LOVERS’ KNOT
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Three One-Act Plays
based on the Canterbury Tales
by Geoffrey Chaucer

for Sixth or Seventh Grade

by

Roberto Trostli

The Hartsbrook School
193 Bay Road
Hadley, MA
(413) 586-1908
rtrostli@hartsbrook.org
Author’s note:

This play is one of a group of plays written for the classes I taught at the Rudolf Steiner School in New York from 1982–1991 and at The Hartsbrook School in Hadley, MA from 1991-1999. The theme of each play was chosen to address a particular class’s issues and interests, and the characters were rendered with specific students in mind.

When other teachers and classes have performed my plays, I have encouraged them to adapt or revise the play as necessary to derive the maximum pedagogical value from it. Other class’s performances have showed me artistic dimensions of my plays that I could not have imagined, and I have always been grateful to see that my work has taken on new life.

I have posted my plays on the Online Waldorf Library as Microsoft Word documents so that they can easily be downloaded and changed. I have purposely given few stage directions so that teachers and students will make the plays more their own.

Dear Colleagues: I hope that these plays will serve you well as inspiration, as a scaffold on which to build your own creation, or as a script to make your own. Please don’t hesitate to take whatever liberties you wish so that the play may serve you in your work. If you have questions, don’t hesitate to phone or email me.

Roberto Trostli

The Hartsbrook School
193 Bay Road
Hadley, MA 01035
(413) 586-1908
rtrostli@hartsbrook.org

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HEART'S DESIRE

Based on The Wife of Bath's Tale
by Geoffrey Chaucer

Cast of Characters: (in order of appearance)

Narrator
A Knight
A Maiden
First Lady
Second Lady
King Arthur
Queen Guinevere
Third Lady
Fourth Lady
Fifth Lady
A Hag
A Maiden

Narrator: It was in good king Arthur's time,
When noble knights served ladies fine,
There dwelt a young and lusty knight,
Who long had sought his love's delight.

One day as he went for a ride
Upon his charger fierce and strong,
A fair young maid he soon espied,
And for her love his heart did long.

Knight: Oh maid—

Narrator: Quoth he—

Knight: How long I've sought
For days, for weeks, for months and years,
But now I know 'twas not for naught
For I have found thee, it appears.

Come live with me and be my love
And we shall all the pleasures prove;
Thy heart's desire I will thee give
If thou wilt come with me to live.
Maiden: What rogue are you? How can you speak
Thus to a maiden pure and true?
I'm not the sort that you do seek
Begone, I say; goodbye, adieu.

Narrator: The more he begs, pleads, and insists,
The more the fair maid him resists,
But he can't bear to be refused
So force at last he tries to use.

Maiden: Remove your hands—

Narrator: The maiden cried—

Maiden: You brute! You beast! You wicked man!
For this foul deed you will be tried
For this you will most surely hang!

Narrator: Just then two ladies them approached,
And witnessing her grievous plight
The girl's assailant sore reproached
As back to court they dragged the knight.

First Lady: Shame! O shame! You wicked knight!

Second Lady: Such foul behavior is not right!

First Lady: You shame your kind by acting thus.

Second Lady: You're coming back to court with us.

(The Ladies take the Knight before King Arthur.)

King Arthur: What have we here? What man is this
Brought thus in shame before this court?

First Lady: A knight whose wooing went amiss
Which prompted him to evil sport.

Second Lady: All knightly glory, honor, truth
Is tainted by such deeds uncouth,

First Lady: A knight who maidens doth mistreat
Must never such base deeds repeat.

King Arthur: Thou speakest well, thou speakest true
So let us see what we can do:
(King Arthur thinks for a moment.)

Away with him! Off with his head!
Churls such as these are best off dead.

Queen Guinevere: Wait, worthy king, restrain thy hand,
Before thou punish force with force,
Let me suggest another course
Whereby his sins he may amend.

King Arthur: In courtly matters thou know'st best.
So let us hear what you suggest.

Narrator: What course is this? What can it be?
Thou dost not know? Neither do we.
What clever scheme has she contrived
To keep this lusty knight alive.

Queen Guinevere: Thy life be spared on this condition:
Return hence of thy own volition,
To honor all us ladies kind;
Thou hast a year and day to find
And come to tell us in this hall
What womenkind want most of all.

Knight: (to himself.)
Why this should not prove difficult,
If I some women but consult.

(to the queen.)

Thou hast my word, whate'er its worth
That unto thee I shall return,
To bring the answer I unearth,
For what all women truly yearn.

Narrator: What trick is this? What riddle thus?
What queenly quest has she bethought?
Who knows the answer? Don't ask us!
Let's hope his search won't come to naught.

(The Knight goes upon his way and encounters three ladies.)

Knight: Now let's begin: thou, thou, and thou
Praytell me what ye ladies now
In all the world would dearly choose
To be or have, to keep or lose.

(The ladies speak in an accelerating chorus.)
Third Lady: Riches,
Fourth Lady: Honor,
Fifth Lady: Happiness,

Fourth Lady: Wisdom,
Fifth Lady: Love
Third Lady: True faithfulness.

Fifth Lady: Clothes,
Third Lady: Fine jewels,
Fourth Lady: And flattery,

Third Lady: Music,
Fourth Lady: Drama,
Fifth Lady: Poetry,

Knight: But is there nothing—I inquire—
That all of you do most desire?

(The chorus resumes.)

Fourth Lady: Husbands
Third Lady: Who don't boss or fuss,
Fifth Lady: Lovers
Fourth Lady: Who admire us,

Third Lady: Never poor,
Fifth Lady: Nor fat,
Fourth Lady: Nor old,

Fifth Lady: Never ugly,
Fourth Lady: Sick,
Third Lady: Nor cold.

Fourth Lady: Fame,
Fifth Lady: And always to be free!
Third Lady: That every wish be granted me.

Knight: If I can't find the answer clear
My head I'll lose after this year!

Narrator: Thus wandered he both up and down
And questioned every girl he found:
Crones and maidens, widows, wives,
Women who lived lofty lives,
Peasants, weavers, dairy maids,
Women who plied various trades.
At every palace, house and inn
The women happily answered him
And said what it was they loved best,
But none agreed with all the rest.

Knight: O woe is me! I must lament
That 'pon this quest I e'er was sent.
Before this year and day are spent
Of my foul deed I will repent.

Narrator: Of countless ladies he inquired
And though each one did answer him
None knew the answer he required,
And soon his face grew grey and grim.

Days, weeks, and months, and now the year
He'd been allotted all had passed;
He knew that he must persevere,
Or the next day would be his last.

'Twas on the last day that remained
As home he turned his tired horse
Upon a poor, old hag he came
Who stayed him in his homeward course.

Hag: Good day to thee, O noble knight
Whose face betrays such heavy plight,
What great misfortune thee befell
What weighs thee down, I beg, praytell?

Knight: It does no good thee to advise
What troubles sore upon me lie.
I travel home in sorry wise
Because tomorrow I must die.

Hag: Can not this fate averted be?
Why must thou die? Confide in me.

Knight: 'Pon pain of death I had a year
To find and tell Queen Guinevere
And all the ladies in her hall
What womenkind crave most of all.

Hag: And hast thou found no answer plain?

Knight: Alas, my seeking was in vain
For no two women can agree,
Thus none could truly answer me.
Hag: That’s all you need? The answer true?
And you have not a single clue?

(The Knight dolefully shakes his head.)

But if I tell, wilt swear to me
To do whate’er I ask of thee?

Knight: If thou dost know, praytell me quick!
That I may hurry back to court.
But if this is naught but a trick,
Be off and quit this sorry sport.

Hag: Before I tell, thy promise plain
To honor and fulfill my claim.

Knight: Upon my honor as a knight
My sacred troth I pledge to thee
That if thou save me from this plight
I will grant what thou ask of me.

(The Hag whispers the answer to the Knight.)

Knight: O can it be? The Lord be blessed!
Who would have thought? Who could have guessed?
Thou hast indeed relieved my plight!
All will agree I’ve answered right.

(The Knight starts to leave.)

Hag: Just one more thing, before you flee
Remember what you promised me?

Knight: Yes, yes, you're right, what must I do?

Narrator: (to the audience)
You think he wants an answer true?

Knight: (as he leaves.)
I’ll soon return and repay you.

Hag: O no you don't! I'm coming too.

(The Knight and Hag arrive in court.)

Queen Guinevere: Sir knight, we greet thee with good cheer;
Hast thou fulfilled thy noble quest?
Can't thou now tell us ladies here
In all the world, what we love best?
Knight: The answer I will tell to thee,
See if thy ladies do agree:
All women share a common yen
For total mastery over men.

Narrator: The court was hushed, the court was still,
No woman there could disagree;
Each thought how she could do her will,
If she but had such mastery.

Queen Guinevere: Well done, sir knight, thou speakest true
Thy life is spared, as promised you.
But where did'st thou this answer find
What woman dared reveal her mind?

Hag: 'Twas I that told him, noble queen,
For in return he swore to give,
Upon his honor, bright and keen,
Whate'er I wished, if he might live.

Knight: Now name thy price and plainly say;
What wilt thou have—I will thee pay.

Hag: I will have thee!

Knight: Thou wilt have me?

Hag: Thy word I claim upon this day
To be my husband, true and kind.
Let us be wed without delay;
A better husband I'll not find.

Knight: Thy husband? I? Thou must be mad
To think I would wed such as thee!
So dirty, ugly, poor and sad,
Name something else you'd take from me.

Hag: I wilt have thee as promised true.
No other gift thou hast will do.

Knight: (to the audience.)
How can I give what she has claimed?
I'll surely die or go insane!

Queen Guinevere: I now proclaim thee man and wife
May blessings be upon thy life

Knight: (aside.)
I cannot bear such pain and strife
If this old witch must be my wife.
Narrator: So let us sing a wedding song
And wish our lovers sweetest bliss;
Although the knight's face sure looks long,
We know he can't get out of this.

(As the court sings, the Knight and Hag do an awkward dance.)

Hag: Come now, dear husband, take me home,
Let us fulfill our wedding vows.

Knight: Oh Lord, I pray! Leave me alone!
Find thy own way unto my house.

Hag: What is my fault? Pray tell me now.

Knight: O would I'd never made that vow!

Hag: What faults have I, tell them to me

Knight: Thou foul, old thing, pray let me be!

Hag: O,'tis my age that bothers thee?

(The Knight nods.)

Hag: Why greater age can help a wife
Avoid much folly in her life.

Knight: And horrid looks will, I suppose,
Stop other men from getting close?

Hag: It is exactly as you say:
Thou would'st not want a fair young thing
Who, every time you went away
Would cuckold you and have a fling?

(The Knight begins to look dubious.)

Hag: Since I love thee so gratefully,
This choice will I present to thee:
Decide with whom you'd rather live:
A fair young wife, who'll trouble give,
Or with a humble, older wife
Who'll make thee happy all thy life?

Whiche'er you choose, I will become
And share thy life, thy lot, thy home.
Narrator: What choice is this? Which will he choose? He stands to gain, yet stands to lose. And if his choice brings him much woe, He can't blame us for choosing so.

Knight: I cannot choose. I leave it thee To choose as thou dost deem it best.

Hag: Thou givest me true sovereignty, Thou'lt do my will, grant my request?

Knight: I do, in faithfulness and trust, Grant thee to choose that which is best.

Hag: Since thou dost give me mastery To choose what I will be for thee. . .

(The Hag goes into the back and returns, transformed into a beautiful maiden)

Maiden: Both fair and faithful will I be And love thee best eternally.

Narrator: And so we see how trusting love Can bring great blessings from above, Through much travail this knight did learn A woman's wisdom not to spurn, But how to give her equal say And live in love and faith alway.

My tale is done, goodbye, farewell, Until I come more tales to tell.
THE PROMISE

Based on The Franklin's Tale by Geoffrey Chaucer

Cast of Characters:  (in order of appearance)

Narrator
Arveragus
Dorigen
Aurelius
The Brother
The Wizard

Narrator: Twas long ago in Brittany
A knight desired a fair lady,
And fortunate for this young knight
The lady gentle sensed his plight;
She saw how goodly, true and fair
A knight he was, beyond compare.

Arveragus: O Dorigen!

Narrator: So was she called,

Arveragus: Whom I do love—be not appalled.
O Dorigen, my love, my sweet,
Be thou my love, I do entreat,
And I thy husband, true and proud,
Nor ever jealous, cruel, or loud.

Dorigen: Arveragus—in all you say
'Tis clear that love alone holds sway.
You offer me so large a reign,
May harshness never cleave us twain;
Let us be bound as man and wife,
And I shall love thee all my life.

Narrator: And thus these two, in joy and bliss
Are joined in love, and naught's amiss--
Until a year or more had passed,
A new desire our knight possessed:
He wished to sail to lands abroad
With charger, armor, spear, and sword,
By force of arms more fame to win.

Dorigen: Alas! Alack!
Narrator: Cried Dorigen.
Each day the seashore wild she roams
And staring 'pon the jagged stones,
She weeps, she sobs, in fear she groans,
The air is filled with sighs and moans.

Dorigen: Eternal Lord, O God of love,
Who fashioned earth, and heaven above;
The world Thou mad'st in wisdom great,
Each living thing Thou did'st create:
The rocks, the plants, the beasts, and Man;
All life on earth fulfills Thy plan.

Yet one great question plagues my mind:
Why Thou, who governest Mankind
These rocks did fashion, hid with waves
To lure brave sailors to their graves.

Narrator: And so she prays, each day she cries,
And lifting hands up to the skies
Implores the Lord her spouse to save
From harm or death or a wat'ry grave.

The months pass on until one day
A letter comes from far away
Relating that Arveragus
Will soon return. . .

Dorigen: May God him bless!
And spare him in his troubles sore,
And bring him safely home once more.

Narrator: Now all this time no word I've said
Of one who loved a lady wed;
Aurelius this squire was height,
Who now to us reveals his plight.

Aurelius: Alack!  Alay!  I waste away!
For love, for hope forlorn this day.
O me!  O my!  I weep!  I sigh!
If she doth scorn me--I will die!

Narrator: What lady doth inspire this yen?
Aurelius: Why sire, it is fair Dorigen!

(to the audience)

How dare I tell her all I feel?
How dare I all my love reveal?
When she is married, loyal, pure;
Yet silence I cannot endure.

Narrator: And thus that day the squire approached
Dear Dorigen; his love he broached.

Aurelius: O lady, flower of mine eye!
O Dorigen, attend my cry!

Dorigen: Aurelius! Why are you here?

Narrator: Now let us hope he answers clear.

Aurelius: Madame—

Narrator: Quoth he—

Aurelius: Come hear my tale,
Of sorrow, woe, and sore travail.

(to the audience.)

How can I speak of love to her,
Who is so pure, so true, so fair?

Ah Dorigen—

Narrator: He tried once more—

Aurelius: Have pity on thy lover poor!
I wish—but all must be in vain. . .

Dorigen: What is it sire, art thou in pain?
Aurelius: In pain and more.

(to the audience.)

O must she know?
O must I tell her? Yea, or no?

My lady, whom I hold most dear,
Must I say more, is it not clear?
Dost thou not gather what I mean?
Must I confess and tell thee plain?

Dorigen: Aurelius, you've said enough;
Your meaning's plain; I'll not be gruff,
But tell thee in a single word—
That your intentions are absurd!
By God who gave me soul and life
I've never been an untrue wife,
In word or deed or in my thought.
I cannot give what you have sought!

Narrator: But then in pity on she went
In lighter vein, yet with intent
To urge him from his crooked path,
She smiled and told him with a laugh

Dorigen: Aurelius—by God above,
I swear to give thee all my love
If one condition you fulfill,
Then shall you have me at your will:
Remove these stones and clear these shores
Of every rock, then I'll be yours.

Aurelius: Is this thy certain sure intent?
No means to beg thee to relent?

Dorigen: There is but one…fulfill the task.
Remove the rocks—'tis all I ask.

Aurelius: This then spells my assured death,
I'll ne'er fulfill this strange request.

Narrator: Aurelius is taken home,
In bed he lies, like to a stone.
No thought, no hope, no wish has he
But one:

Aurelius: Death come and set me free!
Narrator: For days, for weeks, for months he lies
Yet peace and joy death him denies.
Until one day his loyal brother
Who cared for him as for no other,
By inspiration bright is struck.

Brother: Aurelius! We are in luck!
As Archimedes used to say:
Eureka! I have found the way
To heal you and your love secure.
God bless me man! I've found the cure!

Narrator: What in the world can this cure be?
'Tis useless to ask you or me.
So tell us brother, one, two, three,
Reveal your plan for all to see.

Brother: Why—Magic! And leger de main!
By sorcery, this is my plan.
A wizard wise can make it seem
As if the shore of stones is clean.
She will then have to keep her oath
To him as pledged, though she be loath.

Narrator: Aurelius leaps up at once,
He knows his brother is no dunce.
This plan of his may yet succeed,
So off they set with utmost speed.
They come at long last to a town
Where wizards and wise men abound,
See how they stand before the door
Of that town's greatest sorcerer.

Brother: Hail mighty wizard, can'st thou tell
If we might hire thee for a spell?
My brother needs thy wizardry
To win the love of his lady.

Wizard: By Jupiter, Saturn, Venus, Mars,
I know the secrets of the stars,
By Sun and Moon and Mercury
Strong magic can I work for thee.
I can conjure a trick or two
Whereby thou can'st thy lady woo
I'll help thee with no more ado,
But pay thou must when I am through.
Aurelius: O I shall pay, I promise thee,  
A thousand pounds shall be thy fee!  
If thou those rocks do sink so deep  
Her word to me she'll have to keep.

Narrator: A story long we will make short.  
That sorcerer they did import,  
And easy as one, two, and three,  
The wizard cast spells o'er the see.  
The waves commanded he to rise.  
The rocks were hid. Are you surprised?

But what of Dorigen the fair?  
Some months ago, to ease despair,  
Arveragus to her returned,  
Nor did she tell of him she'd spurned,  
For she'd forgotten in her joy  
The oath she gave that other boy.  
But now Aurelius is come  
To claim his prize. His task is done.

Aurelius: Sweet Dorigen, hast gone and seen,  
The shore of rocks has been swept clean.

Dorigen: What nonsense this, Aurelius?  
Hast thou no shame to mock us thus?

Aurelius: But Dorigen, dost not recall  
The oath with which thou promised all  
If I of rocks the shore did cleanse?  
The deed is done, 'tis no pretense.

Narrator: 'Tis no avail to argue more.  
She goes to see the altered shore;  
The rocks removed all but one,  
'Tis as he says:

Aurelius: The deed is done!

Dorigen: O woe is me, unfortunate!  
What trick is this you've played, O Fate?  
Had I that day refused him straight,  
I would not now be in this state.

Narrator: She weeps, she moans, all night she cries,  
Her husband asks about her sighs:

Arveragus: What ails thee love? Why dost thou weep?  
What troubles thee? Praytell, my sweet?
Dorigen: I may not say, Arveragus.
What shame, what shame has come to us!

Narrator: He pleads, cajoles, and begs her tell
What great misfortune her befell.
At last she can resist no more,
Reveals to him her troubles sore.

Arveragus: Unluckiest man that e'er was born!
O wife, in twain my heart hast torn!
But Dorigen, your word you gave,
And swore 'fore God--may he you save;
Though to the shame of all my kin
Thou must do as thou promised him,
And I will do the best I can
T'endure this lot, this grief, and shame.

Narrator: She goes to meet him in the town,
So pale she seems, so drawn, cast down.
Aurelius: observe her plight,
This miserable, sorry sight.

Dorigen: Thus have I come, but sad, forlorn,
To thee, my lord, as I had sworn,
And as my husband ordered me
To keep the oath I swore to thee.

Aurelius: Thy husband? Knows he aught of this?

Dorigen: In sooth, for dear Arveragus
Would rather live ashamed and poor
Than have me break an oath I swore.

Narrator: It then dawned on Aurelius
The outcome of this shameful case.
Despite his hopes now dashed in twain,
He there resolved to ease her pain,
Preserve her husband's worthy name,
And keep their honor free from stain.

Aurelius: From all that thou once swore to me
Thou art released—I set thee free.
Return to thy most noble sire
And tell him that this lowly squire
Perceives that generosity
Is proof of true nobility.
I am a sadder, wiser man,
Farewell, farewell, fair Dorigen.

Dorigen: For thy great love and charity
I give thee thanks. May God bless thee!
Narrator: Aurelius, you’ve proved a man,  
Of honor and nobility,  
When you released fair Dorigen  
From all that she had promised thee.

Wizard: By all the stars, the sun and moon  
Why walkest in such heavy gloom?  
Did I not do my promised task?  
Did'st thou not have thy love, I ask?

Aurelius: I cannot fault thy sorcery,  
But I did not have my lady.

Wizard: How so? How so? How can this be?  
Had she not sworn an oath to thee?

Aurelius: Her husband told her: keep thy oath  
To him as pledged, though ye be loath,  
But when I knew her husband's shame  
I could no longer press my claim.

Wizard: No less than noble squire or knight  
A wizard must know wrong from right,  
To prove my generosity  
No fee shall I accept from thee.

Because thy lust thy lady spurned,  
This worthy lesson we have learned:  
If we our lust with love amend,  
We are ennobled at the end.

Narrator: Our play is done—save one detail—  
Upon your worships I prevail,  
Before we bid adieu, good night,  
Let each one here decide aright:  
Who acted in the noblest wise,  
In this unhappy enterprise?  
And who was the most generous—  
Aurelius or Arveragus?
THE TWO LOVERS

Based on the Knight's Tale
by Geoffrey Chaucer

Cast of Characters: (in order of appearance)

Two Narrators, one aligned with Arcite, the other with Palamon
Arcite
Palamon
Duke Theseus
Queen Hypolita
Lady Emily
Venus
Diana
Mars
Jove

Narrator: A tragic tale we will thee tell
Though some of you may know it well;
A woeful tale of cousins two,
Who loved a lady good and true.

When two men do one maid adore
Their lives are filled with troubles sore
So hear what trials and troubles come
To Arcite and Palamon.

But first I must thee introduce
To my good friend Duke Theseus,
The great and mighty conqueror
Who rules Athens as governor.

And let me not forget his wife
With whom he lives without much strife,
She is called Queen Hypolita.
And comes from Amazonia.

Now meet her sister Emily
As sweet and lovely as can be;
She is not jealous, proud nor vain,
Yet her fine looks will cause much pain.

Pray do not get impatient
And start to question our intent,
For I must spend a moment more
To tell you what has come before.
Narrator: Now in some wars that Theseus fought
Two Theban knights by him were caught
Named Palamon and Arcite,
Who in a tower are locked away.

Though brave and handsome, young and strong,
They must in prison languish long,
For none a ransom can procure,
And so they must their lot endure.

Palamon: Almighty Jove, all power is thine,
So listen to my humble prayer:
Allow some beam of light to shine
To warm my heart, ease my despair.

Arcite: Have cheer, good cousin, be not glum
For surely we our own fates shape,
Some opportunity must come
Whereby this prison we'll escape.

Palamon: These heavy walls oppress me sore,
My only solace is to stare
Out of the window to explore
The paths in that green garden there.

Arcite: On our escape route you should gaze
By which to flee this tower room,
Think of the army we shall raise
Whereby the duke shall meet his doom.

Narrator: As woefully the two men talked
Out for a stroll went Emily
'Twas in the garden where she walked
That Palamon her first did see.

Palamon: Ah me—

Narrator: Sighed he and drew his breath—

Palamon: What sight is this I see down there?
Who is that on the garden path?
A goddess or a woman fair?

Arcite: Say cousin mine, what aileth thee?
Why dost thou gasp? It worries me.
Let not dark grief destroy thy heart,
For from this place we'll surely part.
Narrator: But Palamon says naught of woe
   He's watching as she walks below,
   Long stayed he by that small window
   To see if she would come or go.

Palamon: It is not grief but sheer delight
   That fills my heart, brave Arcite;
   Look there and see that maiden bright;
   Her shall I love and serve alway.

Narrator: When Arcite took one short look
   His senses nearly him forsook,
   For in his life he'd never seen
   A maiden of such beauty keen.

Arcite: What radiant beauty do I spy?
   If I can't have her, I will die!

Palamon: What is this that I heard thee say?
   Dost speak in earnest or in play?

Arcite: Why cousin, how can't doubt my word?
   This is no jest, don't be absurd!
   That lady that I saw just now
   Will be my love: That is my vow!

Palamon: Thou traitor false, thou promised me
   To be my comrade, true and fair.
   Yet thou wouldst dare love my lady?
   This is more than my heart can bear!

Arcite: Love your lady? Be not a dunce!
   You thought you'd seen some fair goddess!
   But I saw and I knew at once
   That I would someday her possess.

Palamon: But by the laws of chivalry
   Thou shouldst assist me in this task:
   To help me win this fair lady;
   Is that so much for me to ask?

Arcite: But there are higher laws of love
   Writ by the blessed gods above;
   Is not all fair in love and war?
   So speak to me of this no more.

Palamon: Say what thou wilt, black-hearted knave,
   Thy fancy words wilt not thee save.
   For I shall not forget this slight
   That thou betrayed thy fellow knight.
Narrator: What can be done? For now their life
Is filled with hate and jealous strife,
Neither their shared plight nor their pain
Can bridge the gap that cleaves them twain.

So would they've lived and died, had not
A friend who had not them forgot
Came now to Theseus to prevail
That Arcite be freed from jail.

Theseus: I will to this request agree;
But if this knight is to go free,
On pain of death, he must stay clear
Of Athens and must ne'er come near.

Palamon: O cruelest Fate, thou dark goddess!
Why did'st thou so my cousin bless,
And free him to pursue his claim,
While I in prison must remain?

Narrator: Yet Arcite thought differently,
For he was banned eternally;
While Palamon stayed near Emily
Never again could he her see.

Arcite: Never again to watch her face?

Narrator: Never again to feel her grace.

Arcite: Never again her steps to trace?

Narrator: Never again to see this place.

Unwilling thus to compromise,
He soon returned to Athens town,
But as a thrall he came disguised
And at the palace work he found.

(Arcite arrives at the palace in disguise.)

Arcite: O to be near her finally!
To Emily, the sweet, the fair,
Dost think that she will notice me
If I work hard, beyond compare?
Narrator: So hard he worked, like one on fire,
That soon the Duke himself took note,
And said he would that thrall promote
And make of him a noble squire.

And so it is that Arcite
Becomes Duke Theseus' right hand man,
Who bears his standard in the fray
And helps the Duke howe'er he can.

But what of Palamon, the poor
Who in that high room languishes?
One night the guard can't watch his door,
And Palamon soon vanishes.

Palamon: Now I am free, yes, free at last!
My troubles sure are fading fast.
To Thebes go I to gather men
To fight Duke Theseus once again.

Palamon: But wait—I fear that battle will
Not grant me what I covet still;
Would Emily consent to come,
Of her free will to Palamon,
If I her lands have ravished thus
And slain her brother Theseus?

Narrator: As in the wood he spoke this word
Arcite him overheard,
For hunting on that morn he’d gone
When he encountered Palamon.

Arcite: Hail there good cousin, art thou free?

Palamon: It can not matter much to thee
Who dost a squire pretend to be,
To hide thy true identity.

Arcite: You've heard it told to thee before:
All's fair in love and fair in war.

Palamon: Thou may'st think thyself so wise,
Yet not fulfill thy enterprise.

Arcite: Neither shalt thou, who here must hide;
How brave thou art, how dignified!

Palamon: Had I my sword, thou woulds't regret
The base words that thou speakest yet.
Arcite: O weapons is it that you crave?
Dost wish to fight, you paltry knave?
Tomorrow morn I'll weapons bring
And we shall settle everything.

Palamon: Do that, but know I will thee slay
For that thou did'st me so betray.

Narrator: The morning came, and Arcite
Returned with mighty armaments;
Spears, swords, and shields in bold array
To settle thus their arguments.

Arcite: Thou mayest choose and take the best
For thou wilt surely need them most;
Prepare thyself this day to die,
For thus will I thy blame defy.

Narrator: Watch how they wait and circle wary,
Each of the other's blade most chary,
They know right well the other's might
One small mistake can cost the fight.

Now they attack with sword and spear,
And neither shows the slightest fear;
See how their blows rain down most cruel,
As each one tries to win the duel.

Palamon: Take that thou knave!

Arcite: Thou scoundrel too!

Palamon: I fear thee not!

Arcite: Nor do I you!

Narrator Just then the Duke and all his court
Who had been hunting in the wood
Found them engaged in deadly sport
And tried to stop them where they stood.

Theseus: Desist I say! Or face my ire
Do as I say! Why, noble squire
How is it that I find thee here
In combat with thy sword and spear?
Palamon: Dost thou not know, O noble duke
What men we are whom ye rebuke?
My cousin Arcite is he,
Whom thou did'st raise to high degree.
And I am Palamon, thy foe
Who would thee slay or overthrow.

Theseus: Is this the truth that I perceive?

Arcite: I can no longer thee deceive,
But swear that all I ever wished
Was to be near her whom I missed.

Theseus: Did I not grant thee freedom once
(To Arcite) If thou would'st swear to stay far hence?

(To Palamon.) And wert thou not my prisoner still
Whom I could spare or slay at will?

(Both knights nod.)

Theseus: Yet thee in battle I have found
Just like two tigers circling round;
Poised to spring, to claw, to bite,
Whatever caused ye thus to fight?

Palamon: We fight for love, most noble duke,
Surely thou can'st not us rebuke
For loving both the same lady,
Thy sister, lady Emily.

Arcite: With what he said, I do agree
We both love lady Emily.
Yet since we have been false to thee,
Our lives to thee must forfeit be.

Palamon: Yea, slay us now, whom thou despise,
But let me die before her eyes.

Theseus: That ye would so in love presume
Would be enough to seal thy doom;
But that ye also me betrayed
Insures that thou cannot be saved.

Hypolita: My dearest husband, let us see
Sure proof of thy nobility.
Since they their lives would gladly give,
Condemn them not, but let them live.

Theseus: A woman's word is ever wise
Thy judgment will I ever prize;
(To the two knights.)

I will not act a cruel despot:
Thy crimes are pardoned and forgot,

Palamon: Our thanks...and yet, Duke Theseus,
Thou art both kind and cruel to us,
For thou hast not our problem solved;
How can we be of love absolved?

Hypolita: I would I could improve thy lot,
Yet Lady Emily cannot
Take both ye lovers as her own,
The choice is hers and hers alone.

Emily: O, I could never chose between
Such strong and noble knights, I ween.
So I shall let my brother name
Which knight I must as husband claim.

Theseus: Were I the good King Solomon
Not even then would I dare say
If thou belong with Palamon
Or with his cousin, Arcite.

So we shall let the gods decide
Which man shall take thee as his bride;
They will an answer clear provide
And by their will we shall abide.

Narrator: And so Duke Theseus declared
A tournament ground to be prepared
Whereon the knights would fight to see
Which one could claim fair Emily.

Each knight could bring one hundred men
That on his side would ride and fight,
And each thinks that he'll surely win
Because his cause is just and right.

The night before the tournament
Brave Palamon to temple went,
That unto Venus he might plead
That she fulfill his greatest need.

Palamon: O Venus fair, goddess of love,
Who reigns on earth and heaven above,
Thy servant have I been alway
Now unto thee I turn to pray.
Thou knowest what great love I bear
For Emily, my lady fair,
For ever since I saw her first
I thought my heart with love would burst.

In loving her I have been true,
By loving her I've served thee too.
But now I pray, grant this request:
Grant me the lady I love best,
That I may have her as my wife,
That I may serve her all my life;
And if this thou wilt grant to me
Then I will always worship thee.

Narrator: No sign gave she for quite a time
And Palamon grew more resigned,
That Venus had his prayer spurned
And would not grant that which he yearned,

But lo, behold—the statue shook
And gave a sign, by which he took
To mean that he would get his way,
Though he might suffer some delay.

Now let us follow Emily
Who makes her way most secretly
By cover of the darkest night
And to Diana tells her plight.

Emily: O goddess of the wildwood green,
Ease thou my heart, my anguish keen,
These many years have I been good
And cherished well my maidenhood,
But on the morrow I'll be claimed
By him who is the victor named.
Say by which knight will I be won—
By Arcite or Palamon?

(The goddess does not answer.)

O goddess fair, grant this request:
Let him win me that loves me best,
Grant this my wish, I do implore,
And I shall serve thee evermore.

Narrator: Yea, even as she said her prayer,
And gazed upon the altar there
Where two small fires were burning bright,
A marvelous vision met her sight.
One fire burned high, but then burned low
Meanwhile the second 'gan to glow,
And grew so high and fierce and bright
It hid the other with its light,
And out of the first fire's wood
Oozed great round drops of bright red blood.

Emily: What can this omen signify?
Does this mean one of them must die?

Diana: Fair Emily, be now at rest
Him shalt thou have who loves thee best.

Narrator: Now Arcite at break of day
To Mars's temple goes to pray,
That he the god might homage pay
And beg his help to win the day.

Arcite: O Mars, thou fierce and mighty god,
Whose warlike paths I've always trod,
And always thy command will heed;
Grant me this boon, I humbly plead.
Since he who wins tomorrow's fray
Fair Emily may take away
To be his wife for evermore,
O grant me victory, I implore.
O grant me victory, I pray,
And I shall honor thee alway.

Narrator: As thus he spoke, the temple shook
As spears and swords around him clashed
The god of war with fierce, harsh look
Promised to give him what he asked.

Mars: Victory! Thou hast my word.
Thou wilt prevail, be thou assured.

Narrator: Now let us turn to heaven's gate
Where these three gods hotly debate
Since each has made a promise true,
Who can predict what they will do?

Venus: I've had it up to here, dear Mars,
For now you've made of me a fool,
Where is your head—lost in the stars?
That you should flaunt our father's rule?

Mars: What did I do, my sweetest one?
That you should so me reprimand?
'Tis true, I'm not for Palamon,
But how did I break Jove's command?
Venus: You swore a holy solemn oath  
That Arcite the day will win.  
Who gave you leave? O I am loath  
Ever to speak to you again.

Mars: But Venus, darling, can’t you see  
That he deserves the victory?

Diana: But it was not your godly place  
To promise that right to his face!  
You know full well we must refrain  
From making our intentions plain.

Venus: You know the rules: just give a sign  
Which can be so interpreted,  
That it might go your way or mine  
If either man is vanquished.

Mars: Perhaps I did o'erstep my bounds...  
Yet Arcite will have his day!

Venus: Throw him, Diana, to thy hounds,  
O silence him! Take him away!

Mars: You are too sensitive my dear,  
Let me assure—you've naught to fear,  
Just that your man will lose the bout  
For Arcite will beat him out.

Venus: Be still, you oaf, don't talk to me  
I have no more to say to thee.

Diana: What of my word to Emily?  
That her true lover will hold sway?  
Whatever will she think of me  
If she is won by Arcite?

Mars: You're out of luck, for I have won;  
A god's true word can't be undone,  
So go console your Palamon,  
While I go down to watch the fun.

(The head of Jove appears above the curtain.)

Jove: No so fast, son, there's still a way  
That each of you can have your say.  
Your holy oaths I will preserve  
And each will get what he deserves.
Narrator: They don't call him wise Jove for naught,
What fine solution has he sought?
How will he loose this lover's knot
And solve the mysteries of this plot?

Let us return to earth again
Where knights are gathered on the plain;
One hundred knights on either side
To help their leader win his bride.

Before they start, Duke Theseus,
Makes battle terms most generous:

Theseus: Let none his sharpest weapons use
So that no one his life will lose.
If one knight forfeits his whole side,
The other knight may claim the bride.
Or when one knight has captured been
The other shall the lady win.
Let each one fight and do his best
And may the gods decide the rest!

Narrator: The trumpets blare, now they begin,
And each great glory seeks to win,
For much does on this fight depend:
Who will have Emily at the end.

Emily: Look there, dear sister, how they fight,
Thank God I was not born a knight!
What mighty blows upon them rain!
How can these knights endure such pain?

Hypolita: Now look: Arcite's men advance
And Palamon's cannot them hold,
But now see Palamon's strong lance
Push back the charge of knights so bold!

Theseus: What brave young men for thee do fight,
Each one well knows his cause is right.
Whoever wins, will gain great fame,
Thou should'st be proud to bear his name.

Narrator: The battle rages thick and fast,
And no one knows how long 'twill last,
Yet it now seems that Arcite
And his strong knights will win the day.
Meanwhile on the Olympian heights
The gods root for their favorite knights,
They see Arcite's press of men
Head straight for Palamon again;
Now he's surrounded; now he's caught,
And to the other side is brought.

Mars: You see—

Narrator: Cried he—

Mars: I told you so!

Narrator: Mars can't resist the chance to crow.

Mars: So much for noble Palamon
He's lost the fight; Arcite's won.

Venus: (to Jove) But that's not fair! You promised me
That my vow too would honored be.

(Jove's head appears above the curtains again.)

Jove: Each one of you will keep your vow,
Just wait and watch what happens now.

Narrator: Watch Arcite in triumph ride
Right to the stands to claim his bride.
But as he gallops o'er the turf
Jove sends a demon from the earth
Which scares his horse so terribly
That he bucks uncontrollably,
And Arcite is hard tossed down
And wounded lies upon the ground.

(Jove springs out.)

Jove: Grand master of the fates am I,
Who let men live and let them die!
Though Arcite claims victory,
His cousin will win Emily.
Diana knew he loved her best.
Now she can grant the girl's request.

(Arcite is brought in and laid down before Emily.)

Arcite: O Emily, my dearest one,
Thou know'st that thou wast fairly won,
Yet thou shalt never be my wife
For Fate this day has claimed my life.
Since Palamon doth love thee too
Fulfill my last request most true,
Wed him and bring him happiness
And may the Lord thy marriage bless.
Though with my cousin I did fight,
He is the purest, noblest knight,
Who will both love and honor thee,
And cherish thee eternally.

Narrator:
With these last words Arcite died,
And she who should have been his bride
Was married when a year had passed,
To Palamon, her love, at last.

They lived forever happily,
There's not much more I can tell thee,
But that the gods we ne'er must scorn,
For each of us is but their pawn.
Their will is law, we must obey
Our lives are in their hands alway.

And so at last our tale is done
Of Arcite and Palamon,
Who loved the lady Emily,
Now we must go—may God bless thee.