Summary & Analysis of The Knight’s Tale

Summary

Part I: Duke Theseus returns from overthrowing Scythia with his new wife, Hippolyta, and her sister, Emilie. Outside Athens, he meets a band of weeping women and learns that the tyrant Creon has murdered their husbands and dishonors the dead by leaving them unburied. Incensed, Theseus quickly overthrows Creon and restores the Theban dead to the women for ceremonial burying. After the destruction of Creon’s forces, booty hunters find two young knights (Palamon and Arcite) who are not quite dead. Theseus decides against executing the knights and instead imprisons them with no hope of ransom.

One morning several years later, Palamon sees the beautiful Emilie wandering about in her garden and cries out in pain. Arcite peers from the tower window and, upon seeing the fair Emilie, proclaims his own love for her. Because both knights claim their love for Emilie, their friendship gives way to hostility. About this time, a friend to both Theseus and Arcite arrives in Athens and secures Arcite’s release on the condition that he never return to Athens. Both knights think the other luckier: Palamon, because he can still see the beautiful Emilie; Arcite, because he can raise an army and capture her.

Part II: Back in Thebes, Arcite sinks into a lover’s melancholy. As a result of his lamenting, his physical appearance changes so much that he is no longer recognizable. One night, Mercury, the messenger of the gods, appears and orders him to return to Athens, which he does. Taking the name Philostrate, Arcite is employed as a page in the House of Emilie. Several years pass and Philostrate/Arcite rises to a high and respected position in the court of Theseus.

Meanwhile, Palamon languishes in the prison tower. At last, whether by chance or destiny, Palamon escapes and flees to a grove. That morning, by chance, Arcite goes to the same grove and, thinking himself alone, recites his history aloud, blaming Juno, Mars, and especially Venus for his plight. Palamon, who had not recognized Arcite, finally identifies him through his lament and leaps up, swearing to kill Arcite for his treachery and law breaking. The two arrange to duel the following day.

The next day, the men duel, dismissing all knightly ceremony. Theseus and his entourage arrive upon the bloody scene. Theseus stops the duel and rebukes the knights for their behavior. Palamon tells all, demanding that both be killed for their crimes, and Theseus swears that the wish will be granted, but he relents when the women of his company beg mercy for the knights. Theseus proposes a formal tournament in one year with each knight supported by one hundred knights. The winner of the joust will get the hand of Emilie.

Part III: At the end of the year, Arcite and Palamon, each at the head of one hundred knights, return to Athens for the joust. Theseus welcomes them all and entertains them in high fashion. On the evening before the battle, Palamon, Emilie, and Arcite pray. Palamon prays to Venus, goddess of love; Emilie prays to Diana, goddess of chastity; and Arcite prays to Mars, god of war. All receive a vision indicating that their prayers will be answered. The three prayers and resulting promises cause confusion in heaven until Saturn, god of destiny, promises that Palamon will win his love and Arcite will win the battle.

Part IV: The battle begins, and after much pageantry and heroic fighting, Palamon is badly wounded and taken from the field. Arcite is declared the winner. Saturn sends a fury from Pluto to make Arcite’s horse shy. Wounded, Arcite is carried to Theseus’ palace. As he lies dying, Arcite acknowledges that he knows no person better than Palamon and begs Emilie to accept Palamon as her husband. Arcite dies and Theseus arranges a great funeral for him. After a long period of mourning, Palamon and Emilie are married and live out their lives in "a love unbroken."

Analysis

Part I: The Knight’s Tale perfectly fits the Knight himself: That is, he chooses a story filled with knights, love, honor, chivalry, and adventure. The emphasis in the story is upon rules of honor and proper conduct. Theseus, like the Knight himself, is an embodiment of the ideal Human Justice — reason.

Theseus' two recent wars — first with the Amazons, a band of fierce women warriors ruled by Hyppolyta, and then with Creon, an unyielding tyrant — focus attention on two different kinds of social disorder. Amazon society is
basically good but needs the rule of male rationality. A female ruler, such as Hippolyta (characterized as "faire" and "hardy"), represents social disorder. Theseus (characterized by "wisdom" and "Chivalry") rules over Athens, the center of learning and justice, and thus he must subdue Hippolyta. Creon's tyranny, on the other hand, represents a worse form of social disorder: Creon's base lower nature (filled with anger and iniquity) has usurped the place of his reason. The two wars are also significant in another way. They show the ideal knight's relationship with women. Theseus first conquers and chastises and then marries and rules Hippolyta. Then later, in his battle with Creon, he lends his masculine strength to the women of Thebes who cannot help themselves.

The scene between Arcite and Palamon when they see Emilie walking in the garden below their locked tower prison is one of the most lyrical and elevated scenes in all the Tales. Chaucer's conventional description of Emilie uses a medieval poetic convention of imagistic associations: The lady is like a flower "that fairer was to see / Than is the lily upon his stalk green." She is a beautiful creature of nature, at one with the garden and the spirit of May, but like nature itself, she has a radiance that suggests something beyond nature: "She sung like a heavenly Angel."

In the senseless struggle between Arcite and Palamon, both complain of their fortune. And then suddenly, Fortune changes Arcite's position. Through the earthly love of Perotheus and the compassion of Theseus, Arcite is released, but he is not pleased. In his formal speech loaded with dramatic irony, he wishes he had never known Perotheus and envies Palamon the "paradise" of his prison where he can see the beauteous Emilie every day. His thoughts cannot rise above his mere physical nature; thus, Arcite falls into the sin of despair — or, in medieval terms, the belief that God is merciless — and he rages against Divine Providence and Fortune, which have robbed him of the sight of Emilie.

**Part II:** In addition to furthering the action of the Knight's story, this section reinforces the traits of each of the main characters. Theseus, in acquiescing to the women's pleas, illustrates that his defining trait is his reason: Despite his own passion (anger, in this case), he is moved to rational compassion. As absurd as the knights' behavior may be, Theseus understands it because he himself has been a servant of love. Similarly, in his lament, Arcite illustrates that he is blind to his good fortune and primarily embroiled in physical matters. Palamon, in demanding that both he and Arcite be killed for their crimes, demonstrates his own willingness to live (and potentially die) by the chivalric code.

The passage also highlights several conventions and customs valued by medieval society. For example, when Arcite returns to Athens, he is "al allone, save only a squier." His condition of being "all alone" is significant in terms of medieval society. No person of significance would travel all alone. (Note that the Narrator-Knight speaks repeatedly of the social significance of traveling with companions or in a "compaignye.") Arcite's "aloneness" allows Theseus to pity him and make him one of his "company," thus Arcite is close to Emilie.

Another important convention of medieval society was the purpose and form of the chivalric code, a code of conduct that defined not only proper forms of behavior but also appropriate interactions among people. That the two knights — ideally bound to chivalrous conduct — fight like animals and not men (they are compared to lions, tigers, bears, and boars) indicates how far they have fallen from the knightly idea. When Theseus stops their duel, he rebukes the knights for their unlawful ceremony and, true to his portrayal in this tale, reimposes the behavioral and social code by proposing an alternative to lawless dueling: a formal tournament in one year with each knight supported by one hundred knights.

Additionally, the passage further illustrates the role of men and women in medieval culture. Women are expected to appeal to, rely on, and acquiesce to men's strength, wisdom, and compassion. Men are expected to rule, maintain order, and use reason above other emotions. Thus we have the women's pleas for mercy for the knights and Theseus' acquiescence. Similarly, the decision regarding who shall win Emilie's hand is the man's, not Emilie's.

**Part III:** The descriptions of the altars, the stadium, and the magnificent feasts are tedious for the modern reader in the same way that the descriptions of shields and armor in the Homeric epics are static and dull for the modern reader, but these descriptions carried a great appeal for the audience of that time because they reinforce the notion of an ideal, ordered society. The description of the feasts shows a society in which the king justly reigns over subjects. The description of the altars implies that the gods are still viable in terms of effecting people's behaviors and rewarding pleas. The stadium symbolizes structure of an ordered society.
The prayers of each of the three principals are also consistent with their individual personalities:

- Palamon prays only for love and thus his prayer is to Venus, goddess of love, asking not that he win the battle or earn fame, but only that he somehow win Emilie or else die by Arcite's spear.
- Emilie prays before the altar of Diana, asking first that her chastity be preserved, and then, if her first wish is not possible, to let the knight who most loves her win.
- Arcite prays to Mars, god of war, for victory. He believes that only force can win Emilie's love.

**Part IV:** Here the Knight turns to a description of the banquet and the elaborate decorations of the stadium and the rituals connected with the funeral at the end of the tale. This type of richness and magnificence would appeal to a man of such distinction as the Knight, with its special emphasis on form, ritual, and code of behavior — elements upon which knighthood is based.

In this tale, the Knight (or Chaucer) implies that the lives of men are influenced by what seems to be chance but, in actuality, is a Prime Mover (God) who controls the ostensibly chance occurrences of the world. The women at the beginning of the tale bemoan the harshness of fortune. By chance, Emilie walks beneath the prison. Later, again by chance, Duke Perotheus recognizes Arcite. Arcite is employed by Emilie and later accidentally meets Palamon. Chance also brings Theseus to the same plot where Arcite and Palamon are fighting. Finally, the god of chance (or fortune or destiny) determines how the story will be solved. The universe, then, is not as incoherent and disorderly as might first be expected. Behind all the acts of the universe is a logic or controlling purpose, even though man might not understand it.

What is central in *The Knight's Tale* is a concern with the right ordering of the elements that make up a person's total soul — essentially a concern with justice. A person who has control of his or her emotions and reason is a person who acts honorably in dealing with others. Early in the tale, for example, both Palamon and Arcite fall hopelessly in love with Emilie, and their love (emotion) for her controls their behavior. In such a state of emotional disarray, their reason fails them and hostilities ensue. Only when Theseus, symbol of right reason and justice, intervenes in the knights' duel, does reason, synonymous with justice, again reign. Note, too, that both Palamon and Arcite receive the reward that they seek, albeit ironically: Palamon wins Emilie's love but loses the battle to Arcite; Arcite wins the battle but loses his life and thus Emilie. Out of this mayhem, justice is reestablished, and each man gets what he asks for. The two tales that follow (*The Miller's Tale* and *The Reeve's Tale*) develop these themes on a baser, or lower, level.

**Glossary**

*Capaneus* proud, vain man so disdainful that he boasted that not even Jove could stop him. He took part in the war to restore Oedipus' oldest son to the throne of Thebes.

*Minotaur* a monster with a man's body and a bull's head.

*Juno* the Roman queen of the gods.

*Citherea* the residence of Venus, goddess of Love.

*Narcissus, Solomon, Hercules, Medea, Circe, Turnus, and King Croesus* figures, each of whom had in some way been trapped by love, used as decoration on the walls of the altar to Venus.

*Caesar, Nero, Mark Anthony, and Mars in a chariot* figures, all of whom had functioned in wars, used as decoration on the altar to Mars.

*Callisto, Dana (Daphne), and Atalanta* figures, all of whom avoided — with varying degrees of success — marriage, used as decoration on the altar to Diana.

*Galophy* probably meaning the Valley of Gargaphia where Actaeon, who saw the goddess Diana naked, was turned into a stag and torn to pieces by his own hounds.