

Synopsis of "The Canterbury Tales"

After *The Prologue*, *The Tales* follow. But not the least interesting part of *The Canterbury Tales* is the links with which Chaucer connects the different stories. These passages between tales have been called by one critic, "the most original of all his contributions." They fill out the characters of the Pilgrims and enrich what we already know of them through *The Prologue*. And the spirited dialogue which is carried on among them in these connecting passages is one of the most life-like and fascinating interests of the work.

1. "The Knight's Tale" is the longest and one of the best—a tale of chivalric romance adapted from Boccaccio. Theseus, returning in victory to Athens with his new queen Hippolyta and her sister Emilia, is met by a company of black-clad women. King Creon of Thebes will not allow their dead husbands decent burial. Theseus battles Creon and slays him. Among his prisoners are two wounded Theban knights, Arcite and Palamon, cousins, sentenced to perpetual imprisonment. Years later, Emilia is seen by the two prisoners from their tower, and both fall in love with her. They quarrel fiercely and face bitterly the future of having to be imprisoned together forever. Pirithous, a close friend of Theseus and Arcite, persuades Theseus to release the latter. Theseus complies on the condition that Arcite is never to come near Athens. Palamon is anguished that Arcite is free to woo Emilia; Arcite mourns his inability to see Emilia again, and goes to Thebes. Two years of suffering so much alter Arcite's face that he determines to return to Athens under the name of Philostrate. Theseus makes him a squire, and he soon becomes the King's trusted aide. Five years pass. Palamon drugs the jailer and escapes. Hiding in the woods till nightfall, he overhears Arcite lamenting. Palamon reveals himself. They quarrel in jealous rage, promising to meet on the same spot to battle it out next day: Arcite will bring the other food and armour. Theseus, out hunting with his court, comes upon the two fighting. The ladies move his pity, and he forgives the two men. They are to return in fifty weeks with a hundred knights each, and joust for the hand of Emilia. Theseus meanwhile builds a theater a mile in circumference for the event. Before the battle Palamon prays to Venus and receives a sign foretelling his victory. Emilia prays to Diana and asks peace for the rivals, since she wishes to marry neither. Diana reveals that Emilia must marry one. Arcite prays to Mars, who grants him a sign of victory. Thus there is strife in Heaven, but Saturn hits on a compromise. At the tournament Palamon is wounded and Arcite declared victor. But a Fury bursts forth out of the earth and Arcite is hurled to the ground. Theseus declares both sides victorious. Dying, Arcite yields