Canterbury Tales
Knight’s tale

Geoffrey Chaucer

fourteenth century Middle English verse

Translated and retold in Modern English prose
by

Richard Scott-Robinson


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Whylom, as olde stories tellen us ther was a duk that highte Theseus; of Athenes he was lord and governour.

- Once, as old stories tell us, there was a duke whose name was Theseus; he was the ruler of Athens and such a successful conqueror in his days that there was no one like him under the sun. He had subdued many a country through his intelligence and his horsemanship, and in particular he had conquered Scythia and married its queen, Hippolyte, or some say Antiope, bringing her home to be his own queen.

With much pomp and pageant Hippolyte rode alongside her young sister Emily, to the sounds of music and applause. I'll let Theseus ride towards Athens, to the admiration of all who are there, with his mounted warriors riding beside him. And certainly, if it was not too long a story, I would tell you how the land of Scythia was conquered by Theseus and his horsemen, of the great battle between the Athenians and the Amazons and how Queen Hippolyta was besieged. I would describe to you the marriage feast and the tempest they all had to endure on their homecoming. But I haven't got the time – I have a large field to plough and my oxen are eager to set to work. The rest of my story is long enough and I've no desire to encroach into other peoples' time. May the best tale win! But I've lost my thread. Where was I?

This duke, whom I was talking about, Theseus, when he had come almost within sight of Athens, in all his pomp and splendour, noticed a company of ladies kneeling in the road in pairs, one in front of the other, clothed in black. They were wailing and screaming so much that no one can ever have heard its like. They continued wailing as they seized hold of his bridle.

'Who are you, spoiling my victorious homecoming with all this ostentatious grief?' shouted Theseus. 'Are you so upset at my victory that you choose to lament it? Or have you angered someone and fear for your lives? Tell me. If I can help in any way, I will, and why are you all wearing black?'

The eldest of them spoke. She recovered herself from a swoon that was pitiful to see, gathered herself and said: 'Lord, to whom Fortune has given victory, we bear no malice towards you nor any dislike at the honour you are receiving. We seek only mercy. Have mercy on our woe and on our distress! Through your gentility, let there fall a drop of pity upon our wretchedness. There is not one of us who was not formerly a duchess or...
a queen, but thanks to Fortune and her dishonest wheel, which gives no one any guarantee of happiness or the preservation of their status, we are now slaves dressed in rags as you can see.

‘We have been waiting for you for a fortnight in the temple of the goddess Clemence. Please help us, for it is in your power to do so. I, whom you see weeping before you, am the recently widowed wife of King Capaneus who has died at Thebes, cursed be that day! All of us have lost husbands during a cruel siege. Now old Creon – curses! – is lord of that city. He is full of anger and evil. Through a thirst for revenge he has had all the slain piled into a heap and will not allow them to be buried or cremated. He sends dogs to eat them!’

At this, the women all collapsed, sobbing and wailing. ‘Have mercy upon us,’ they cried. ‘Let our sorrow sink into your heart.’

Theseus dismounted and approached them, in tears himself. He raised each of them into his arms in turn, swearing upon his knighthood that he would do all in his power to bring this tyrant Creon to grief. All the people of Greece would know how Theseus deals with a man who thoroughly deserves his death. Without any further delay, he unfurled his banner and rode towards Thebes with all his warriors. He did not enter Athens but sent his queen, Hippolyte, and her beautiful young sister Emily, into that city without him. He rode through the night towards Thebes.

A red image of Mars shone on Theseus’s white banner. All the fields glittered and shone in its reflected light. Beside this banner hung a gold pennon on which was embossed an image of the Minotaur which Theseus had killed in Crete. So rode this duke, this conqueror, amidst all the finest knights of his time, until he came to Thebes and camped in a place that would give him the greatest advantage in battle. And to cut a long story short, he fought Creon, the King of Thebes, and killed him with his own sword. He put Creon’s army to flight and attacked the city, tore down masonry and timberwork and restored to the ladies the bones of their dead husbands, so that they could perform all the necessary rites and ceremonies. But it would take too long to describe all the wailing and lamentation that these ladies made when the bodies were burnt, and the great honour that Theseus paid to them when he finally took his leave. I shall move on quickly.

When Theseus had killed Creon, driven his army from the field and won Thebes, he spent the night camped on the battlefield, intending the subdue the entire country. When the fighting was over, all the thieves and robbers began to ransack the slain for their armour, weapons and clothes. As they did so, they came across two bodies, hacked mercilessly with many a grievous wound. These two young knights were lying side-by-side, both wearing the same ornate and costly armour with the same heraldic devices. Their names were Arcite and Palamon. They were neither fully alive nor completely dead, but the heralds recognised the coat-of-arms that each of them wore and knew
them to be of royal blood. They were cousins, born to two royal sisters. These pillagers tore them from the pile of dead and carried them, while they still breathed, to Theseus’s tent. Theseus quickly sent them back to Athens where they would be incarcerated in prison for life, without any hope of ransom.

Theseus did all that he intended to do and then returned to Athens, crowned in laurel; and there he stayed for the rest of his days – what need is there to elaborate upon his glorious reign? But in a tower, in anguish and woe, languished Palamon and Arcite, sentenced to life imprisonment; no gold could free them.

Years passed, years and days, until one May morning the fair Emily, who had grown to be more beautiful than the lily and fresher than the May flowers – her complexion vied even with the rose so that I could not say which was the fairer — but she was up and dressed before the sun had risen, as was her custom. May will allow no unnecessary lying in bed, it stirs every gentle heart and wakes it out of slumber. ‘Arise, and pay your respects!’ it commands. Emily had been reminded in this way to honour May and had arisen, her clothes freshly laundered, her fair hair bound delightfully into a plait that hung down the length of her back at least a yard, I would guess. And as the sun rose above the horizon, she walked about in the garden, gathering flowers as she pleased, red and white, to make a garland to wear on her head. She sang like an angel as she did so.

A great tower, with its strong walls, in which was hidden the chief dungeon of the castle, where Palamon and Arcite were incarcerated, lay adjacent to the garden wall beyond which Emily was taking the morning air. The sun was bright, the sky was clear and Palamon, this woeful prisoner, with the permission of his jailor, had already got up and was in a high chamber where he had a view over the whole city. This vista included the garden, so full of branches, where Emily was enjoying this beautiful May morning.

This sorrowful prisoner, Palamon, paced up and down in the chamber, giving vent to his complaints. ‘Alas that I was born!’ he cried, as he often did. And it happened by chance that, through one of the windows, between the thick, square iron bars, he caught a glimpse of fair Emily. He started, and cried ‘Ah!’ as though his heart had been stung. Hearing this noise, Arcite awoke and cried out: ‘Cousin, what’s the matter? Who has injured you? For God’s love, accept our predicament with patience for there’s nothing we can do about it. Fortune has sent us this adversity. An ill-favoured planetary aspect must have caused it, a conjunction between some constellation or other and Saturn, perhaps, when we were born. We must endure it. There’s nothing else we can do.’

‘This prison isn’t the reason I cried out,’ replied Palamon. ‘I was stung in the eye, right down to my heart. Such beauty! A beautiful woman is walking about in that garden below us. I don’t know whether she’s a woman or a goddess, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s Venus herself.’

Then he fell onto his knees and exclaimed: ‘Venus! If it is indeed you who has chosen to walk in this garden before me, please find some means by which we can escape from this horrible place. And if it is my destiny to die in this prison, please have compassion upon
our loved ones, who are so impoverished by defeat and tyranny.'

As Palamon was saying this, Arcite spotted the lady as well and fell into as deep a rapture as his cousin, if not more so. ‘The beauty of that lady destroys me!’ he exclaimed. ‘Unless I can win her affection – her love even, or speak to her at the very least! – I must die.’ He sighed.

When Palamon heard this, he scowled: ‘Are you having a joke?’

‘I am in earnest, by my faith!’

‘It will bring you no great honour to be faithless, or a traitor to me,’ Palamon frowned. ‘I who am your cousin and your sworn brother; for we have both pledged that, never, until death, will either of us hinder the other in matters of love, nor in any other way. Rather you should seek to aid my suit and give me all the support you can, as I would to you. We have both sworn this. But now you seem to be wavering in your loyalty and would love the lady that I love. False Arcite, this shall not be! I loved her first, and told you of my pain. You should act as our bond of loyalty requires. Behave like a knight, and help me.’

‘You didn’t see her first,’ insisted Arcite. ‘And anyway, you didn’t know whether she was a woman or a goddess, so yours must be a religious, holy love whilst mine is entirely of the flesh, I assure you. You should be loyal to me. And what if you did love her first? Don’t you know the old saying: Who shall give a lover any law? All’s fair where love is concerned. A man will fall in love whether he wants to or not, regardless of whether she’s a maiden, a widow or somebody else’s wife even and will likely lead to his death. But enough. You know full well that we’re incarcerated in this prison for life. There shall be no ransom. We’re like those two hounds that fought all day for a bone only for a hawk to come and carry it away whilst they were fighting. Love her if you want to. I shall as well. That’s all there is to it. Here in this prison we must remain.’

But to cut a long story short, it happened one day that a duke named Perithous visited Athens. He and Theseus had been childhood friends and there was great affection between the two of them. They loved one another so much, as old books tell us, that when Perithous died, Theseus went down to hell to try to find him again. But we won’t go into that now.

Duke Perithous had been very fond of Arcite over the years when he had lived in Thebes, and through his requests and entreaties, Arcite was at last let out of prison on this condition: that if he was ever seen again in any land over which Theseus ruled, and was captured, he would have his head cut off with a sword.

Arcite was distraught when he heard this judgement. As he was led out of the prison tower he felt as though his heart would break. He wept and wailed, cried aloud and secretly resolved to kill himself. ‘Alas, that I was born!’ he sobbed. ‘I’m exchanging one prison for another that is far worse. I’m compelled to jump from purgatory into hell itself! Alas, that I ever knew Perithous. But for him I would remain chained here in this
prison, which to me is Bliss, for it is enough only to have a sight of the lady I serve.

‘Oh my dear cousin Palamon, yours is the victory,’ he complained. ‘You may remain blissfully in this prison, or rather, this Paradise! Fortune has favoured your throw of the dice. You will be near to her and you are a worthy and accomplished knight so that by some chance, since fortune is never constant, you may at last attain your desire. But I, who am exiled and bereft of all mercy, have no hope. I will die in misery and distress. Farewell happiness! Farewell my life!

‘Alas, folk complain to God or to Fortune about things which give them more pleasure than they could themselves have asked for, if only they could see it. I was one of those. We are all like the drunk who knows that he has a home to go to, but where it is eludes him. He doesn’t recognise where he is and certainly, in this world we are just the same. We hanker after happiness, but in which direction does it lie? All of us can say this, and I more than any, who had such a high ambition to escape from this prison and to be happy and free, but now, in exile, find myself barred from all joy. Since I cannot see you any more, Emily, my death is near, there is no remedy.’

Palamon, however, when Arcite had gone, shouted out in equal sorrow, so much that the great tower shook with the noise and the clamour. The leg-irons around his shins were soon wet with tears.

‘Alas!’ he cried. ‘My cousin Arcite, you saunter around Thebes, free now, and care nothing for my misery. Since you possess both intelligence and courage, you will probably gather together all our kinsmen and make war upon this city so that through some treaty or capitulation you will marry Emily, for whom I must now die. You have the advantage over me – I who am dying in a cage. I must weep and wail while I live, with all the harsh discomforts of prison, and added to this, the pain of a hopeless love.’

With this, the fire of jealousy so ignited within Palamon and so gripped his heart that he became ashen pale, like boxwood: ‘Oh cruel gods who govern this world!’ he cried. ‘You, who pronounce eternal truths from your tablets of stone, does mankind mean no more to you than sheep huddled in the fold? A man may be killed like any other beast, or shut away and made to suffer disease and torment; often undeservedly so, God knows! An animal can do whatever it likes and when a beast is dead, it suffers no torment; but a man must suffer penance in this life and after his death must weep and beg for mercy, however much pain and misery he has already suffered in this world. This is the truth of the matter! Alas, a snake or a thief, who does wrong to honest men, walks free, whilst I must languish in prison through the madness and jealousy of Saturn and Juno, who have well-nigh destroyed the entire nobility of Thebes. And in addition to this, Venus
torments me.’

But let Palamon lie in his prison cell, while I tell you what happened to Arcite.

2

W hen Arcite arrived back in Thebes, he died a thousand deaths every day and languished in agony for the love of Emily. And to tell the matter plainly, no creature can ever have suffered so much, since the world began.

Spring passes into summer and the lengthening nights increase the agony both of the lover and the prisoner. I don’t know who has the more intolerable time of it. Palamon is condemned to lie in prison, in manacles and chains until he dies. Arcite is exiled, upon pain of beheading, and can never again see the lady he loves.

I pose this question to you: who has the worst of it? Palamon can see his lady every day, but only through the bars of his prison cell. Arcite may walk and ride wherever he wishes, but can never see his lady ever again. Judge as you wish, all you who may. I shall continue with the story.

Arcite could not sleep, he could not eat or drink, he grew thin and his skin became as pale and dry as a stick. His eyes became hollow, his complexion began to look like cold ashes and he shunned all company, preferring to be alone. At night he wailed in torment. At the sound of any singing, or the playing of any musical instrument, he would burst into tears. He was so lifeless and depressed, and so unlike the way he used to be that when he spoke, nobody recognised his voice. He exhibited every lover’s malady it is possible to have. Soon his habits and his personality had changed completely. But I will not linger unduly over a description of his cruel torment.

After a year or two of this pain and woe in Thebes, Arcite went to sleep one night and dreamed that the winged god Mercury stood before him, urging him to be merry. Mercury held a staff in his hand and, dressed in the same way that he had appeared before Argus, he said: ‘Go to Athens, for be assured, there is a way out of your misery.’

Arcite woke up immediately. ‘Whatever may come of it, I shall go to Athens at once,’ he declared. ‘I shall not hesitate for any fear of death. I don’t care if I die.’

He snatched up a great mirror and saw that his face had changed – his colour was not as it had been and his features were all different. And the thought occurred to him that since his face was so altered through the pain that he had endured, it might be possible, if he did nothing to bring attention to himself, to live in Athens and see his lady well-nigh every day. So he changed his clothes for those of a poor labourer and all alone, except for a young squire who knew everything and whom he dressed in the same poor clothes, he made his way to Athens by the shortest route.
Arcite made his way to the royal court and offered his services. He could lift and toil at any task they set him to and with a little inside knowledge which he very quickly gleaned, he fell into service with a chamberlain who lived in the same house as Emily. Arcite was young and strong and able to cut wood, draw water and indeed, do anything that people asked him to. He spent a year or two in this service, as a page in the chamber of the beautiful Emily, having assumed the name Philostrate. At the end of this time there had never been such a well-loved menial at court! He was every inch a gentleman and loved by all. Everybody said that it would be a fine gesture if Theseus promoted him and gave him a more responsible position. And not long after this, his noble deeds and his eloquent speech so impressed Theseus that he made him a squire in his own chamber. He gave him gold to finance this new status; and also, men secretly brought funds out from Thebes for him as well, every year, which he spent discretely so that no one would wonder where his money was coming from. He led this life for three years, in peace and in war, until there was no man whom Theseus held in higher regard. In this bliss I shall leave Arcite for a while and speak of Palamon.

In darkness and horror, Palamon has spent the last seven years in prison, tormented by discomfort and distress. His agony is compounded and he is out of his mind with unhappiness, a prisoner not for a year only, but until death. Who can properly portray his miserable plight in English verse? Not I, that’s for sure. So I’ll quickly will move on.

It happened that in the seventh year, in May, on the third night of that month (as all the old books that relate this story explain) either by chance or by destiny (as when a coming event has already been shaped and ordained by fate) Palamon managed to escape from his prison. It was just after midnight. With the help of a friend he had obtained spiced wine laced with opium and other narcotics from Thebes and given it to his jailor to drink, who then slept so soundly all night that nobody could wake the man, however hard they shook him.

Palamon fled from the city as fast as he could. But the night was short and as day began to dawn he knew that he had to find somewhere to hide, so he crept cautiously and quietly into a small wood, intending to conceal himself there all day, and then make a dash for Thebes when darkness fell once more. Then he would gather together all his friends and make war against Theseus, for he intended very quickly either to lose his life or win Emily’s hand in marriage. This was his plan.

But now let us turn to Arcite. Little does he know how close he is to disaster. He is tragically oblivious to what has happened, and will remain so, unless fortune pounces on him.

The busy lark, the messenger of the day, salutes the grey dawn with her song. The sun rises so mightily that the eastern sky delights in the light; his glorious beams will soon dry all the dew that has collected on the leaves. Arcite is in the royal court. He is Theseus’s principal squire and is already up and about; and to pay homage to May, and remembering the true focus of his love, he rides his horse like the spark from a fire, rejoicing in
some free time and intending to go a mile or two from the court to the very wood I have just been speaking about. He hopes to collect some leaves with which to make a garland, some honeysuckle or may blossom perhaps. He sings loudly in the sunlight: ‘May, with all your flowers and all your greenery, welcome, fresh, fair May, I shall gather some of your lovely leaves today!’

Arcite rode his horse quickly into the wood and trotted up and down a path near to where Palamon was hiding in a bush. Palamon had no idea that it was Arcite riding nearby, and God knows, he wouldn’t have believed it anyway. But there is a well-known saying: ‘Fields have eyes and woods have ears.’ It is wise for a man not to allow himself to be overcome with emotion, for he cannot know who might be hiding around the next corner. Arcite has no idea that he is being overheard, for Palamon is hunkering down as quietly as he can in the middle of a bush.

When Arcite had gathered all that he wanted to and finished his lusty song, he suddenly became very quiet, as lovers do, with their changeable moods – now high up in the saddle, now low down in the dumps, up and down like a bucket in a well. Just like Friday, in all honesty; now it rains, now the sun comes out. In the same way, Venus keeps changing the hearts of her people. Seldom is a Friday like any other day of the week.

When Arcite had finished singing, he suddenly became very despondent. He collapsed to the ground and began to sigh: ‘Alas, that I was born!’ he cried to himself. ‘How long, Juno, in your cruelty, do you intend to make war upon Thebes? Alas! The royal blood of Cadmus and Amphion has been brought to confusion. Cadmus, who founded Thebes and was the first king to be crowned there, is my ancestor, I am a direct descendent of his. But now I am so enslaved and live such a menial life that I serve my mortal enemy as his lowly squire. Yet Juno piles more shame upon me still, for I may not even be known by my proper name; my name is Arcite but now I am Philostrate and I am not worth anything. Alas, you, cruel Mars! Alas, cruel Juno! Your anger has undone a whole dynasty, except for me and wretched Palamon, whom Theseus murders in his prison. And if this is not enough, to destroy me entirely, Love has shot his fiery arrow right through my sorrowful heart. I was fitted up for death before this tear-stained shirt was even made. You slay me with your eyes, Emily. You are the reason that I must die. As for the rest of my worries, I would value them at no more than a blade of this grass if I could only win your favour.’

With this, he fell down in a trance and lay for a long while just staring into space before getting up again.

Palamon, meanwhile, was feeling as though a cold sword had just glided into his heart. Suddenly, he could contain himself no longer. Shaking with rage, his face deadly pale, like a madman he sprang out of the dense bush that he was hiding in and shouted:

‘Arcite, you dishonest traitor! Now I’ve got you! You love my lady for whom I suffer such agonies, and you are of my blood and sworn to help me as I have told you before! You have deceived Theseus and made him look a fool and changed your name, and now you
shall die, or I shall. You will not love my lady Emily! I am Palamon, your mortal enemy, and only I shall love her. Although I have no weapon on me and have just escaped from prison – may God be praised! – I can tell you, either you will renounce your love for Emily at once or you will die. Choose which it is to be.’

‘By God who sits above,’ replied Arcite, as fiercely as a lion. ‘If you were not completely mad and unarmed, I would kill you where you stand!’ Drawing his sword: ‘I defy the pledge you claim I have made,’ he shouted. ‘Love is free, you fool! I will love Emily however much you may try to stop me. But you are a knight as well and wish to win her in battle, so here is a pledge: tomorrow, and without anybody knowing, I shall appear here again with weapons and armour enough for both of us. Choose the best of what I bring. I shall use the remainder. Tonight I shall bring food and drink for you, and something warm for you to lie on. And if it is written in the stars that you shall kill me and win my lady, then so be it.’

‘I agree to this,’ replied Palamon.

So they left one another, having pledged to meet in battle the next day.

Oh Cupid! Uncharitable and jealous ruler of those things which may not be shared! Neither love nor lordship will willingly suffer a rival, as Arcite and Palamon now know to their cost.

Arcite rode back into the city and early the next morning, before the sun was up, he secretly gathered together arms for both of them. Then completely alone, he carried all this equipment on his horse to the woods and arrived at the appointed time to meet Palamon. Their faces quickly changed colour, just as does that of a hunter in the kingdom of Thrace who stands at a rugged pass with a spear when he is hunting a lion or a bear and suddenly hears the creature come rushing towards him through the bushes, breaking branches and leaves, and he thinks: “Here comes my mortal enemy. Either he will die in the next few moments, or I shall, if I make a single mistake.”

There was no: ‘Good day,’ or greeting of any kind, only fierce looks on their faces as they began at once to help each other to put on the armour, as though they were brothers. Then, with spears whose points were as sharp as needles and battle-ready, they lunged and thrust at one another. Palamon fought like a lion, be in no doubt, and Arcite fought like a tiger. They came together like wild boars frothing white at the mouth and soon the pair were ankle-deep in their own blood. But I shall let them fight on for a moment, and speak of Theseus.

Destiny, one of the highest authorities that preside over the world, administers the providence that God has ordained and is so powerful that, even if the whole world has sworn that a thing shall not happen, if destiny requires it, it will happen. It will happen, at the particular moment that it is ordained to, even if it is unlikely to happen again for another thousand years. Our emotions and desires are governed by destiny. And so it was
for Theseus. He suddenly felt an urge to go hunting. He suddenly desired to chase the May deer, and it was not yet light before he was up, dressed and ready to set out with his hunting horn and his hounds. Theseus took a great delight in hunting and enjoyed being the bane of all the harts, for after the war god Mars he served the goddess of hunting, Diana.

The day was clear and a joyful Theseus rode off in regal splendour for what he hoped would be a fine day's hunting. With Hippolyte his queen and her sister Emily alongside her, all dressed in green, they made straight for the wood where Palamon and Arcite were fighting, for it was known that there was a stag there. They soon arrived in an open clearing where this hart liked to run, and where there was a brook. Duke Theseus planned to set his hounds against this deer and to have one or two gallops over the brook himself. Unexpectedly, though, when Theseus rode into this clearing he saw in the morning light two knights fighting one another like two wild boars. Their swords flashed so viciously in the sunlight as they wielded them to and fro that each stroke seemed enough to fell an oak tree. Who these knights were, Theseus had no idea, but he dug his spurs into his horse's sides and galloped between them, then pulled out a sword and cried: 'Ho! No more, or you will both lose your heads! By Mars, the next one of you to lift up his sword shall die. What kind of men are you, to be so foolhardy as to fight one another in my forest without any judge or officer of the law in attendance?'

'Sir, what is there to say?' replied Palamon quickly. 'We are two woeful wretches whose lives are a burden to us and we both deserve death. Kill me first and then kill Arcite. Or kill him first, for he is your mortal enemy whom you banished from your land on pain of death. He has returned and given himself the name Philostrate. You've made Arcite your chief squire and he's made a monkey out of you! He loves Emily. And since the day has come that I must die, I will hide nothing from you. I am Palamon and I've escaped from your prison. I'm your mortal enemy and I love Emily so deeply that I will gladly die in her presence. Therefore I ask for death, and kill Arcite as well, for both of us deserve to die.'

'Then this matter is concluded very swiftly!' exclaimed Theseus. 'You are damned by this confession and I'm pleased that I have no need to use torture to wring anything out of you. You shall both die, by Mars!'

But the queen let her femininity overcome her and began to weep, and so did Emily, and all the ladies with them. They thought this whole affair a great pity, for these were obviously two gentlemen of high estate and the conflict between them was about love and nothing else. They looked at the wounds they had already inflicted upon each other and all cried out together:
‘Have mercy, lord, upon us women!’

They fell down upon their bare knees and would have kissed Theseus’s feet, and at last his anger began to quell, for pity is not long in coming to a gentle heart. And although he had at first been shaking with rage, he quickly considered the circumstances under which this pair were fighting, their crimes and the causes for them, and although in the heat of anger he had wanted them both dead, in the cold light of a more considered judgement he determined that they should both be excused.

Theseus knew that it is every man for himself where love is concerned, and that anyone will try to escape from a prison. And he had compassion for the women, who were all weeping, and in his heart he said: ‘Fy upon a lord who has no mercy! A lord should not behave like a lion equally to those who are wilfully stubborn and those who are repentant. That lord is a fool who puts obstinacy and contrition in the same pan of the weighing scales.’

And when his anger had subsided, he raised his eyes to heaven and said: ‘Ah, the god of love, how mighty a lord he is! Nothing can act against his wishes and he may truly be called a god, because of his miracles. He can make any heart do as he wishes. Here are Palamon and Arcite who have both managed to escape from my prison and might now be living comfortably in Thebes. They each know that I am quite capable of killing them, and yet love, despite all that they know, has brought them back here to almost certain death. Isn’t this truly marvellous? Who is more foolish than a lover? Look, for God’s sake, see how they bleed! Can you see how well their god looks after them? This is the way that the god of love rewards them for their service; yet they always claim to be wise, whatever happens to them. But the best joke of all is that the lady for whom they endure all this grief has been no more aware of their ardour than a cuckoo or a hare!

‘But a man must be allowed to be a fool sometimes. I know this to be true, for I fell in love myself, once. Therefore, I know how debilitating the pain of love can be. So I forgive you. I forgive you at the request of the queen who kneels here before me, and her beautiful sister Emily. But you must both swear to me that you will never make war upon my country, nor do any harm to it at all, but be my friends in every way that you can. Do this for me, and I shall forgive you everything.’

Palamon and Arcite agreed at once. They asked for Theseus’s mercy and swore allegiance to him. He granted it. Then he said:

‘As regards royal lineage and wealth, each of you is suited to marry a princess or a queen when the time is right. But concerning my sister-in-law Emily, for whom you are at one another’s throats, you must be aware that, even were you to fight forevermore, she cannot marry both of you. One of you will have to go and whistle to an ivy leaf. She can marry only one of you.

‘I suggest, therefore, that we put the matter into the hands of destiny. I propose that each of you goes away to wherever you want to go, in total freedom. And in fifty weeks’
time, you shall both return here to Athens with a hundred knights, armed for a tournament and ready to win Emily in combat. And I promise you this: you have my word as a knight that whichever of you has the strength to kill the other with his company of knights, or drive him from the field, shall win Emily. I shall have lists constructed, and may God give me the grace to be a good arbiter. I shall make no further judgement on the matter until one of you is captured or dead. If you agree to this, say so, for it is a generous offer and it will settle matters once and for all.’

Arcite could hardly contain himself for joy, Palamon was overcome with gratitude. Who can properly describe the joy they both felt? Everybody went down on their knees and thanked Theseus from the bottom of their hearts, and especially the two Theban noblemen. And so, in happy and optimistic mood, they both took their leave and rode away towards Thebes, and its ancient walls.

3

I imagine that men will deem me negligent if I fail to describe the work that Theseus ordered to be carried out in preparation for the tournament. A field was turned into the finest theatre for such a contest that the world has ever seen. An arena was constructed, a mile in circumference with a stone wall and an outer ditch, circular in shape and tiered like an amphitheatre, so that those sitting in front did not obstruct the view of those behind. In the east stood a gate of white marble and directly opposite it, on the west side of the arena, stood another one exactly like it. Despite the swiftness of its construction, there was nothing to compare with it in the whole world. Every craftsman versed in geometry and arithmetic, every sculptor and every notable artist was commissioned by Theseus at generous rates to help with the work.

In order to perform all the necessary sacrifices and ceremonies, Theseus placed a temple of Venus, the goddess of love, above the eastern gate. Above the western gate he placed a temple to the war god Mars that cost a cart-load of gold to construct! On the north side of this vast amphitheatre, in a turret on the wall, he put a temple to the goddess Diana, virgin and huntress, made of white alabaster and red coral. And I must not forget to mention the wonderful carvings and the frescoes, the sculptures and the bas-reliefs that adorned all of these temples.

In the temple of Venus there was depicted on the walls all the sleepless nights, the dreadful sighs, the tears, the cries of anguish and the pangs of heart-throb that love’s servants have to endure, the pledges and the promises, the joys and anticipations, the hopes and desires, the beauty, youth, foolhardiness and charm, the compulsion, the sex, the lies and the expense. The jealousies attributed to this goddess were depicted as a cuckoo sitting on Jealousy’s hand. Painted upon the walls also were scenes of feasts, images of musicians with their instruments, dancing and ostentation, sexual desire and all else that pertains to love. Truly, the whole of Mount Citherea, which is Venus’s principal home,
was depicted on these walls; the garden, the energy and the lust, not to forget the doorkeeper Idleness. Depicted on these walls was the handsome Narcissus of ancient lore, the folly of Solomon, the strength of Hercules, the enchantments of Medea and Circe, the fierce and persistent courage of Turnus and the wealthy slave Cresus – all those who had become fatally tangled in love's mesh and provided proof that neither wisdom, wealth, cunning, beauty nor strength or tenacity can in any way compete against Venus. She does what she wants. I could give you a thousand more examples of people who have cried: ‘Alas!’ because of love, but these will have to suffice.

There was a glorious statue of Venus, depicting her floating naked in the wide ocean, covered by green waves from the navel downwards, as bright as any glass. She held a harp in her right hand and wore a garland of roses on her head, freshly-opened, smelling sweetly. Doves flew above her. With her was her son Cupid, with two wings on his shoulders, carrying a bow and some very sharp arrows, and he was blind, as has often been remarked.

Why should I not also describe to you the paintings that were in the temple of Mars?

The interior of this temple was decorated just like the temple of Mars in Thrace, his principal dwelling place high up in the frosty mountains. On the walls were painted a forest that was barren and empty of all life, with ancient, twisted, knotty trees and jagged stumps through which there rumbled the low whining of a storm that threatened to bring down every branch. From the lower fringe of this eerie forest, grass ran down to a depiction of a temple built of forged steel with a long entrance passage that was ghastly to behold. Out of it came such an angry blast of wind that it shook all the gates. There were no windows. Light from the northern sky entered through the doors, doors which were made of crystal, eternal adamantine, bound in iron. The whole temple was supported on iron pillars, each a ton in weight.

On these walls I saw depictions of criminality in all its forms, cruel anger, as red as a hot coal, the pickpocket, a fearful face drained of all blood, a smiling man with a knife hidden under his cloak, farm buildings burning, enveloped in acrid smoke, underhand deceit leading to a man murdered in his bed. There were images of open warfare with grievous and bloody wounds, battle, conflict, evil intent and the blood-stained knife. The place was full of screams. A suicide was there, his hair bathed in his own blood. A nail driven into his forehead, staring upwards in cold death. In the centre of the temple sat sad misfortune, madness laughing with rage, violent disagreement, alarm and fierce anger. There was a corpse with its throat cut, thrown into a bush, a thousand slain without mercy, a tyrant with his helpless victims, a town destroyed. I saw burning ships, a huntsman strangled by a bear, a sow pulling a child from its cradle on the ground, a cook who had had his whole arm scalded. Nothing of misfortune was forgotten: a carter lying dead under the wheel of his cart, a barber with his razor, a butcher with his knives, a blacksmith at his anvil. Above all these, depicted in a tower, was Conquest sitting in great honour with a sharp sword hanging over his head, suspended by a single thread.
I saw painted upon these walls the slaughter that Julius Caesar would one day cause, Nero and Mark Anthony, although these people hadn’t yet been born. This carnage was depicted there as a reflection of that which was already painted in the stars. But enough. I cannot describe it all, although I would if I had the time.

The statue of Mars was standing on a cart. He was armed and looked insane. Above him shone Puella and Rubeus, the starry figures of two constellations, as old books relate. This was how he was portrayed. A wolf with red eyes stood at his feet, eating a man. All this was sculpted with a great deal of skill.

But let me hasten as quickly as I can to the temple of Diana and describe to you all the pictures of hunting and modest chastity that were there. I could see woeful Callisto, whom an angry Diana had turned into a bear; Callisto was then placed by Zeus into the night sky as the constellation known as the Great Bear, along with her son, to guide us to the pole star. There I saw Dana, turned into a tree – not the goddess Diana, I mean, but Peneius’s daughter who was called Dana. I saw how Actaeon was turned into a deer for daring to catch a glimpse of Diana when she was naked; he was attacked by his own hounds shortly afterwards because they couldn’t recognise their own master any more. A little way away from these was painted how Atalanta hunted the wild boar with Meleager and many others, whom Diana caused to suffer. I saw many of these wonderful stories, but I can’t relate them all to you here.

The statue of Diana rode high upon a stag, with small hounds running about her feet. Underneath her was a moon, nearly full and shortly about to wane once again. She was clothed in bright green and she held a bow, with a set of arrows in a case. Her eyes were cast down to where Pluto rules and in front of her was a pregnant woman who cried to be delivered of her child: ‘Lucina,’ the woman wailed. ‘Help me, for you are the one most able to.’ The man who had carved this statue was very skilful, and the colours and pigments that he used must have cost a fortune.

This tournament field was duly completed and Theseus, having built these temples and the arena at great cost to himself, stood back and admired it all. But I will not talk about Theseus but turn instead to Palamon and Arcite, for the day of their return approaches.

Palamon and Arcite arrived in Athens with a hundred knights each, armed for war. And certainly, over the breadth of the Earth, and never since the world began, have so many fine and able knights in such a small company made for such a noble sight! Many a man who was there would testify to the truth of this, and every knight who loved chivalry had wanted to be amongst them. All those who had been selected were very happy to have
been chosen, for the same reason that every ambitious knight who loves a lady and has strength and endurance today, whether in England or elsewhere, would be delighted to be there. To fight for a lady, may the Lord bless you! It was a fine sight to see.

Palamon was surrounded by noblemen, some armed in a coat of mail, a breastplate or a leather doublet, others with plate armour front and back. Some carried a Prussian shield, or a targe. Others would have had extravagant leg armour and an axe, or an iron mace, for there is nothing new that isn’t old. Each knight was armed according to his inclinations. There you would have seen Ligurge, the King of Thrace, riding alongside Palamon, with a black beard and his face set firmly, his eyes glowing orange-red, looking about like a mythical bird of prey. He had long, harsh eyebrows, great muscular arms and legs, broad powerful shoulders and, as was the fashion of his county, he stood high upon a golden chariot pulled along by four white bulls. Instead of a coat-of-arms over his armour – which had yellow rivets and was as bright as gold – he wore a bear’s skin, as black as coal and of great antiquity. His long hair was combed behind his back and shone as black as a raven’s feathers. Upon his head he wore a golden circlet, very heavy and set with rubies and diamonds. About his chariot ran twenty huge white dogs, used for hunting deer and lions; they pranced and followed alongside and were as large as bullocks, with gold-studded collars and with their jaws muzzled. A hundred noblemen followed him, all of them brave warriors and magnificently armed.

Arcite, the story tells us, was accompanied by Emetreus, the king of India, riding upon a bay steed draped in horse-armour and cloth-of-gold. Emetreus rode like Mars himself, wearing over his own armour an outer garment of cloth made by the Tartars, speckled with large, white pearls. His saddle was of freshly-burnished gold, a cloak hung from one of his shoulders sparkling with the fire from a thousand rubies and his curly blond hair glistened like the sun. His complexion was ruddy, he had orange and black freckles on his face, lips that were full and he cast his eyes around like a lion. I imagine he was about twenty-five years old, his beard was getting quite full and his voice rang out like a trumpet. Upon his head he wore a fresh green laurel wreath and on his wrist there rested a tame, white eagle. Around this king’s horse, tame lions and leopards ran as he made his way forwards. A hundred lords accompanied him, completely armed except for their heads, all of them dukes, earls and kings; their armour was magnificent. They were there to do honour to chivalry, and to love.

And so, on this Sunday, when the sun was already climbing high into the sky, in the middle of the morning, all these warriors arrived in Athens and dismounted.

Theseus, this duke, this worthy knight, when he had greeted them and formally invited them into the city, found lodgings for them all, each according to his wealth and status, then he put on a feast and did his utmost to rest and entertain them so magnificently that the arrangements are considered faultless to this day. The minstrels and the music, the service at table, the presents given to the highest and the lowest, the splendour of Theseus’s palace and the hierarchy of seating could not be criticised. As to which of the ladies was the fairest or the best at dancing or at singing, or who spoke most poetically
of love, or what sort of hawks were perched around the hall and how many dogs were lying on the floor, I shall give you no description. It was all wonderful, but I must get to the point of the story. Listen, if you will.

That night, well before dawn, fully two hours before the sun was due to rise, when Palamon heard the blissful lark singing he rose with equal joy and made his way to the temple of Venus which Theseus had built into the eastern gate of the tournament arena. Venus herself shone in the sky as he knelt with a fervent heart and said: ‘Fairest of them all, Venus, my lady, daughter of Jove and husband to Vulcan, bringer of joy on Mount Citherea – with the same love that you gave to Adonis, please have pity on my bitter tears and accept this humble prayer into your heart. Alas, I have no words to express the torment that I am in! My heart cannot find the language, I am so confused. But please have mercy, glorious lady. I know that you can read my thoughts and feel my anguish, so have pity on me.

‘I vow that, if you will help me, I shall be your servant and make war upon chastity to the fullest extent of my power. I do not like to boast of my fighting qualities and I don’t ask you for victory tomorrow, or glorious martial renown or any of that proud ostentation, but only that I may have Emily to myself, to hold in my arms. Please find a way of bringing this about. I don’t care if we have the victory or they do, I just want to hold Emily in my arms. For although Mars is the god of war, you have such influence in heaven that, if you wish it to be so, then I can have Emily.

‘If you will do this for me, I shall worship in your temple forevermore and sacrifice to you upon your altars, wherever I am. But if this cannot be so, my sweet lady, then may I ask only that tomorrow, Arcite runs me through the heart with his lance, for then I shall not care that he has won Emily in marriage instead of me. This is all I ask. But please give me Emily, blissful lady.’

When Palamon had finished this prayer, he made his sacrifice, paying attention to every detail. I will not describe what he did, but when he had finished, the statue of Venus began to shake and made a sign that Palamon took to mean that his prayer had been heard. Although there had been a small delay, he knew that his request had been granted. With a joyful heart, he made his way home.

Palamon had been up for over two hours when the sun rose at last, and so did Emily. She made her way at once to the temple of Diana, taking her maidens with her, carrying the sacred fire, the incense, the cloths and the horns full of sweet alcohol that she would need to perform a sacrifice. She filled the temple with the smoke of incense and draped it with fine cloth while she happily washed in the water from a spring; although how exactly she performed these rites I dare not say. I shall only give you the gist of it, although it is tempting to reveal to you all of the details. To a well-meaning person I could do so; but it is good to stay out of prison.

Her hair was combed but left to hang free, with a circlet of oak leaves on the top of her head. She blew two fires into life on the altar and did the things that she had to do, as
are written in Statius’s Book of Thebes and other old tomes. When the fire was kindled, Emily spoke imploringly to the goddess Diana:

‘Oh virgin goddess of the green woodlands, who overlooks heaven, Earth and sea, queen also of the realm of Pluto in its dark depths, goddess of maidens, you have understood my heart for many years and know what I desire. Protect me from the vengeance that Actaeon cruelly deserved, but remember that I have wanted for a long time to remain a virgin and not to become anybody’s wife. I am still one of your company, a virgin still. I love hunting and to walk in the wild forest. I have no wish to be a wife or to be pregnant. I do not wish to have sex with any man. Help me, lady, please, since it is in your power, through those three forms within one that you possess. Palamon, who is so in love with me, and Arcite, whose heart bursts with an equal desire, please, I implore you, send love and peace between them so that they might leave me alone! Let all their desire and passion, all their fire and torment be quenched, or turned towards another object entirely. But if you cannot do this for me, or if my destiny compels that I must take one of them as my husband, then send to me the one who loves me the most.

‘Look, chaste goddess! – see how the tears fall down my cheeks! Since you are a maiden and our protector, please protect my maidenhead. If you do this, I shall serve you for as long as I remain a virgin.’

The fires were burning upon the altar as Emily prayed to Diana, but suddenly, something odd happened. All at once, one of the fires went out, then it came back to life again, then the other fire went out with a whistling and crackling sound like that of damp tinder and from the end of the kindling began to emerge drops of blood. Emily was terrified and screamed, for she had no idea what this meant. But then, immediately, the goddess Diana appeared before her, holding a bow like a huntress:

‘Daughter, stop this anguish,’ she said. ‘It has been affirmed amongst the high gods, and confirmed by eternal ordinance, that you shall be married to one of these two young men who endure such agonies for you. But I am not at liberty to tell you which one. Farewell, I can stay no longer. The fire on my altar reveals how things shall go.’

With this, the arrows in the goddess’s quiver clattered and rang and she vanished. Emily was astonished and said: ‘What does this mean? I have put myself in your protection, Diana!’

But that was it. There was nothing more to do, so Emily went home.

A short while afterwards, Arcite walked into the temple of Mars at the western gate of the arena to perform a sacrifice and to complete his pagan rites. With an anguished heart full of high devotion, he prayed to the god Mars:
‘Oh powerful god, honoured in the cold land of Thrace and held to be lord there. In every region and every kingdom you hold the reins of armies in your hand and determine their fortune in battle, so accept from me this pitiful sacrifice. If I am not too young or too weak to be one of your servants, then make me one. Take pity upon my plight! You felt this same pain and raging fire when you held Venus in your arms and passion overcame you – although you came to grief on one occasion when Vulcan caught you both in a net while you were making love, alas! But for the agony which you felt in your heart then, have pity upon mine now.

‘I am young and inexperienced, as you know, and more overcome, I am sure, than anybody else has ever been by love. The lady who causes me all this pain doesn’t care if I sink or float. Before she will show me any mercy I must win her in battle. It is clear to me that without your help, my strength will not be enough. Help me then, lord, at this tournament. The fire which once burned in your heart now burns in mine as well, so let me win the battle tomorrow. Then all the effort will be mine, but all the glory will be yours!

‘If you grant me this, I will honour your temple above all others and spare no effort to perform all your rites. I will hang my banner in your temple and the heraldic emblems of all my followers, and I will light an eternal fire to burn here until the day I die. And in addition, I vow this – that my long hair and my beard, that never before have felt the cutting edge of any scissors or razor, I will offer to you, and be your true servant for as long as I live. Have mercy upon my sorrows and give me the victory tomorrow. I ask no more than this.’

Arcite finished his prayer and immediately the temple door and all the rings hanging on it began to shake and clatter, which put fear into Arcite’s heart. Then the fires on the altar began to grow until the temple was filled with their light and the floor emitted a sweet smell. Arcite threw more incense into the flames and performed other rites. Then the coat of chain mail on the statue of Mars began to shake and ring, and along with this sound there arose a deep and barely discernible murmuring that sounded like: ‘Victory!’ Arcite wished honour and glory upon Mars and then excitedly, and full of optimism, went joyously back to his lodgings.

Such an argument broke out in heaven over these pledges, between Venus, the goddess of love and Mars, the fearsome god of weapons, that Jupiter had to step in to try to dampen it. Cold Saturn, who knew so many things of old, weighed in too, and was able through his wisdom to come up with a solution that pleased everybody; for it is wisely said that there is a great advantage in age. Age possesses both wisdom and experience. The elderly may be out-run, but not out-witted. Saturn, in order to quell the dispute – although such pacification is normally against his nature – prescribed the following remedy:

‘My dear daughter Venus,’ he said. ‘My orbit, which is larger than any of yours, has more power in it than any human can guess. Mine is the drowning in the sea, the languishing
in prison in a dark dungeon, the strangling and hanging by the throat, the insurrection and the riot, the common assault and the secret poisoning. I do vengeance and rough justice when I am in the constellation of Leo. Mine is the ruin of palaces, the falling of towers and walls upon the miners and carpenters who undermine them. I killed Samson when he shook the pillars. Mine are the cancers, the dark deceptions and the old contrivances. My gaze brings disease. But worry not, I shall see to it that Palamon, who is your knight, shall have his lady, as you have promised, even though Mars will not have to break his word to his knight. So for the time being, let there be peace and accord between the two of you. Venus, I am your grandfather, ready to help you at all times. Weep no more, for I shall give you what you want.’

But let me leave the gods in heaven and come as quickly as I can to the point of this tale.

4

Athens played host to a magnificent feast that day, and the beautiful May weather put everybody in such a joyful mood that they spent all of that Monday jousting, dancing and giving honour to love. But because they all had to rise early the next day to witness this great tournament, they did not stay up very late.

The next morning, as the sun rose, the whole of Athens rang to the clattering of horses and armour being readied in all the hostels. Knights made their way up to Theseus’s palace leading ponies and war horses and there you would have seen the arranging of strange and extravagant armour, fashioned skilfully by goldsmiths, by embroiderers and by those skilled in working steel; bright shields, helmets and horse trappings, coats of chain mail, coats of arms, lords draped with their heraldic emblems sitting on war horses, knights following them, squires in attendance riveting lances and buckling on helmets, fitting straps to shields, lacing leather thongs; wherever there was a job to do there was somebody doing it. No one was standing idly about. Sweating horses gnawed on their bits, armourers sped to and fro with their hammers and files, yeomen walked about and the common people also with short staves, crowding the place. Pipes rang out, drums, trumpets and blood-curdling clarions.

The palace was full of people – groups of three here, ten there, discussing which of these two Theban knights had the best chance of victory. Some said one thing, some another. Some liked the look of the warrior with the black beard, others liked the one with a bald head or one with a huge neck – he looked grim and ready for a fight. Another’s battle axe weighed twenty pounds! The hall was full of opinion, full of speculation, which continued long after the sun had begun to climb into the sky.

Theseus, who had been awoken by all this noise, chose to remain in his private chambers until the two honoured Theban knights had arrived at his palace. He sat on a balcony,
dressed like a god on a throne. Soon the people pressed forwards to see him and to pay him due reverence, and also to hear what he had to say. A herald on top of a scaffold shouted for quiet and immediately the noise of the crowd was hushed. When the herald saw that everybody was waiting expectantly, he read out a pronouncement that Theseus had given him to make.

‘Our lord,’ he cried out, ‘through his great wisdom, has decided that it will be a great shame if the ensuing battle is to be fought in the manner of all-out war. Therefore, to keep casualties to a minimum, he will modify the original terms of the contest. No man, therefore, upon pain of death, shall carry any projectiles, any poleaxes or stabbing knives onto the tournament field, or cause any of these to be brought onto it, and no short swords may be used either. Every man will ride only once against his opponent, carrying a sharpened lance, and he may afterwards defend himself on foot with his sword if need be. Any knight who is stricken shall be carried off the field, his life spared, and taken to a stake that shall be set up for each side, and there he must stay. If it comes about that the principal adversary on either side is captured or killed, then the tournament will be deemed to have been decided and will end. God speed you all. Now go and give each other hell! Do whatever you want to do with long swords and maces. This is the will of Theseus.’

With this, a huge cheer rang out. ‘God save such a worthy lord, who wishes to see no great loss of life,’ they all cried merrily.

Trumpets sounded and everybody obediently made their way through Athens, which was adorned with flags of cloth-of-gold, towards the arena where the tournament was to take place. Theseus fully looked the part as he rode along in magnificence and splendour, flanked on either side by Palamon and Arcite. Behind him rode the queen and Emily. Behind them, another company and so on and so forth, in descending order of status. They all left the city and soon arrived at the great arena. It was not yet nine o’clock in the morning when Theseus sat down on a seat on a high platform with Hippolyte and Emily, and all the other noble ladies who were with them. Then everybody else scrambled for seats.

Arcite appeared at the western gate, below the temple of Mars, with his hundred knights, bearing a red banner. At the same moment, Palamon appeared at the eastern gate beneath the temple of Venus, with his hundred knights, boldly bearing a white banner. One could search through the whole world and not find a more evenly-balanced contest. It was impossible to determine which side had the advantage over the other, neither in age nor in fighting ability nor in status nor in anything else. Both sides formed up. When the rolls were called and it could be seen that both sides had counted their numbers honestly, the gates were shut and the cry went out: ‘Now do your duty, you proud young knights!’

The heralds withdrew. Trumpets and clarions rang out. Every knight put his lance into its rest with purposeful resolve, dug spurs into his horse’s sides and everybody in the
arena was treated to the marvellous spectacle of accomplished warriors urging war horses into a gallop, with fine skill. What more is there to say?

Breastbones jarred on impact as lances shattered against shields or rose twenty feet into the air, swords were drawn, shining like silver, helmets were hacked at and smashed to pieces. Blood burst out in red streams. Warriors fought their way through a wall of knights only to have their bones broken with blows from a mighty mace, horses stumbled and fell, bringing everything crashing down around them, knights rolled into a ball under the horses’ hooves or stood and jabbed with the broken stumps of their lances, bringing down other knights. Some were wounded and, bitterly protesting, taken to the stake were they could take no further part in the action. Now and again, Theseus called a halt to allow them all to drink, if they wished, and to rest for a moment.

Many times Palamon and Arcite meet one another in combat and exchange some fearsome blows. No tiger looking angrily for her stolen, new-born cubs has ever been more tenacious in the hunt than Arcite, as he rages with jealousy against Palamon; no lion, mad with hunger or hunted by men, has ever been more hungry for blood than Palamon, who is desperate to see Arcite slain. Each has unhorsed the other. Jealous blows rain down upon both their helmets. Both have blood running down their sides.

But everything has an end, and before the sun drew into the west, King Emetreus caught hold of Palamon as he fought with Arcite and drove his sword deep into his flesh. Twenty knights then seized Palamon, against his will, and carried him off to the stake. During a rescue attempt, King Ligurge was unhorsed and King Emetreus, for all his strength, was toppled a sword’s length from his horse by Palamon, but to no avail. Palamon was taken to the stake. His brave heart was not enough. He had no other choice but to remain captured, both from physical compulsion and by the terms of the contest.

Who cries out in misery now but woeful Palamon? He cannot re-join the battle. When Theseus saw what had happened he stood and cried: ‘No more! It is finished! I give my impartial judgement that Arcite of Thebes shall have Emily. He has won her fairly on the field of battle.’

The roar of the crowd rose to a crescendo of cheering and whooping until it seemed that the whole arena would collapse from the noise.

What can fair Venus do now? What does she say? She weeps at the humiliation of it all, until her tears fall upon the field where the fighting has now ended.

‘I am ashamed,’ she confides.
'Be still, my daughter,' replies Saturn. 'Mars has had his way and his knight has got what he wants. But you will shortly be comforted, I shall stake my head on it.'

Blaring trumpets, the raucous noise of singing and the shouts and cries of heralds sound out joyfully in celebration of Arcite’s victory. But listen, pause for a moment, for a miracle is about to unfold. Arcite has taken off his helmet in order to show his jubilant face and is riding his warhorse across the entire breadth of the arena, his head turned in adoration towards Emily. She returns his gaze in a friendly way (for women, in general, can swiftly accommodate themselves to any turn of fortune) and her smile warms his heart. But suddenly, out of the ground rises an infernal fury, sent by Pluto at the request of Saturn.

Arcite’s horse reared in terror, tried to turn and in doing so stumbled and staggered sideways. Before he could do anything, Arcite was flung out of the saddle onto the ground. He landed head first and lay as though he was dead, his chest ruptured by the saddle where his horse’s weight had caught him. He lay there as black as coal, his face was so bruised.

Quickly, he was carried away with immense grief and concern to Theseus’s palace, where they carefully removed his armour and took him swiftly to a comfortable bed. He was still conscious and able to speak, and called continually for Emily.

Theseus made his way back to Athens, followed by a great host, in splendour and great solemnity; but despite this unfortunate accident, he did not want proceedings to lose their element of festival. Men were of the opinion that Arcite would live and that he should fully recover. And furthermore, with equal pleasure it was announced that nobody had died during the tournament, although there were many who had been injured and one in particular who had received a lance right through his breastbone. Ointments, as well as objects of mystery and words of magic were applied to wounds and to broken bones. Infusions of herbs, and especially sage, were prepared and drunk, for every knight wished to retain the use of his limbs.

Theseus comforted and honoured the foreign knights and made merry with them all until long into the night. There was no ill-feeling or malice now, it was all viewed simply as a jousting contest, where falling off your horse is just a part of the game, as is being led away from the fighting against your will by twenty knights and being carried head, foot and toe and having your horse chased away with sticks by yeomen and boys, and even this is not considered a disgrace. Duke Theseus requested that there should be an end to all hostilities and gave every knight a gift that befitted his status. The feast lasted for three days, then Theseus escorted all his guests out of Athens and they all took the shortest route home. There was nothing to hear but: ‘Farewell! Have a good day!’

But I shall now turn to Palamon and Arcite. Arcite’s chest began to swell as the underlying injury grew worse. Despite the attention of physicians, his blood became infected and festered in his body, such that neither blood-letting nor herbal medicines had any
effect. Their expulsive properties were not enough to drain the poison. The vesicles in his lungs began to fill with fluid and every muscle in his chest became bloated with puss and corruption. Neither drugs to induce vomiting nor laxatives to force poisons out from the other end had any effect. This region of his body was nearly destroyed and all natural healing had abandoned it; and where nature has given up, one can only say: ‘Farewell!’ and carry the man to a church. Recognising that he was going to die, Arcite sent for Emily, and his cousin Palamon.

‘It is impossible,’ said Arcite, bravely, ‘to describe the sadness that I feel. My lady, you whom I love the most, I can say nothing except that I shall serve you even in death. Alas, the agony, the heartache that I have suffered because of you, for so many years. Alas, my death! My Emily, we must now part, queen of my heart, my wife, my destroyer. What is this world? What does a man hope to find, now with his love, now alone in his cold grave without any company? Farewell my sweet foe, my Emily. Hold me gently in your arms, for his love, he who died for us, and listen to me.

‘I have fought with my cousin Palamon for a long while, because of jealousy over you, but may Jupiter guide me to use all honesty when I speak about the knighthood, the wisdom, humility, stature and honour of one who is more worthy to be loved by you than anybody else in this world, and that is Palamon, who adores you and will do so for the rest of his life. If ever you choose to marry, don’t forget Palamon.’

Then his speech began to fail him and a deathly cold rose from his feet into his chest until it overcame him, his arms went limp and a last flicker of sorrow and regret passed across his eyes before they went dim and he stopped breathing.

Arcite’s spirit changed its habitation and went to somewhere that I have never been, I could not tell you where, therefore I shall say no more. I am no theologian. There is nothing mentioned about souls in this story, nor have I any inclination to relate the opinions of those who do speculate upon where they go. Arcite is cold, may Mars guide his soul, and now I will speak of Emily.

Emily screamed and Palamon howled. Theseus took his sister-in-law in his arms and led her away from Arcite’s dead body. But what purpose will it serve if I take time to tell you how Emily wept night and day for Arcite? Wives endure such sorrow when they lose their husbands. Often, they either weep all the time or worse still, fall into such a deep depression that at last they die as well.

Everybody in the city, young and old, felt an immense sadness over the death of this Theban and everybody wept. So great a show of grief was not seen even when Hector was brought back into Troy, freshly-slain. Alas, such scratching of cheeks and tearing of hair!

No one could console Theseus except for his father Aegeus, who knew this world’s transmutations, as he had seen it change over the years – joy after woe and woe after joy. He explained to his son: ‘Just as no man has ever died,’ he said, ‘who has not lived on this
Earth at least for a while, so in the same way, no man has ever lived, who has not died at some time. This world is nothing but a sorrowful thoroughfare and we are all pilgrims, travelling to and fro. Death is an end of every worldly trouble.’ And he said a lot more to this effect as well, in order to urge the people, wisely, to moderate their grief and to be reassured.

Theseus, with great care and energy, turned his attention to determining where Arcite’s tomb should be built, so that it would receive due honour. At last he decided that it would be appropriate to put it where Arcite and Palamon had first fought one another for Emily’s love, in that green woodland clearing where Arcite had first given expression to the full fire of his passion. He thought that it would be right to build the funeral pyre there, so the command went out to hack and hew the ancient oaks and to gather the wood into bundles for burning. Officers ran swiftly to their horses to see that this was done. Theseus then had cloth-of-gold spread over a bier, the finest that he had, clad Arcite’s body in the same costly material, put white gloves on his hands, placed a crown of green laurel upon his head and placed a sharp, bright sword in his hand. He left Arcite’s face uncovered and wept at the sight of him lying there. And so that everybody could pay their respects, as soon as it was daylight, Theseus had Arcite’s body brought into the main hall of his palace. The sounds of weeping and lamentation soon became deafening. Palamon entered, with his young, wispy beard and his long hair covered in ashes, dressed in black clothes, tear-stained, followed by Emily who wept more loudly that anyone.

In order that the funeral should bring the greatest honour to Arcite’s memory, Theseus next instructed that three horses should be brought, clad in shining steel and draped in Arcite’s heraldic arms. Upon each of these great, white horses sat a knight, one bearing Arcite’s shield, another bearing his lance high in the air and a third his bow, a gold case with his arrows and everything else pertaining to archery fitted out in gold. Then, Arcite’s bier was carried upon the shoulders of some of Theseus’s noblest knights, who made their way slowly forwards with measured pace and red, tear-stained eyes along the main street of Athens, which was adorned with black flags hanging high, then out towards the woodland and the clearing. On the right side of the bier walked old Aegeas, on the other side, his son Theseus, carrying golden vessels filled with milk and honey, blood and wine. Palamon followed behind with a great company, then Emily, who carried the fire, as was the custom at the time, in order to perform the crucial act.

The green boughs lying at the top of the pile of wood for the fire seemed to touch heaven. No expense had been spared and it was more than a hundred feet wide at the base. Cartloads of straw had first been placed onto the ground. But exactly how the bonfire was then built up and the names of all the trees used to make it, such as oak, fir, birch and aspen, alder, holm oak and poplar, willow, elm, plane and ash, box, chestnut, lime and laurel, maple, thorn, beech, hazel and yew, or how they were all felled, you shall not get from me. Nor shall I describe how the nymphs and fawns were all scampering about, having had their peace, contentment and homes destroyed by the woodman’s axe, nor how the birds and animals had all fled in fear when their nests and burrows were oblit-
erated, nor how aghast was the ground to see the sunlight for the first time in decades when the trees that had been growing there were brutally cut down, nor how the bonfire was laid first with straw, then with dry sticks split into three, then with green branches, then with cloth-of-gold and gemstones, garlands of flowers, myrrh and incense to perfume the air, nor how Arcite lay amongst all of this, nor the fine clothes and objects that covered and surrounded him, nor how Emily, as was the custom, placed the fire that she had been carrying into the pyre, nor now she fainted when men fanned the flames into a conflagration.

I shall not tell you what she said either, nor what she thought, nor what jewels were thrown into the fire as it burned ever more fiercely, nor how some threw their shields into the conflagration, some their spears, some the very clothes that they were wearing, cups full of wine, milk and blood, thrown into a fire that now burned uncontrollably, nor how these Greeks in a huge company rode anticlockwise three times around the flames, roaring with their voices and clashing their spears together, nor the three shouts that the ladies cried out, nor how Emily was then led home heartbroken, nor how Arcite is now burnt to cold ashes.

The funeral vigil lasted all night, but I will not describe the funeral games that were performed the next day, nor who it was who wrestled best, naked and covered in oil, nor who won the contests, nor who lost them, nor how they all returned to Athens when the games were over. I will get quickly to the point of my story and bring it to a close.

Over the years, the passage of time lessened the grief and the tears. By general agreement, a parliament was called by the Greeks in Athens, to discuss certain issues. One of the main topics for discussion was the idea of forming alliances with other countries and city states and bringing Thebes under Athens’ direct control. To this end, Theseus sent for Palamon. And although he had no idea why he was being summoned, and still wearing black, Palamon dutifully arrived in Athens. Then Theseus sent for Emily.

When they were all assembled, and a hush had descended, Theseus waited for a moment, let the sadness show in his eyes, sighed, and then said:

‘The prime mover of the heavens, when he first fashioned the love that binds the world, knowingly changed the universe, for with that beautiful chain of love he bound together the fire, the water, the air and the land, so strongly that they could not flee from one another. This same prince and prime mover established a predetermined duration to everything that lives in this wretched world, and beyond these days it may not extend, although a man may certainly succeed in shortening his days, as experience shows. But let me explain what I mean.

‘People may infer from these laws that the prime mover is constant and eternal. Men may understand as well, unless they are fools, that every part derives from his whole. For nature has not been created out of a part of something, or only a portion of it, but from a thing which is whole and perfect and unchanging, which has descended until it has
become corruptible. Therefore, through his generous wisdom, he has so arranged matters that all the different kinds of things and their evolving histories shall endure through succession, and not be everlasting. The truth of this needs only to be observed. The oak, that takes such a long time to grow from an acorn into a tree and has such a long life, is wasted and lifeless at the end. Even the paving stones under our feet are slowly cracked and broken and trampled into dust. Rivers dry up. Great cities flourish and then lie in ruins. Everything has an end, and men and women are the same. They must necessarily die, either in their youth or in their old age. This applies to a king as well as a page. Some will die in their beds, others in the sea, some out in the open fields. There's nothing we can do about it. We all go the same way in the end. Everything must die.

‘Who can possibly be responsible for all this but Jupiter, the king, prince and ultimate cause of all things? He returns everything back into his own marvellous fountainhead from which it was derived, and there is no creature on Earth who can gain anything by struggling against this. So it is wise, I think, to make a virtue out of necessity, to accept in good part what we cannot escape from and which is coming to us all; for whoever complains is a fool, and a rebel to the prime mover of everything. Certainly, a man derives most honour when he dies in the flower of his excellence and can be sure of his good name. He has done no dishonour to his friend, nor to himself, and his friend should be glad that his death has taken place under these happy circumstances, rather than that he has died an old, forgotten nobody. It is better, if you hope for fame, to die when your reputation is at its zenith. To argue against this is just obstinacy.

‘So why do we complain and feel sad when good Arcite, who was the flower of chivalry, departs with such great honour from the foul prison of this life? Why does his cousin here still wear black and grieve for him? And why does his wife?

‘Would Arcite thank them? No, God knows, those who think so offend both his soul and themselves as well, and yet they persist in this. So what can I say in conclusion, other than that, after sorrow we should he merry, and thank Jupiter for all his grace. Before we all depart, therefore, I propose that out of two sorrows we make one perfect joy. The greatest sadness can be a starting point for healing and a new beginning.

‘Sister-in-law,’ said Theseus. ‘I am entirely of the opinion, and in agreement with the advice of my parliament, that Palamon, your gentle knight, who adores you with all his heart and all his strength, and has done so since he first set eyes upon you, shall have your pity and your compassion and that you will take him to be your husband. Give me your hand, for this is our agreement. Show us your feminine pity. He is a king’s nephew, by God! But even if he was a poor bachelor knight, since he has loved you for so many years and been through so much pain because of you, it would be right for you to show
mercy upon him now, for mercy outweighs all other virtues.’

Then Theseus turned to Palamon: ‘I don’t believe I need to use a great many words in order for you to agree to this. Come here, and take your lady by the hand.’

Palamon and Emily were married at once, in the presence of all the nobility of Athens, with beautiful music, song and all the joy in the world.

May God, who made this world, send Palamon his love, for he has surely earned it. Palamon is now in bliss and contentment. He loves Emily so tenderly and serves her so courteously that there is never any word of jealousy between the two of them, nor any discord at all.

So ends the story of Palamon and Emily. God save this fair company. Amen!