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October 25, 2011  
Chaucer

### Towers, Gardens, and the Duality of Love

If a story in *The Canterbury Tales* is read strictly for a literal meaning, it is hardly read at all. When reading a work so full of allusion, so brimming with hidden meaning the words seem to swallow you and drag you down like quicksand, it is essential to understand the subtle intricacies within the language in order to fully grasp the moral intention of the writer. In Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, this can be a daunting task, as each story seems to overflow with metaphors, begging to be understood. One such example is the garden in "The Knight's Tale" and the neighboring tower. Combined with Chaucer's frequent allusions to the Greek goddess Venus, the garden and tower represent the double nature of love. His descriptions of natural and man made settings combined with astrological and mythological significance work together to supply the tale with a pensive comment on the pain and happiness love can bring.

The tale begins with Arcite and Palamon locked in a tower, with no hope of ever being released. As prisoners of war, the two have succumbed to their fates until Palamon sees Emily in a garden below, equates her to Venus, and falls in love immediately. Arcite sees her next, and he too is struck by love at first sight. Arcite claims he has fallen for Emily the woman, while Palamon is merely obsessed with the idea of Emily as Venus the goddess. From this moment on, the men are enemies and live tragically separated from their beloved Emily, their strong brotherly bond broken and replaced by hatred and jealousy over their mutual love. "Greet was the stryf and long bitwixe hem twye" (Chaucer 61). These tendencies toward jealousy are characteristic of the sign Taurus,

which rules most of the month of May, a month Chaucer emphasizes repeatedly throughout the tale. The men first see Emily in May, Palamon escapes in May, and one year later the tournament for Emily begins. Many pitfalls of Arcite and Palamon are acutely predicted in the tendencies of those under Taurus rule. Taureans are stubborn, jealous, and possessive, which precisely describes the root of Arcite and Palamon's feud. Taureans are also susceptible to violent situations over love or money, which is clearly applicable in this story. The most important aspect of Taurus to this tale is the fact that it is ruled by the planet Venus, causing Arcite and Palamon to appreciate and crave beauty in things they love and possess. Placing this tale in May puts even more emphasis on Venus, as she rules over the very time in which the tale takes place. Venus plays a crucial role throughout the tale not only in a literal sense but in the metaphorical ideals she represents. While her literal interference decides who wins Emily's heart in the end, her mere presence enables Chaucer to draw attention to the nature of love and the conflicting emotions it arouses.

The metaphorical significance of Venus represents opposing pairs in many ways. Firstly, Venus the planet was first believed to be two separate celestial bodies, one that "heralds the morning and the other that closed the doors of twilight" (Woolfolk 200). This planetary characterization translated into the dualistic qualities of Venus the goddess, who stands for love, beauty, and affection, as well as treachery and spite. These qualities are seen in Palamon and Arcite, whose love for each other quickly turns to malice once they catch a glimpse of Emily. Venus also represents two kinds of love, charitable love and physical desire or lust, the very same representations of love that

sparked the debate between Arcite and Palamon in the tower when they first see Emily in the garden below.

Emily is strongly connected with her garden, as it is not only the first place she is seen, but the only place she is seen for much of the tale. It isn't until many years go by that she is described anywhere besides among her plants. Emily is first seen picking flowers for a garland, conjuring images of a carefree maiden covered in flowers. This floral theme makes up a great deal of her physical description, "That Emelyse, that fairer was to sene/ than is the lylie upon his stalke grene/ and fressher than the May with floures newe / For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe" (Chaucer 59). Here the comparisons between Emily and nature and her rosy cheeks provide her with a connection so deep, she almost becomes part of the garden herself. Chaucer's link between Emily and the garden has both Christian and Greek significance, which meld together to represent the blissful side of love.

In Greek mythology, Venus was originally the goddess of flowers and gardens, which produced the symbol of "the classical hortus conclusus as the abode of Venus" (Jeffrey 364). Emily's relationship to flowers equates her to Venus, especially since Emily is first seen making a garland of roses for herself, and the statue of Venus in Theseus's temple is wearing a rose garland. "And on hir heed, ful seemly for to see, / a rose garland, fresh and wel smellinge" (Chaucer 72). This connection explains why Palamon immediately compares Emily to Venus, along with her incredible beauty. In Christian literature, a garden represents the Garden of Eden, and as such exemplifies a "metaphor for the ideal world" (Jeffrey 364) or a paradise. Through the garden's connection to paradise, Palamon and Arcite view Emily as a representation of the

happiness love can bring, and it is that bliss they crave to have with Emily. Thus, Emily's garden not only represents her beauty, but the joy and rapturous side of love. The nirvana of the garden is contrasted with the prison tower, which holds the men in a perpetual state of grief. These conflicting passions are seen in the temple Theseus builds for Venus, where "pleasaunce and hope, desir, foolhardiness,/ beautee and youthe, auderie, richesee,/ charmes and force, lesynges, flaterye, despense, busyness, and jalousie" (Chaucer 72) are shown in paintings throughout the temple.

Chaucer's juxtaposition of the tower and the garden is a metaphor for the two faces of Venus and the two conflicting emotional outcomes of love. The tower and garden acutely represent the two effects of love, one a joyous paradise and the other a wretched anguish. "In the Middle Ages, Venus had two aspects or faces. . . love as a blissful place of grace and healing influences; the other describes it as a barren and sorrowful prison" (Rossignol 596). While Arcite and Palamon are literally locked in a tower, they are metaphorically trapped in the sorrowful prison of unrequited love, merely able to catch glimpses of idyllic love in the garden utopia below.

The dual nature of love is something Chaucer frequently explored. In *The Parliament of Fowls*, a double-doored gate leading to a garden promises "relief of suffering and sorrow, followed by a blissful experience. The other side paradoxically warns that those who enter here will suffer great hardship in a place where trees never bear fruit" (Rossignol 439). This dichotomy of love is represented in "The Knight's Tale" through the duality of Venus. This duality represents the parallel emotions love causes, joy and sorrow. These conflicting emotions are represented by the utopic

beautiful garden, beneath the cheerless tower. In their depression, Palamon and Arcite  
turn from loyal cousins to spiteful enemies, trapped in a tower overlooking a garden;  
stuck in the grief love brings and longing for the blissful paradise.

## Works Cited

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