

The Canterbury Tales: The Knight's Tale

In A Nutshell

[Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale,"](#) found in [The Canterbury Tales](#), is the story of two knights from Thebes who fall in love with the same woman, a princess of Athens named Emily. Since the two knights have apparently sworn to support each other in everything, each one's love for Emily does *not* go over well. (Sounds kind of like a recipe for romantic comedy, doesn't it?)

Chivalry is a big deal in "The Knight's Tale." Chivalry was a system of rituals, duties, and behaviors a knight was supposed to follow if he wished to behave with honor. The rules of chivalry included things like always keeping your promises, defending the helpless, and remaining loyal to your lord and fellow knights *no matter what*. Wondering if this is like King Arthur's honorable knights of the Round Table? Yep, it definitely is. Lots of the stories about Arthur's knights have to do with chivalry too.

"The Knight's Tale" is also concerned with courtly love, which demanded the loyalty of the knight to just one person: his lady-love. Courtly love was actually a "system" of love, just as chivalry was a system of knightly behavior. That means there were rules. The system got its start in the literature of the Aquitaine region in France, where troubadours sang ballads about the often secret and illicit love of knights for noblewomen (scandalous!).

The woman in a courtly love story is placed on a pedestal – she is totally perfect in every way, and the knight practically worships her. His love for her makes the knight stronger and more honorable. The rules of courtly love were even written down in a treatise by a 12th-century French courtier, Andreas Capellanus, in a work called *De Amore*, although literary types disagree on whether or not this work is meant to be serious or just a way to make fun of the courtly love tradition.

In any case, we have these two codes of behavior, chivalry and courtly love. In "The Knight's Tale" we get to see what happens when the two codes clash. Palamon and Arcite are sworn brothers. As brother knights, they should be willing to do anything to protect one another. But when they both fall into (courtly) love with Emily, they have to be willing to do anything to win *her*, which includes breaking their promise to one another. Or does it? That's the question "The Knight's Tale" wants you to think about.

Brought in to solve the conflict, we have the almost impossibly noble Duke Theseus. He represents another of the tale's major themes: order. What happens when two systems come into conflict? Answer: you need someone smart and powerful like Duke Theseus to figure out what to do. Either that or Judge Judy. Theseus's calming, powerful presence in the tale represents authority overcoming the forces of chaos. It reveals this tale's origins in the aristocratic genre of courtly romance, which portrays the aristocracy as a force for good in an otherwise dark, crazy, and scary world.

Why Should I Care?

Everybody knows that you should never, ever in a million years date your BFF's crush. No matter what. Even if said crush begs and pleads and claims he/she's hopelessly in love with you. Even if you're so hopelessly in love with him/her that you think you're going to die if you can't be together. Because dating the guy/girl that you *know* your BFF's hopelessly in love with would break the BFF code of conduct, and would make you the most heinous person on the face of the earth, right?

Well, maybe. On the other hand, there are those that claim that "love is a gretter lawe" (307) than any other code of conduct, that true love trumps all obligations you might have to the other people in your life. This is the excuse that Arcite uses in "The Knight's Tale" when he breaks his oath of sworn brotherhood to Palamon in order to become his rival for the love of Emily. It's also one of the excuses [Denise Richards](#) used when dating former BFF [Heather Locklear](#)'s husband. Which just goes to show that this kind of situation's been going on for a long time now and isn't likely to stop occurring any time soon. So what's a BFF to do?

Well, if you're an ancient Greek knight, you can fight it out in a joust and just pray that a freak earthquake doesn't knock you off your horse. Unfortunately, not many of us are ancient Greek knights, which means that we have to solve this conflict without horses, spears, and armor. We've got to either suck it up and hang on to our friendship, or say goodbye to the friendship for good in order to date the guy or girl of our dreams.

Of course, we could also hope against hope that our friend will find it in their heart to forgive us and declare "non so worthy to ben loved" as us, as Arcite does for Palamon on his deathbed (1934-1935). Yeah, we don't think that last one's too likely either. So, like Arcite and Palamon, you're going to have to make a choice between the BFF and the love of your life. And if you need help understanding the possible consequences of your choice, you need only turn to "The Knight's Tale" for guidance.

The Canterbury Tales: The Knight's Tale Summary

How It All Goes Down

The noble Duke Theseus of Athens is on his way home from his invasion of Scythia, where he has won a wife, Hippolyta, and a sister-in-law, Emily. Sounds like a pretty successful trip, right? Along the way, Theseus & Co. meet a group of crying women. They beg Theseus to take vengeance on Creon, King of Thebes, because of his refusal to allow them to give their husbands' bodies a proper burial. Theseus agrees and beats Creon. In the process, he wins two noble Theban hostages, cousins Palamon and Arcite.

Theseus throws Palamon and Arcite in the slammer (a tower next to his garden), without ransom. One day in early May, Emily walks in the garden, gathering flowers. Palamon sees her from the prison window and immediately starts crushing on her. He's so smitten that he cries out. Hearing his cry, Arcite runs to his cousin. But as soon as he lays eyes on Emily, he falls for her too. The knights argue about who gets dibs on Emily. Arcite finally decides that it's a dumb argument to have; since both knights will be in prison forever, they'll just have to love Emily from afar with no hope of consummation.

Or maybe not. Soon, Arcite gets out of jail because he and Theseus have a mutual friend, who petitioned to get Arcite released. The only catch is that Arcite has to leave Athens and never set foot in the city again. Arcite moans and groans and feels sorry for himself, convinced that Palamon is better off than him because he gets to see Emily every day. Palamon, on the other hand, thinks that Arcite is a lucky dog because he can assemble an army to win Emily in battle.

Arcite returns to Thebes for a while, but, unable to stay away from Emily, quickly returns to Athens disguised as a servant. He works his way into Theseus's household, becoming Emily's manservant.

Meanwhile, Palamon has managed to escape from prison. He takes shelter in a grove of trees not far from the palace, planning to continue his journey under cover of nightfall. And – surprise, surprise – Arcite happens to go walking in that same grove. Palamon doesn't recognize him at first because of his disguise. When Arcite begins to speak of his love for Emily (because, you know, emo lovers always talk to themselves about their crushes), though, Palamon figures out who he is and leaps from the bushes, outraged. He and Arcite bicker. Arcite challenges Palamon to a duel, promising to return the next day with armor and weapons for Palamon, to ensure a fair fight.

The next day comes, and the two knights begin their duel. Duke Theseus and his party, out hawking, happen to come across the two knights as they battle. Theseus orders them to stop. When he finds out who they are at what they're fighting about, he at first wants to put them to death. But when the ladies, especially Hippolyta and Emily, beg for mercy, Theseus reconsiders. The Duke admits that he, too, has done some pretty stupid things for love.

Theseus decides that each of the knights must return in one year's time with one hundred knights, in order to fight an epic joust. The winner will get Emily. The knights agree, and ride home to Athens to gather knights. Meanwhile, Theseus pours time and money into building a huge stadium for the joust. It's like he's prepping for the World Cup. The stadium is complete with temples dedicated to Venus (goddess of love), Mars (god of war), and Diana (goddess of the hunt).

After a year has passed, Palamon and Arcite return to Athens, where everybody is ready to watch the competition and party. On the morning of the joust, the two knights and Emily visit the different temples. Palamon prays to Venus to grant him Emily, while Arcite asks Mars for victory in the joust. Emily, on the other hand, asks Diana to grant her perpetual virginity. (Guess she doesn't want to marry either of these guys.) Only Emily's request is refused. The knights' requests cause a conflict between Mars and Venus in the Heavens, but Jupiter (the king of the Gods) figures out a way to please both of them.

The joust begins, and many captives are taken. The fighting is fierce on both sides. In the end, Palamon is captured, and Arcite wins. On his victory ride, an earthquake in the stadium causes Arcite's horse to trip, sending him headfirst to the ground. Despite cracking his head pretty hard, everyone is sure that Arcite will recover. That night the people of Athens celebrate the upcoming marriage of Emily and Arcite.

But Arcite doesn't recover. He dies with Emily and Palamon at his bedside, using his last breath to tell Emily what a great guy Palamon is. Theseus arranges a fancy funeral for Arcite, after which Palamon returns to Thebes in mourning. He doesn't stay in Thebes very long, though. Theseus's counselors want an alliance between Athens and Thebes, and think that a marriage between Palamon and Emily would be just the thing. Theseus gives a long speech about how death is a part of God's plan for the world. At the end, he recommends that Palamon and Emily marry. They agree, and the story ends with a big, happy wedding.