem more virtuous because she does not wish to marry, she is not afforded the

opportunity to speak out in protest. Women in the tale have absolutely no say in matters of the heart. In fact, they generally assume subservient, non-vocal positions in society and obediently comply with the will of the men. The Knight proclaims that “wommen, as to speken in commune, / They folwen al the favour of fortune” (Chaucer KT 1823-1824). When Emily learns that Palamon is the victor, she dutifully gives her hand in marriage because she understands this to be her fate.

In conclusion, The Knight's Tale is a chivalric romance comprising all of the classical characteristics of a medieval romance. It is set long ago and far away, involves mythology, and revolves around an unattainable love interest and the construction of an idealized form of love. The Knight holds order in high esteem, and thus the symmetrical structure of the tale follows the organizational function. Love threatens to overthrow the order, but in the end everything comes together and the symmetry is preserved. The tale is completely appropriate for the ideal Knight to tell, as it is dignified and proper in style and casts a favorable light on the venerable profession of knighthood. Love, as constructed by the Knight, does not encompass notions of mutual affection, but is a one-sided concept which causes erratic, fanatical behavior and is spurred by nothing more than aesthetic appearances. Love focuses solely on the feelings of the man who has been struck by Cupid's unmerciful arrow, and The Knight's Tale constructs love as an ideal to which a gallant man commits himself.