

The Portrait of the Knight

From *The General Prologue*, lines 43–78

A KNIGHT ther was, and that a worthy man,
 That fro the time that he first bigan
 To riden out, he loved chivalrie,
 Trouthe and honour, fredom and curteisie.
 Ful worthy was he in his lordes werre,
 And therto hadde he riden, no man ferre,
 As wel in cristendom as in hethenesse,
 And evere honoured for his worthiness.
 At Alisaundre he was whan it was wonne.
 Ful ofte time he hadde the bord bigonne
 Aboven alle nacions in Pruce;
 In Lettow hadde he reysed and in Ruce,
 No Cristen man so ofte of his degree.
 In Gernade at the seege eek hadde he be
 Of Algezir, and riden in Belmarye.
 At Lyeys was he and at Satalye,
 Whan they were wonne; and in the Grete See
 At many a noble armee hadde he be.
 At mortal batailles hadde he been fiftene,
 And foughten for oure feith at Tramissene
 In listes thries, and ay slain his foo.
 This ilke worthy knight hadde been also
 Sometime with the lord of Palatye
 Again another hethen in Turkye.
 And everemoore he hadde a sovereyn prys;
 And though that he were worthy, he was wys,
 And of his port as meeke as is a maide.
 He nevere yet no vileinye ne saide
 In al his lif unto no maner wight.
 He was a verray, parfit gentil knight.

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Geoffrey Chaucer , Edited by A. C. Spearing
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The Knight's Tale

But, for to tellen yow of his array,
His hors were goode, but he was nat gay.
Of fustian he wered a gipon
Al bismotered with his habergeon,
For he was late ycome from his viage,
And wente for to doon his pilgrimage.

The Knight's Tale

Part I

Whilom, as olde stories tellen us,
 Ther was a duc that highte Theseus;
 Of Atthenes he was lord and governour,
 And in his time swich a conquerour
 That gretter was ther noon under the sonne.
 Ful many a riche contree hadde he wonne;
 What with his wisdom and his chivalrie,
 He conquered al the regne of Femenye,
 That whilom was ycleped Scithia,
 And weddede the queene Ypolita, 10
 And broghte hire hoom with him in his contree
 With muchel glorie and greet solempnitee,
 And eek hir yonge suster Emelye.
 And thus with victorie and with melodye
 Lete I this noble duc to Atthenes ride,
 And al his hoost in armes him beside.
 And certes, if it nere to long to heere,
 I wolde have toold yow fully the manere
 How wonnen was the regne of Femenye
 By Theseus and by his chivalrye; 20
 And of the grete bataille for the nones
 Bitwixen Atthenes and Amazones;
 And how asseged was Ypolita,
 The faire, hardy queene of Scithia;
 And of the feste that was at hir weddinge,
 And of the tempest at hir hoom-cominge;
 But al that thing I moot as now forbere.
 I have, God woot, a large feeld to ere,
 And wayke been the oxen in my plough. 30
 The remenant of the tale is long ynough.

The Knight's Tale

I wol nat letten eek noon of this route;
 Lat every felawe telle his tale aboute,
 And lat se now who shal the soper winne;
 And ther I lefte, I wol ayeyn biginne.

This duc of whom I make mencion, Whan he was come almoost unto the toun,
 In al his wele and in his mooste pride,
 He was war, as he caste his eye aside,
 Where that ther kneled in the heighe weye 40
 A compaignye of ladies, tweye and tweye,
 Ech after oother, clad in clothes blake;
 But swich a cry and swich a wo they make
 That in this world nis creature livinge
 That herde swich another waymentinge;
 And of this cry they nolde nevere stenten
 Til they the reines of his bridel henten.

‘What folk been ye, that at myn hom-cominge
 Perturben so my feste with cryinge?’
 Quod Theseus. ‘Have ye so greet envye 50
 Of myn honour, that thus compleyne and crye?
 Or who hath yow misboden or offended?
 And telleth me if it may been amended,
 And why that ye been clothed thus in blak.’

The eldeste lady of hem alle spak,
 Whan she hadde swowned with a deedly cheere,
 That it was routhe for to seen and heere.
 She seyde: ‘Lord, to whom Fortune hath given
 Victorie, and as a conqueror to liven,
 Nat greveth us youre glorie and youre honour, 60
 But we biseken mercy and socour.
 Have mercy on oure wo and oure distresse.
 Som drope of pitee, thurgh thy gentilless, e,
 Upon us wrecched wommen lat thou falle.
 For certes, lord, ther is noon of us alle

That she ne hath been a duchesse or a queene.
 Now be we caytyves, as it is wel seene,
 Thanked be Fortune and hire false wheel,
 That noon estaat assureth to be weel.
 And certes, lord, to abiden youre presence,
 Heere in this temple of the goddesse Clemence 70
 We han ben waitinge al this fourtenight.
 Now help us, lord, sith it is in thy might.

I, wrecche, which that wepe and waile thus,
 Was whilom wyf to king Cappaneus,
 That starf at Thebes – cursed be that day! –
 And alle we that been in this array
 And maken al this lamentacioun,
 We losten alle oure housbondes at that toun
 Whil that the seege therabout lay.
 And yet now the olde Creon, weylaway! 80
 That lord is now of Thebes the citee,
 Fulfild of ire and of iniquitee,
 He, for despit and for his tirannye,
 To do the dede bodies vileynye
 Of alle oure lordes whiche that been yslawe,
 Hath alle the bodies on an heep ydrawe,
 And wol nat suffren hem, by noon assent,
 Neither to been yburied nor ybrent,
 But maketh houndes ete hem in despit.

And with that word, withouten moore respit, 90
 They fillen gruf and criden pitously,
 ‘Have on us wrecched wommen som mercy,
 And lat oure sorwe sinken in thyn herte.’

This gentil duc doun from his courser sterte
 With herte pitous, whan he herde hem speke.
 Him thoughte that his herte wolde breke,
 Whan he saugh hem so pitous and so maat,
 That whilom weren of so greet estaat;

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And in his armes he hem alle up hente, 100
 And hem conforteth in ful good entente,
 And swoor his ooth, as he was trewe knight,
 He wolde doon so ferforthly his might
 Upon the tiraunt Creon hem to wreke,
 That al the peple of Grece sholde speke
 How Creon was of Theseus yserved
 As he that hadde his deeth ful wel deserved.
 And right anoon, withouten moore abood,
 His baner he desplayeth, and forth rood 110
 To Thebes-ward, and al his hoost biside.
 No neer Atthenes wolde he go ne ride,
 Ne take his ese fully half a day,
 But onward on his wey that night he lay,
 And sente anon Ypolita the queene
 And Emelye, hir yonge suster sheene,
 Unto the toun of Atthenes to dwelle,
 And forth he rit; ther is namoore to telle.

The rede statue of Mars, with spere and targe,
 So shineth in his white baner large
 That alle the feeldes gliteren up and doun; 120
 And by his baner born is his penoun
 Of gold ful riche, in which ther was ybete
 The Minotaur, which that he slough in Crete.
 Thus rit this duc, thus rit this conquerour,
 And in his hoost of chivalrie the flour,
 Til that he cam to Thebes and alighte
 Faire in a feeld, ther as he thoughte to fighte.
 But shortly for to speken of this thing,
 With Creon, which that was of Thebes king,
 He faught, and slough him manly as a knight
 In pleyn bataille, and putte the folk to flight; 130
 And by assaut he wan the citee after,
 And rente adoun bothe wall and sparre and rafter;

And to the ladies he restored again
 The bones of hir housbondes that were slain,
 To doon obsequies, as was tho the gyse.
 But it were al to longe for to devyse
 The grete clamour and the waymentinge
 That the ladies made at the brenninge
 Of the bodies, and the grete honour
 That Theseus, the noble conquerour, 140
 Dooth to the ladies whan they from him wente;
 But shortly for to telle is myn entente.

Whan that this worthy duc, this Theseus,
 Hath Creon slain, and wonne Thebes thus,
 Stille in that feeld he took al night his reste,
 And dide with al the contree as him leste.

To ransake in the taas of bodies dede,
 Hem for to strepe of harneys and of wede,
 The pilours diden bisynesse and cure
 After the bataille and disconfiture. 150

And so bifel that in the taas they founde,
 Thurgh-girt with many a grevous bloody wounde,
 Two yonge knightes ligginge by and by,
 Bothe in oon armes, wroght ful richely,
 Of whiche two Arcita highte that oon,
 And that oother knight highte Palamon.
 Nat fully quyke, ne fully dede they were,
 But by hir cote-armures and by hir gere
 The heraudes knewe hem best in special 160
 As they that weren of the blood roial
 Of Thebes, and of sustren two yborn.
 Out of the taas the pilours han hem torn,
 And han hem caried softe unto the tente
 Of Theseus; and he ful soone hem sente
 To Athenes, to dwellen in prisoun
 Perpetuelly – he nolde no raunsoun.

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And whan this worthy duc hath thus ydon,
 He took his hoost, and hoom he rit anon
 With laurer crowned as a conquerour; 170
 And ther he liveth in joye and in honour
 Terme of his lyf; what nedeth wordes mo?
 And in a tour, in angwissh and in wo,
 This Palamon and his felawe Arcite
 For everemoore; ther may no gold hem quite.
 This passeth yeer by yeer and day by day,
 Till it fil ones, in a morwe of May,
 That Emelye, that fairer was to sene
 Than is the lilie upon his stalke grene,
 And fressher than the May with floures newe— 180
 For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe,
 I noot which was the finer of hem two—
 Er it were day, as was hir wone to do,
 She was arisen and al redy dight;
 For May wole have no slogardie a-night.
 The sesoun priketh every gentil herte,
 And maketh him out of his slep to sterte,
 And seith 'Arys and do thyn observaunce.'
 This maked Emelye have remembraunce
 To doon honour to May, and for to rise.
 Yclothed was she fressh, for to devyse: 190
 Hir yelow heer was broided in a tresse
 Bihinde hir bak, a yerde long, I gesse.
 And in the gardyn, at the sonne upriste,
 She walketh up and doun, and as hire liste
 She gadereth floures, party white and rede,
 To make a subtil gerland for hire hede;
 And as an aungel hevenisshly she soong.
 The grete tour, that was so thikke and stroong,
 Which of the castel was the chief dongeoun
 (Ther as the knightes weren in prisoun 200

Of which I tolde yow and tellen shal)
 Was evene joinant to the gardyn wal
 Ther as this Emelye hadde hir pleyinge.
 Bright was the sonne and cleer that morweninge,
 And Palamoun, this woful prisoner,
 As was his wone, by leve of his gayler
 Was risen and romed in a chambre an heigh,
 In which he al the noble citee seigh,
 And eek the gardyn, ful of braunches grene,
 Ther as this fresshe Emelye the shene 210
 Was in hire walk, and romed up and down.
 This sorweful prisoner, this Palamoun,
 Goth in the chambre rominge to and fro,
 And to himself compleyninge of his wo.
 That he was born, ful ofte he seyde, 'allas!
 And so bifel, by aventure or cas,
 That thurgh a window, thikke of many a barre
 Of iren greet and square as any sparre,
 He cast his eye upon Emelya,
 And therwithal he bleynte and cride, 'A!' 220
 As though he stongen were unto the herte.
 And with that cry Arcite anon up sterte,
 And seyde, 'Cosin myn, what eyleth thee,
 That art so pale and deedly on to see?
 Why cridestow? Who hath thee doon offence?
 For Goddes love, taak al in pacience
 Oure prisoun, for it may noon oother be.
 Fortune hath yeven us this adversitee.
 Som wikke aspect or disposicioun 230
 Of Saturne, by som constellacioun,
 Hath yeven us this, although we hadde it sworn;
 So stood the hevene whan that we were born.
 We moste endure it; this is the short and plain.'
 This Palamon answerde and seyde again:

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'Cosin, for sothe, of this opinioun
 Thow hast a veyn imaginacioun.
 This prison caused me nat for to crye,
 But I was hurt right now thurghout myn ye
 Into myn herte, that wol my bane be. 240
 The fairnesse of that lady that I see
 Yond in the gardyn romen to and fro
 Is cause of al my crying and my wo.
 I noot wher she be womman or goddesse,
 But Venus is it soothly, as I gesse.
 And therwithal on knees down he fil,
 And seyde: 'Venus, if it be thy wil
 Yow in this gardyn thus to transfigure
 Bifore me, sorweful, wrecched creature,
 Out of this prisoun help that we may scapen. 250
 And if so be my destinee be shapen
 By eterne word to dyen in prisoun,
 Of oure linage have som compassioun,
 That is so lowe ybrought by tyrannye.'
 And with that word Arcite gan espye
 Wher as this lady romed to and fro,
 And with that sighte hir beautee hurte him so,
 That, if that Palamon was wounded sore,
 Arcite is hurt as muche as he, or moore.
 And with a sigh he seyde pitously:
 'The fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly 260
 Of hire that rometh in the yonder place,
 And but I have hir mercy and hir grace,
 That I may seen hire atte leeste weye,
 I nam but deed; ther nis namoore to seye.'
 This Palamon, whan he tho wordes herde,
 Dispitously he looked and answerde,
 'Wheither seistow this in earnest or in pley?'
 'Nay,' quod Arcite, 'in earnest, by my fey!'