

Characters in Chaucer

PALAMON

 (in *The Knight's Tale*) (Emotional)

Overview *The Knight's Tale* is a vignette (or highly verbal video) of the kind of situation that might have arisen in mediaeval Europe. Chaucer was of course a pre-modern urbanite, a diplomat and bureaucrat, and a sophisticate around town when he decided to turn to a series of tales, *The Canterbury Tales*. In those tales he could draw special attention to lifestyles which were trend-setting in the 12th and 13th centuries: *The Knight's Tale* goes to the heart of those already romanticized cultures, a century plus in Chaucer's past, with their traits of courtly love and chivalry.

Character Palamon is one of two knightly cousins, who find themselves imprisoned in the palace cell block of Lord Theseus of Athens, after the victory of that Lord over King Creon. Palamon (like his cousin) is in part a generic chivalrous knight, like his cousin, but also in part a figure out of courtly love, profoundly devoted to his *bien-aimée*. Circumstances place Palamon at a unique angle to the main narrative—he remains longer in prison than his cousin—and he prevails (thanks to divine intervention) in the battle to win Theseus' daughter Emily.

Desolate 'And Palamon, and his friend Arcita, are in a tower in misery and grief...' Thus Palamon appears to us—a figure viewed very much from the outside, little exploration of his unique perceptions or attitudes. Not long before, the bodies of these two cousins had been extracted from a pile of nearly dead warriors, after Theseus' victory over the forces of Creon. Throughout the start of the Tale, the two cousins are almost indistinguishable: two noble knights in deep trouble.

Amazed Palamon walks disconsolately through the chambers of his palace prison. He bemoans his fate, and sees no way ever to escape from his wretched lot. As he laments, however, his eyes fall on a beautiful woman—'I don't know if she's woman or goddess'—and he emits a cry 'as though he had been bitten to the heart.' His cry is an expression of amazement and passion, and at once he falls on his knees before the goddess Venus, begging for some way to escape from prison.

Outraged As Palamon swoons, at the sight of the gorgeous daughter of King Theseus, Arcita too looks out the window, and exclaims, just like his cousin, that he has never before seen such beauty. At this statement, Palamon goes wild: 'I loved her first and told you my desire,' says Palamon to his cousin, thereby introducing his fidelity to the chivalric tradition, which dictates that one knight is sworn not to interfere with the love relations of a fellow knight. Palamon belongs deeply to his code. He is genuinely outraged.

Jealous Not much later, Arcita is freed from prison—an old friend of Theseus intervenes on his behalf—on the condition that he will leave Theseus' realm forever. When Palamon learns that his cousin has been freed, 'the fire of jealousy awoke within his breast,' for he imagined that now Arcita would be in a position to get in touch with Emily. He bemoans man's wretched fate, and the indifference of destiny to human desire. He feels he will never again breathe freely in the outside air.

Parallels Knightly heroes abound in mediaeval literature—and into the Renaissance, where a gentleman like Sir Walter Raleigh shone like a latter day knight—courteous and brave. Indeed Beowulf himself extends the vital timeframe for the knights, intent as he was on expelling gross evil from Britain. The great names in literary knightliness cluster around the Chaucerian period, and would include Lancelot and Parzifal, questers for the Grail and the purity of Christ's example, or Roland or El Cid, whom Romance epic transformed out of history into universality.

Discussion questions

Do we sympathize with Palamon's emotions, or simply observe them from the outside?

What is Chaucer's attitude toward the chivalric struggle between the two cousins? Is he ironic—looking back on the mediaeval world, which he is no longer fully living in?

What is the trigger for Palamon's 'love at first sight'? Is he simply stir-crazy, or is he overwhelmed by beauty, the way Dante was by Beatrice?