The Two Noble Kinsmen

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Many regard William Shakespeare as the greatest writer in the English language and one of the most influential dramatists of all time. His bibliography consists of nearly 40 plays, 154 sonnets, and three long narrative poems. Shakespeare was baptized in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, on April 26, 1564. His father, John Shakespeare, was an alderman, and his mother, Mary Arden, was the daughter of a wealthy landowning family. Although Shakespeare likely attended the King's New School in Stratford, he received no formal schooling beyond a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, and the couple had three children together: a daughter named Susanna and twins Hamnet and Judith. Much of Shakespeare's life between the birth of his twins and his entrance into the London theater scene in 1592 remains a mystery, and scholars refer to this period as Shakespeare's "lost years." Nevertheless, Shakespeare became an immensely successful actor, poet, and playwright upon moving to London. He was a part-owner of the King's Men (formerly Lord Chamberlain's Men), a playing company supported by the patronage of Elizabeth I, and later, by James I. Shakespeare likely ended his tenure with the King's Men and returned to Stratford-upon-Avon around 1610. He produced only a few more plays before his death in 1616, one of which was *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, which he wrote in collaboration with John Fletcher, the playwright who replaced him as house playwright for the King's Men. Shakespeare died in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 23, 1616, at 52. Although John Fletcher hasn't achieved the same lasting renown as William Shakespeare, he was a prominent playwright in his day, and scholars credit him with popularizing the tragicomedy genre in England's theater scene. Fletcher was born in December 1579 in Sussex. Much of Fletcher's early life remains a mystery, but scholars believe he enrolled in Corpus Christi College in Cambridge in 1591 before entering the London theater scene in the early 1600s. Fletcher worked as a playwright for the Children of the Queen's Revels beginning around 1606. Throughout his early career, Fletcher frequently collaborated with Francis Beaumont, a contemporary playwright. Fletcher began working more closely with the King's Men playing company around 1613. He collaborated with Shakespeare on *Henry VIII*; *The Two Noble Kinsmen*; and *Cardenio*, a lost play thought to have been performed by the King's Men in 1613. After Shakespeare's death in 1616, Fletcher took over Shakespeare's position as house playwright for the King's Men. He continued to collaborate with other contemporary playwrights, as well—most notably Nathan Field and Philip Massinger, the latter of whom would succeed him as house playwright for the King's Men. Fletcher died (reportedly of the Black Death) in London in August 1625.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

One key difference between *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and its literary inspiration, Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale," (from *The Canterbury Tales*) is *The Two Noble Kinsmen*'s heightened emphasis on friendship. This discrepancy reflects cultural ideas about friendship that emerged during the Renaissance. The Renaissance was a cultural movement that bridged the gap between the Middle Ages and modernity. It first developed in continental Europe starting in the late 1300s before taking hold in England around the mid-1500s, and it's characterized by a revived a revived interest in the art, scholarship, and values of Classical Greece and Rome. One Classical ideal that saw new life during the Renaissance was the virtue of friendship. The French Renaissance philosopher Michel de Montaigne wrote a collection of essays (translated into English in 1603) in which he praised the passionate, intimate bond of friendship that develops between two men. Montaigne held that this bond is so strong that friends become conjoined. Montaigne's ideas derive from the writings of Classical Roman philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero, specifically ideas that Cicero voiced in *Laelius de amicitia* ("On Friendship"), a treatise on friendship that itself draws inspiration from Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*. The philosophy of friendship Cicero establishes in his work describes a friend as "another self," or "one soul in two bodies." Elizabethan and early Jacobian readers like Shakespeare and Fletcher would have been well-acquainted with these works and used them to form their own philosophies on friendship.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Two Noble Kinsmen is inspired by "The Knight's Tale," the opening story of Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. *The Canterbury Tales* is a collection of stories written in Middle English, mostly in verse, between 1387 and 1400. Chaucer presents the stories as the tales a group of pilgrims shares as they engage in a storytelling contest while traveling from London to Canterbury to see the shrine of Saint Thomas of Canterbury. In addition to *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Shakespeare and Fletcher also collaborated on *Henry VIII*, a history play first published in the First Folio in 1623. Scholars associate *The Two Noble Kinsmen* with a group of Shakespeare's later works called the "late romances," which includes *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*; *Cymbeline*; *The Winter's Tale*; and *The Tempest*. These works are generally characterized as tragicomedies, a genre that combines elements of tragedy and comedy and that became

increasingly popular in early 17th-century England. Fletcher wrote his first solo play, a tragicomedy entitled *The Faithful Shepherdess*, around the time he collaborated with Shakespeare on *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. First performed in 1608, *The Faithful Shepherdess* wasn't initially successful with audiences. However, the printed version of the play is significant because it includes Fletcher's written definition of "tragicomedy," which emphasizes the prevalence of death as a critical element of the genre. Other notable plays of Fletcher's include *Valentinian*, a tragedy (c. 1610–1614 and first published 1647); *Monsieur Thomas*, a comedy (c. 1610–1616, first published 1639); and *The Woman's Prize, or The Tamer Tamed*, a comedy (c. 1611, first published 1647). Finally, other notable Jacobian tragicomedies written by Fletcher's contemporaries include Philip Massinger's *The Bondman* (first published in 1624) and James Shirley's *The Young Admiral* (first published in 1637).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Two Noble Kinsmen
- **When Written:** c. 1612–1614
- **Where Written:** England, United Kingdom
- **When Published:** 1634
- **Literary Period:** Renaissance, Jacobian Drama
- **Genre:** Drama, Tragicomedy
- **Setting:** Ancient Greece
- **Climax:** Arcite defeats Palamon in a duel to win Emilia's hand in marriage, and Theseus sentences Palamon to death.
- **Point of View:** Dramatic

EXTRA CREDIT

Refashioned Roles. The mythological figures of Hippolyta and Theseus also appear as characters in one of Shakespeare's most widely performed plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

A Noble Find. In 2020, a rare 1634 edition of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* was discovered in the library of Royal Scots College (Real Colegio de Escoceses) in Spain.

PLOT SUMMARY

The Prologue addresses the audience and tells them that the play is based on a story by Chaucer. Although the play's actors strive to honor Chaucer's legacy, their performance might not achieve the high quality of Chaucer. Nevertheless, the Prologue asks that his audience humor the actors' attempts to honor Chaucer and, at the very least, hopes that the play amuses them.

Act One opens in Athens in Ancient Greece. Three Queens interrupt Hippolyta and Theseus's wedding procession to plead with Theseus to help them. Creon, the corrupt King of Thebes, has killed their husbands in battle and won't let the queens retrieve and bury their husbands' remains. Theseus is hesitant to postpone his wedding night, but Emilia and Hippolyta eventually convince him to do the noble thing and lead an army to defeat Creon. Theseus acquiesces and leaves for Thebes that night.

Meanwhile, in Thebes, Arcite and Palamon debate leaving the city to avoid becoming as corrupt as their uncle Creon. Valerius appears and informs them of Theseus's approaching army, and the cousins resolve to stay behind and defend their city.

Back in Athens, Hippolyta and Emilia pray to the gods for Theseus's victory and talk about friendship, love, and marriage. Hippolyta talks of the many hardships Theseus and his close friend Pirithous have endured over their many years of friendship. Emilia recalls her own loving relationship with Flavina, who died in childhood. Emilia doesn't think she'll ever love a man like she loved Flavina, but Hippolyta suspects Emilia will change her mind.

Theseus defeats Creon, enabling the queens to retrieve their husbands' remains and honor them with funeral rites. A Herald brings Theseus the unconscious, gravely wounded bodies of Arcite and Palamon, whom the Athenians have captured as prisoners of war. Theseus immediately recognizes Arcite and Palamon's worth and nobility. He decides to bring the cousins to Athens as prisoners and orders the Herald to ensure that they receive the best treatment to guarantee their recovery.

Arcite and Palamon spend their days in a shared prison cell in Athens. They initially accept their fate and take comfort in their friendship. However, everything changes when they see Emilia walking through the garden below their cell and simultaneously fall in love with her. In an instant, the formerly intimate friends become bitter rivals in a battle over Emilia's love.

Theseus frees Arcite and banishes him from Athens. However, Arcite breaks Theseus's orders and secretly remains in Athens to try to win over Emilia. While hiding in the woods, Arcite encounters some Countrymen headed to a festival of competitive games held outside Athens to celebrate May Day. Arcite overhears the men discuss a dance they plan to perform for Theseus and devises a plan to compete in the games in disguise, prove his nobility to Theseus, and earn a position near Emilia. Arcite's plan works: Theseus rewards Arcite with a position as Emilia's servant and invites him to go hunting with the rest of the nobility.

Meanwhile, the Jailer's Daughter has fallen in love with Palamon. She concocts a misguided plan to free him from prison in an effort to make him love her. The Jailer's Daughter instructs Palamon to wait for her in the woods, promising to return later to remove his shackles. However, Palamon immediately wanders off and runs into Arcite elsewhere in the forest. Palamon angrily calls Arcite a traitor for pursuing Emilia

when it was Palamon who saw her first. The cousins decide the only way to end their quarrel is to have a duel. Arcite leaves and returns later with weapons and food. They decide to delay their duel until after Palamon has regained his strength to ensure a fair fight.

When the Jailer's Daughter returns to the forest and can't find Palamon, she immediately convinces herself that wolves have killed him. She also realizes that her father (the Jailer) will die for her actions. Lovesick and grieving, the Jailer's Daughter descends into madness, singing nonsensical songs, obsessing over Palamon, and longing for death as she wanders through the woods.

Sometime later, the Schoolmaster assembles the Countryfolk in the forest to practice the Morris dance they plan to perform for Theseus. The Schoolmaster is distraught when the absence of one of the female dancers threatens the performance's success. However, the Jailer's Daughter wanders past the group and, despite her madness, proves herself to be a suitable replacement. Shortly after that, Theseus's hunting party crosses paths with the Countryfolk, who perform their Morris dance as planned. Theseus's party enjoys the performance and rewards the Countryfolk with money.

Shortly after this, the hunting party encounters Arcite and Palamon, poised to duel. The unsanctioned fight enrages Theseus, and he sentences the cousins to death. However, Emilia intervenes, reminding Theseus of an oath her made to grant her a favor, and spares the men's lives. Instead of killing both men, Theseus orders the cousins to leave Athens and return next month to compete against each other in a battle. The winner will marry Emilia, and the loser will die. The cousins accept this arrangement and agree to return to Athens next month.

Before leaving Athens, Palamon ensures that neither the Jailer nor the Jailer's Daughter is punished for his escape, and he gives the Jailer's Daughter a generous dowry to thank her for freeing him. The Wooer (the Jailer's Daughter's suitor) discovers the daughter—still mad—while out fishing and saves her from drowning. He returns the girl to the Jailer, but she doesn't recognize her father and continues to sing nonsense songs and obsess about Palamon. The Jailer consults the Doctor about a cure for his daughter's madness. The Doctor orders everyone to humor the girls' delusions and instructs the Wooer to continue courting the girl—but to pretend that he's Palamon. The Doctor's strategy is successful: the Jailer's Daughter accepts "Palamon's" courtship and recovers. She and the Wooer make plans to marry.

As the day of Arcite and Palamon's battle approaches, Emilia anguishes over her difficult decision. Although both cousins are noble, Emilia can't stand choosing one and sending the other to his death.

Arcite, Palamon, and their knights return to Athens. Before commencing the battle, they take turns praying in the temple. Arcite prays to Mars for Victory, Palamon prays to the goddess Venus for love, and Emilia prays to the goddess Diana for the victory of the man who loves her best. Emilia refuses to watch the battle and waits nearby instead. She listens to the crowd's cheers while a servant relays key developments to her. Eventually, Arcite emerges as the winner. After the battle, Theseus and his party lead Arcite to Emilia. Theseus announces that the couple is free to wed. Although nobody is happy that Palamon must die, they know he must accept his fate.

A group of orderlies leads Palamon and his knights to the execution block. The men bravely accept their fate, but a messenger and Pirithous halt the execution before it can begin. Pirithous informs Palamon that Arcite is mortally wounded after being thrown from his horse. Theseus, Emilia, Hippolyta enter the room, followed by Arcite, who is confined to a chair. Arcite asks for Palamon's forgiveness, gives Palamon his blessing to wed Emilia, and promptly dies. Theseus considers the odd turn of fate that has allowed Palamon to wed Emilia and decides that the gods have given everyone what they prayed for: victory for Arcite, love for Palamon love, and the love of the man who loves her best for Emilia. Theseus announces that they will hold a funeral for Arcite, followed by a wedding for Emilia and Palamon. He orders everyone to live their lives and be grateful for everything the gods have in store for them.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Arcite – Arcite is a Theban soldier and nobleman. He is Palamon's cousin and close friend. Arcite's most notable characteristics are his noble conduct and commitment to chivalry, but he's also clever and calculating. For example, when Palamon accuses Arcite of overstepping a boundary by pursuing Emilia, Arcite shrewdly justifies his amorous feelings with the logic that, as friends, they are subject to the same emotions—including love. Arcite is also a more accomplished warrior than Palamon, which he demonstrates in Act 5, Scene 3 when he defeats Palamon in the duel that Theseus arranges for them to determine which cousin will have Emilia's hand in marriage. Arcite sometimes cares more about maintaining an honorable reputation than actually behaving honorably: for example, in his quest to secure Emilia's love and prove that he is nobler and more deserving than Palamon, he breaks the terms of his exile from Athens. He further dishonors and deceives Theseus by disguising himself as a lowly peasant to gain a position near Emilia. Moreover, Arcite's desire to achieve a noble and victorious reputation by securing Emilia's love compels him to destroy his friendship with Palamon. Still, Arcite's quest to secure a noble reputation also leads him to behave in genuinely noble ways. For example, in Act 1, Scene 2,

Palamon and Arcite set aside their personal grievances with their uncle Creon to honor their duty to defend Thebes against the Athenian army. When Arcite encounters the escaped Palamon in the forest, he treats his cousin courteously, even as Palamon insults and threatens Arcite. After the cousins decide a duel is the only way to settle their differences, Arcite brings Palamon food, water, and armor to ensure that they have a fair fight. Arcite also redeems himself by the end of the play. After he's thrown from his horse and mortally wounded, he admits to his transgressions, asks for Palamon's forgiveness, and gives Palamon his blessing to wed Emilia. Arcite's plea for mercy proves that he is noble despite his flaws and demonstrates his renewed gratitude for his friendship with Palamon.

Palamon – Palamon is a Theban soldier, nobleman, and Arcite's cousin and close friend. He complements Arcite's cleverness and warrior ethos with his more emotional, intense personality. For example, Palamon's love for Emilia immediately becomes irrational, obsessive, and all-consuming. After Arcite's feelings for Emilia transform the cousins into rivals, Palamon justifies his hostility toward Arcite on the grounds that he is defending his honor and pride. In reality, though, Palamon's anger and jealousy toward Arcite play a more significant role in perpetuating the feud. Furthermore, while Arcite continues to address Palamon respectfully, Palamon makes no effort to return this chivalrous gesture. In Act 3, Scene 1, when Arcite encounters the escaped Palamon hiding in the forest, he addresses Palamon respectfully and affectionally, referring to him as "Dear cousin Palamon." Palamon responds to Arcite's courteous greeting by calling him "Cozener Arcite," punning Arcite's familial address with the term "cozener," which means a liar or cheater. Furthermore, in contrast to Arcite, who seems to love the idea of winning Emilia's love more than he loves Emilia herself, Palamon pursues Emilia out of genuine love for her. Still, the cousins are alike in that their flaws prevent them from fully upholding their commitment to chivalry. For example, Palamon's obsession with Emilia persuades him to accept the Jailer's Daughter's offer to free him from prison with little concern for the dire consequences his escape will have on the Jailer's Daughter and the Jailer. His passion for Emilia motivates him to destroy his friendship with Arcite and ultimately (albeit indirectly) leads to Arcite's death. Still, the play presents many examples of Palamon's chivalry. For example, even though Palamon opposes Creon's corrupt regime, he remains in Thebes to defend his city against the Athenians. Similarly, he ensures that Theseus punishes neither the Jailer nor the Jailer's Daughter for his escape from prison. He also provides Jailer's Daughter with a substantial dowry in return for her role in freeing him from prison. In the end, Palamon redeems himself when he forgives Arcite's transgressions and mourns his death, demonstrating that he recognizes the loss he has suffered due to his unbridled passion and misguided sense of duty.

Emilia – Emilia is Hippolyta's younger sister and Theseus's sister-in-law. Before Arcite and Palamon arrive in Athens, Emilia has little interest in men or marriage and spends her days admiring **flowers**. Moreover, there are subtle moments throughout the play that might suggest that Emilia engages in acts of physical intimacy with her female servants. Emilia conveys her disinterest in marriage in a conversation with Hippolyta. She recalls her profound love for Flavina, a childhood friend who died when both girls were 11 years old. Emilia believes that she's incapable of loving a man like she loved Flavina. While Hippolyta predicts Emilia will change her mind someday, Emilia respectfully disagrees. Furthermore, Emilia only agrees to marry Palamon or Arcite to uphold her end of the compromise she reaches with Theseus in her attempt to spare the cousins' lives. Emilia's later inability to decide which cousin she'd prefer to marry reflects her continued indifference about marriage. To Emilia, Arcite and Palamon are equally attractive, noble, and superior to her. But Emilia's indecision also reflects her compassionate and sympathetic nature: she can't bear to choose one cousin and leave the other to die. Another essential part of Emilia's character is her sense of duty. Emilia's prayers to Diana in Act 5 reveal her desire to preserve her chastity and remain unwed. Nevertheless, she accepts her calling to marry the victor of Arcite and Palamon's duel and resolves to marry whichever cousin the gods select for her. The limitations society places on women make Emilia more perceptive and critical of certain social norms. Unlike many of the play's male characters, Emilia is unimpressed by Palamon and Arcite's heroic battle to win her love. Instead, she laments how the cousins' unchecked chivalry results in senseless bloodshed and the dissolution of their friendship, a bond Emilia recognizes as more profoundly meaningful than their sudden, frenzied love for her.

Theseus – Theseus is the Duke of Athens and Hippolyta's husband. He is close friends with Pirithous, with whom he has endured many battles and hardships. Above all, Theseus is a principled, brave, and noble leader who consistently honors his chivalric duties. He demonstrates his chivalry in Act 1 when (after some convincing by Emilia and Hippolyta) he leaves his wedding to travel to Thebes, conquer Creon, and aid the Three Queens in retrieving their husbands' remains. Another example of Theseus's chivalry is his refusal to break an oath. When Theseus encounters Arcite and Palamon engaged in an unsanctioned duel in the woods, he initially sentences both cousins to death. However, after Emilia interjects to remind Theseus of an oath he took to agree to any reasonable request she made of him, he realizes he has no choice but to fulfill Emilia's request to spare Arcite and Palamon's lives. However, Theseus's chivalry doesn't always lead him to be merciful. The new conditions Theseus proposes to honor his oath to Emilia hold that Arcite and Palamon will enter into a sanctioned contest where the winner will receive his blessing to wed Emilia, and the loser must die. Arcite ultimately defeats

Palamon, leaving the latter fated to die. Although Palamon's death saddens Theseus, he extends no other mercy to Palamon since he believes Palamon must honor the conditions Theseus outlined in their arrangement and bravely accept his fate. The lack of compassion Theseus shows Palamon also reflects Theseus's unwavering faith in divine Providence. Although it saddens Theseus that Palamon must die, he accepts Palamon's loss and Arcite's victory as the gods' will. He adopts the same attitude when Arcite's unexpected death allows Palamon to marry Emilia. Theseus even suggests that this unlikely twist of fate is evidence that the gods have heard everyone's prayers, fulfilling Arcite's prayer for victory, Palamon's prayer for love, and Emilia's prayer to marry the man who loves her best.

Hippolyta – Hippolyta is the Queen of the Amazons who becomes the Duchess of Athens after marrying Theseus. Like her younger sister Emilia, Hippolyta is compassionate and merciful. She joins Emilia in convincing Theseus to travel to Thebes, conquer Creon, and help the Three Queens honor their fallen husbands. She also sympathizes with Arcite and Palamon and begs Theseus to spare their lives. Like Emilia, Hippolyta refuses to valorize the cousins' chivalric efforts to secure Emilia's hand in marriage. Instead, Hippolyta laments the cousins' irrationality in allowing their infatuation with Emilia to come between their loving friendship.

Pirithous – Pirithous is Theseus's close friend. The men have developed a profoundly meaningful relationship due to the many battles and other hardships they've endured together. According to Hippolyta, the friends are so close that they can hardly tell where one ends and the other begins. Like Theseus, Pirithous is noble and exceptionally attuned to his chivalric duties. Unlike Arcite and Palamon, Pirithous and Theseus never quarrel, though Pirithous often sides with Hippolyta and Emilia on extending mercy to the cousins. In this way, Pirithous and Theseus are equals not only because they mutually support each other through hardship but because they complement each other, with Pirithous's compassion balancing out Theseus's harshness.

The Jailer's Daughter – The Jailer's Daughter is an impressionable young woman who helps her father, the Jailer, operate the jail where Theseus imprisons Arcite and Palamon. After Theseus frees Arcite, the Jailer's Daughter continues tending to Palamon and eventually falls in love with him. She hatches a plan to free Palamon and hide him in the woods in a misguided effort to make him love her, ignoring the grave danger such a plan will create for her and her father once her foolish actions come to light. In this way, the Jailer's Daughter's love for Palamon is just as irrational and deluded as Palamon's love for Emilia. Moreover, when the Jailer's Daughter returns to the woods and sees that Palamon has disappeared, she slowly descends into madness. Heartbroken and delusional, she longs for death. Although the Wooer, her former suitor, saves her from drowning and returns her to her father, she continues to entertain delusions about her and Palamon's nonexistent romance. Eventually, the Doctor devises a plan for the Wooer to disguise himself as Palamon and court the Jailer's Daughter as though he is her absent lover. The method works: The Wooer's courtship restores the daughter's sanity, and the couple makes plans to marry. Furthermore, Palamon redeems himself by ensuring that Theseus doesn't punish the Jailer and his daughter for his escape. He even rewards the daughter with a generous dowry.

The Jailer – The Jailer operates the prison in Athens where Theseus imprisons Arcite and Palamon. He is a just, sympathetic man who treats his prisoners with respect. Although the Jailer isn't wealthy, he works hard to support his daughter, ensuring his daughter's suitor, the Wooer, that she will inherit everything the Jailer has to offer. The Jailer's love for his daughter compounds the foolishness and irrationality of her decision to free Palamon, an action that will almost certainly put her father's life in danger. But the Jailer's Daughter's betrayal doesn't tarnish the Jailer's love for her, which he demonstrates by consulting with a Doctor after the Wooer returns the now-maddened young woman to her father's custody. Although the Jailer initially resists the Doctor's recommendation that the Wooer (disguised as Palamon) fulfills the daughter's every desire—including her requests for physical intimacy—he ultimately acquiesces. The Jailer's reluctant acceptance shows that while he cares about preserving his daughter's supposed purity, it's more important to him that she recovers her sanity. Lastly, Palamon expresses his gratitude to the just, respectful Jailer by ensuring that the Jailer and his daughter receive no punishment for his escape. Palamon also rewards the daughter with a generous dowry for her future marriage.

The Wooer – The Wooer was the Jailer's Daughter's suitor before she fell in love with Palamon. Even though the Wooer belongs to a lower social class than noblemen like Arcite and Palamon, he behaves nobly by supporting the Jailer's Daughter through her madness. The Wooer rescues the Jailer's Daughter from drowning, returns her to the Jailer, and follows the Doctor's orders to pretend to be Palamon to secure the daughter's affection and gradually restore her sanity. Of course, nobility and a sense of duty aren't the only things motivating the Wooer to stand by the Jailer's Daughter: he'll inherit the Jailer's wealth and Palamon's dowry contribution to the dowry if he marries her. Furthermore, the Doctor tells the Wooer (as "Palamon") to do everything to satisfy every request the daughter asks of him—including requests for physical intimacy, much to the Jailer's displeasure. The Wooer's decision to support the Jailer's Daughter through her madness isn't entirely selfless. Nevertheless, his noble efforts earn him a happy ending: his love regains her sanity, the couple resumes their engagement, and they receive the unexpected financial benefit of Palamon's generous contribution to the Jailer's

Daughter's dowry.

Flavina – In a conversation with Hippolyta, Emilia recalls her loving relationship with Flavina, a close friend who died when both girls were 11 years old. Emilia recalls how she and Flavina would copy each other, dressing the same way, wearing the same **flowers** pinned to their dresses, and singing the same songs. While Emilia recognizes that her comparatively brief friendship with Flavina is different from Theseus and Pirithous's long-standing friendship, she believes her relationship with Flavina was profound in its own way. Furthermore, Emilia doesn't want to marry because she doesn't think she can love a man like she loved Flavina. Hippolyta thinks Emilia will change her mind, but Emilia respectfully disagrees with Hippolyta's prediction.

The Prologue – The Prologue is an actor (who does not appear elsewhere in the play) who greets the audience before Act 1. He informs the audience that the play they are about to witness is based on a tale by Chaucer. The Prologue alludes to the theme of chivalry, honor, and pride when he explains the actors' wish to honor Chaucer with their performance.

Three Queens – The Three Queens (referred to only as First Queen, Second Queen, and Third Queen) are the wives of kings killed by the treacherous Creon, King of Thebes. When Creon doesn't allow the queens to retrieve their husbands' remains, they interrupt Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding to beg Theseus to help them. When Theseus appears hesitant to abandon his wedding, the queens solicit additional support from Hippolyta and Emilia. Theseus ultimately honors his chivalric duty by traveling to Thebes, defeating Creon, and enabling the queens to honor their husbands with funeral rites.

Creon – Creon is the corrupt King of Thebes and Arcite and Palamon's uncle. He doesn't appear in the play outside of other characters' references to him. In Act 1, Theseus honors the request of Three Queens to travel to Thebes, conquer Creon's army, and retrieve the queens' husbands' remains so that they may receive a proper burial. Arcite and Palamon disapprove of Creon's treachery and consider leaving Thebes to save their reputations and avoid becoming corrupt themselves. However, when they learn of Theseus's approaching army, they set aside their ethical misgivings about Creon to honor their duty to defend their homeland against outside invaders.

Woman – When Arcite and Palamon look out their prison cell window and see Emilia for the first time, she is walking through a nearby garden, accompanied by an unnamed woman (a servant). Oblivious to her admirers, Emilia and her woman admire the **flowers** and discuss love, lust, and men. Some of Emilia's exchanges with her serving woman are provocative and might suggest that Emilia is sexually intimate with her maids. For example, Emilia calls the woman "wanton" (promiscuous), and both women convey their desire to "laugh" and "lie down," possibly with another person.

The Countryfolk – The Countryfolk are a group of countrymen and countrywomen the Schoolmaster assembles to perform a traditional Morris dance for Theseus during the May Day festivities. After the Countryfolk perform their dance for Theseus and his hunting party, Theseus generously rewards the performers with money, demonstrating his commitment to chivalry. The Countryfolk plotline mainly exists for comic effect and as a strategic way to place Arcite near Emilia. After Theseus frees and exiles Arcite, Arcite remains in Athens, lies low, and tries to devise a plan to pursue his love. While Arcite is hiding in the woods, he encounters a group of Countrymen who tell him about their plans to perform for Theseus during the May Day festival, which features a series of athletic competitions. Arcite hatches his own plan to participate in the games, impress Theseus, and earn a position near Emilia.

The Doctor – The Doctor assesses the Jailer's Daughter's condition after her unrequited love for Palamon drives her to madness. To cure the daughter's madness, the Doctor proposes that the Wooer disguise himself as Palamon and do whatever the Jailer's Daughter asks of him—even if her requests involve sexual intimacy. Although the Jailer initially disapproves of the plan, the Wooer does his part and ultimately restores the Jailer's Daughter's sanity.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Epilogue – The Epilogue is an actor who greets the audience after the final scene of Act 5. He is displeased when the audience appears not to have enjoyed the performance but predicts that they'll return to the theater to see future productions of different plays.

The Schoolmaster – The Schoolmaster leads the Countryfolk in performing a traditional Morris dance for Theseus during the May Day festivities. However, he becomes frustrated when the dancers' inattention and ineptitude threaten the success of his performance. He dramatically and wordily laments their failure to realize his artistic vision.

Knights – Palamon and Arcite return to Athens accompanied by knights who will fight by their sides in the contest Theseus has arranged to determine who will wed Emilia. The knights adhere to a chivalric code and feel a duty to defend their lords' honor—even if they must die trying.

The Jailer's Brother – After the Wooer finds and rescues the Jailer's Daughter, he keeps her with her uncle, the Jailer's Brother, until he can inform the Jailer of the daughter's maddened state.

Artesius – Artesius is a soldier in Theseus's court who attends Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding. Theseus initially orders Artesius to go to Thebes to lead the fight against Creon, but Emilia, Hippolyta, and the Three Queens eventually persuade Theseus to go himself.

Valerius – Valerius is a Theban who informs Arcite and

Palamon of the approaching Athenian army.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

LOVE AND IRRATIONALITY

The Two Noble Kinsmen's central conflict revolves around the love triangle that develops between the knights Arcite and Palamon and the Athenian duke's sister-in-law, Emilia. Arcite and Palamon are cousins who have been imprisoned in Athens, and they become enamored with Emilia after witnessing her wandering around the garden below their cell. Almost immediately, their love morphs into a maddening obsession that threatens to destroy the integrity of their close friendship to which they've just pledged eternal devotion. Palamon sees Emilia first, but Arcite claims he has an equal right to Emilia's heart. In a matter of minutes, hatred, jealousy, and rage destroy Arcite and Palamon's close bond, as they become rivals willing to fight to the death to secure Emilia's love. Adding to the irrationality of their feud is the unlikelihood that a romance between either cousin and Emilia, a noblewoman, could develop in the first place: neither man pauses to consider that, as an Athenian noblewoman, Emilia likely has little interest in two imprisoned Theban soldiers. The scene depicts a stereotypical "love at first sight" encounter made absurd by the comical one-sidedness of the romance. Arcite and Palamon find themselves instantaneously and wholeheartedly invested in a woman who has given them no indication that she loves them back—or that she even knows they exist.

This absurdity makes the cousins' respective fates—Arcite's death, and Palamon's—all the more tragically senseless. Love causes Arcite and Palamon to forgo logic and abandon reality entirely: in their quest for romantic fulfillment, they become willful participants in the dismantling of their friendship and the endangerment of their very lives. Furthermore, it's important to consider that Emilia never once expresses romantic interest in Arcite and Palamon. In fact, she explicitly says she *doesn't* want to marry and only agrees to wed one of the cousins out of a moral obligation to not be responsible for sending both cousins to their deaths. Emilia's disinterest in either suitor makes cousins' feud especially pointless, since whatever romantic fulfillment they could hope to achieve through a relationship with an unloving, indifferent spouse surely would be less gratifying than the fulfillment they experienced in their friendship. The swift and senseless disintegration of Arcite and Palamon from devoted friends to bitter rivals portrays love as an intoxicating, maddening force that drives people to behave recklessly, illogically, and destructively.

FATE, FORTUNE, AND DIVINE PROVIDENCE

While characters in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* have some degree of agency over their actions, they generally accept that fortune and fate shape their lives to a far greater extent than free will and determination. However, this doesn't mean they regard life as meaningless and arbitrary. To the contrary, characters generally accept whatever fate or fortune befalls them as a sign of Providence, or divine guidance. In other words, it's the gods' whims—not mere chance—that determine fate. This worldview allows characters to apply reason, stability, and meaning to an otherwise chaotic, unpredictable, and mysterious world. It also enables them to differentiate the noble from the wretched: good fortune comes to those the gods see as virtuous, and bad fortune comes to those they deem dishonorable.

For example, in Act I, Scene 4, Theseus returns to Athens after handily defeating Creon's Theban army and states, "Th' impartial gods, who from the mounted heavens / View us their mortal herd, behold who err / And, in their time, chastise." In other words, Theseus and the Athenians' victory is the consequence of the gods looking down on the "mortal herd" of humanity, deciding who "err[s]" (does wrong), and punishing them accordingly. Theseus regards his victory as divinely sanctioned evidence that he and the Athenians are honorable and that Creon and the Thebans are dishonorable. The final lines of Act 5, Scene 5 (also delivered by Theseus) also portray Arcite, Palamon, and Emilia's fates as acts of Providence. Theseus sees Arcite's defeat of Palamon in the tournament held to determine which cousin will marry Emilia and which will die as Mars's answer to Arcite's prayer for victory. He also interprets Arcite's sudden death, which leaves Palamon free to wed Emilia, as Venus's answer to Palamon's prayer for love. Finally, Theseus regards the odd twist of fate that leads to Palamon and Emilia's union as the goddess Diana's answer to Emilia's prayer, which was to marry the man who loves her best, since it was Palamon—not Arcite, the original victor—who prayed for love. *The Two Noble Kinsmen* therefore portrays Providence as an antidote to life's instability, unpredictability, and discord. A belief in Providence allows the characters to apply meaning to events that otherwise would be senseless, ultimately giving order and value to lives that would otherwise be left entirely to chance.

CHIVALRY, HONOR, AND PRIDE

William Shakespeare and John Fletcher based *The Two Noble Kinsmen* on Geoffrey Chaucer's well-known work of medieval literature, *The Canterbury*

Tales, a satirical collection of stories written mostly in verse. The particular story that *The Two Noble Kinsmen* draws from, "The Knight's Tale," explores themes that relate to the chivalric code, a set of rules that governed the behavior of medieval knights and gentlemen. Though *The Two Noble Kinsmen* is set in Ancient Greece rather than medieval England, the same moral code shapes its characters, whose shared desire to embody the virtues of loyalty, piety, generosity, bravery, and a commitment to courtly manners influences their actions and decisions. For example, when Theseus leaves his wedding to battle Creon, he does so out of a sense of duty to the Three Queens who call on him to avenge their husbands' deaths. Likewise, Arcite and Palamon remain in Thebes to defend the city against Theseus's Athenian army—despite their personal disapproval of Creon's corrupt kingdom—out of a chivalric sense of duty to defend their homeland.

This strong sense of duty to an external value system allows characters in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* to accept the trials that befall them, even in the face of death. For example, in Act 3, Scene 6, Theseus's hunting party interrupts Arcite and Palamon's duel. Angry at the cousins for disrespecting his authority (Palamon has escaped from prison, and Arcite has returned to Athens in disguise after Theseus banished him), Theseus sentences them to death. But even though Emilia eventually convinces Theseus to spare the cousins, they reject the offer. They would both rather put their lives on the line than live as cowards and traitors to their personal chivalric causes (love for Palamon, victory for Arcite). The same sense of honor ultimately gives Arcite the strength to accept his fate when he is mortally wounded, as he confesses his wrongs against Palamon and asks for Palamon's forgiveness. In *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, characters' commitment to the chivalric code keeps them focused on maintaining their honor—even when doing so means facing danger, hardship, or death. At the same time, the play complicates an uncritical view of chivalry by presenting situations in which the cousins' intense devotion to the chivalric code leads them to become so wrapped up in notions of honor that they actively turn down opportunities to avoid violence. In the above example, Emilia offers Arcite and Palamon an opportunity to escape Athens unscathed, yet they stubbornly insist on staying behind to fight because they'd rather die than appear weak and dishonorable. The play highlights Arcite and Palamon's stubborn adherence to the chivalric code to show just how devoted knights were to defending their honor—so devoted, in fact, that they'd die before they injure their pride.

FRIENDSHIP

One of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*'s most significant departures from Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" is its heightened emphasis on friendship. The play establishes three primary pairs of close friends in its opening scenes: Theseus and Pirithous, Emilia and Flavina, and Arcite and Palamon, each of which depicts an intimate bond. These friendships are largely defined by shared respect or affection, and this creates a certain equality in the relationships. Arcite and Palamon (when they are not feuding) address each other as "noble cousin," "gentle cousin," "fair cousin," and "noble kinsman." What's more, Arcite's clever, rational personality complements Palamon's more loving, impassioned demeanor, thus leading to a well-balanced connection. After the Athenians capture and imprison Palamon and Arcite at the beginning of the play, the friends go so far as to express gratitude for their imprisonment, since it ensures they will always have the other by their side. Arcite refers to their cell as a "holy sanctuary," and Palamon expresses gratitude that "[their] fortunes / Were twined together." The implication here is that it's possible to take refuge in friendship, which can sustain people through times of hardship. To that end, Hippolyta recounts the battles and hardships Theseus and Pirithous have endured together and describes their friendship as a "knot of love" that is so "entangled" that it could never be "undone." In a way, then, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* presents the love between friends as the ideal form of closeness that two people can achieve, a deeply unified existence split between two sympathetic individuals. Whereas the play characterizes romantic love as irrational, chaotic, and discordant, this bond of platonic friendship embodies stability, unity, and harmony. Indeed, the play's tragic ending illustrates the importance of friendship over other forms of love, as Arcite and Palamon's misguided efforts to attain the romantic love of Emilia cause them to lose a much greater love: that of a good friend.

GENDER AND POWER

The female characters in *The Two Noble Kinsmen* don't enjoy the same freedoms and intellectual treatment as the male characters, largely because of the sexist cultural climate in which the play was written. Although women hold some power or agency, they often lack the means to exercise this power directly and must convey their thoughts and wishes through male characters. For example, Emilia convinces Theseus to spare Palamon and Arcite their lives in Act 3, Scene 6, but not by her power of persuasion alone. Instead, Emilia convinces Theseus by appealing to an earlier oath he made to give Emilia anything she wanted. In other words, Emilia persuades Theseus to spare the cousins' lives not because *she* is particularly persuasive, but because Theseus is concerned about the negative ramifications breaking an oath would have on his reputation as a chivalrous nobleman.

But the play's women are hardly powerless. Often, female characters cast a more perceptive, attentive, and critical gaze at the issues male characters accept without question. For example, in Act 5, Scene 4, while Theseus happily accepts the odd twist of fate that leaves Arcite mortally wounded and

Palamon the winner of Emilia's hand in marriage, Emilia and Hippolyta are less convinced that the cousins' fates were really so favorable. "Is this winning?" asks Emilia. Hippolyta, too, observes what a "pity" it is that Arcite and Palamon's obsession with Emilia had to wreak such irreparable havoc on their formerly beautiful friendship. In turn, the female characters have something the male characters don't: namely, the ability to think reasonably and critically about the things men foolishly take for granted. Of course, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* still isn't particularly subversive in its treatment of gender roles: more often than not, the play relegates female characters to the sidelines, robs them of personal agency (nobody considers whether Emilia *wants* to marry Palamon or Arcite, for example), and upholds stereotypes about femininity. And yet, despite these shortcomings, the play gives its female characters the unique function of keenly observing and criticizing the action and intellectual debate from which their patriarchal society excludes them. Female characters, primarily Emilia and Hippolyta, cast a critical eye on the things male characters are quick to valorize, effectively offering a more nuanced and complicated exploration of the play's values.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

FLOWERS

Flowers symbolize growth, rebirth, and renewal. Flower imagery is abundant throughout the play, which takes place during the springtime. For example, Act 1, Scene 1 opens on Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding procession with a boy singing a song about the flowers he scatters at the couple's feet. The song's lyrics describe the blooming flowers that mark the onset of spring and are evidence of the natural renewed growth the earth experiences as winter transitions into spring. When the boy places flowers at Theseus and Hippolyta's feet, he symbolically blesses their marriage, imbuing it with the regenerative power of new beginnings reflected in the blooming of springtime flowers. Similarly, when Arcite and Palamon first see Emilia, she is wandering through a garden, inspecting flowers. The presence of flowers in this scene symbolizes the onset of a new phase in Arcite and Palamon's friendship, for it's Emilia's appearance that prompts the once-devoted friends to become rivals.

Flowers also symbolize fertility and sexuality. In Act 2, Scene 2, the same scene in which Arcite and Palamon first see Emilia, Emilia remarks how a rose captures "the very emblem of a maid." She compares how a rose blooms for the gentle west wind and closes its petals to the violent, persistent north wind to the way women respond to their male suitors. Like the rose, women are receptive to gentle wooing but will reject suitors' advances if they are too harsh and unthinking. In Emilia's metaphor, the "chaste blushes" the rose reveals in its bloom represents female virginity. When Emilia prays to Diana in Act 5, Scene 3 and asks the goddess to show her a sign that she's received Emilia's prayers, a tree bearing a single rose appears. Emilia interprets the rose to mean that she will remain "unplucked," or chaste. When the rose falls from the tree, Emilia sees it as a sign that Diana has "dischargest" her. Because Diana is a goddess associated with fertility and virginity, for release of Emilia foreshadows Emilia's impending marriage to Arcite or Palamon and the loss of virginity that likely would follow the union.

WREATHS/GARLANDS

Wreaths symbolize victory and fertility. This symbolism has roots in Greek mythology. In one myth, Zeus's son, Apollo (the god of life and light), falls in love with Daphne, a nymph. Apollo chases after Daphne, who pleads with her father, the river god Peneus, to help her. Peneus turns Daphne into a laurel tree, thwarting Apollo. From that day forth, Apollo wears a laurel wreath to honor Daphne. The Ancient Greeks awarded laurel wreaths to victorious poets, athletes, and warriors. The Ancient Romans used wreaths to honor military victories, as well. In Act 5, Scene 4 of *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Theseus awards Arcite with a garland after Arcite defeats Palamon in battle. Later, when Pirithous recounts Arcite's fatal accident, he notes how Arcite initially manages to stay mounted atop his mad horse but falls after the commotion causes his garland to fall from his head. This detail symbolizes Arcite's fateful fall from victory.

The Ancient Greeks also associated wreaths with fertility and the changing seasons. The round headdresses, made of **flowers**, leaves, and grasses, were often worn on holy days and other celebrations. They believed that wearing a wreath could bring the wearer closer to a particular god. For example, in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, Emilia wears a wheaten wreath when she prays to Diana, a goddess associated with virginity, about her impending marriage. When Emilia prays that the cousin who loves her best be the one to remove her wheaten garland, she means that she wants that man to be the one who takes her virginity. In this way, wreaths are associated with belief in divine Providence: characters wear wreaths to honor or be closer to the gods who control their fates.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* published in 2010.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

> Let th' event,
> That never-erring arbitrator, tell us
> When we know all ourselves, and let us follow
> The becking of our chance.

Related Characters: Arcite (speaker), Creon, Palamon, Valerius, Theseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.2.132-135

Explanation and Analysis

Valerius alerts Arcite and Palamon to the approaching Athenian army, led by Theseus. Although the cousins were previously speaking about leaving Thebes to avoid becoming corrupt like their uncle, Creon (the king of Thebes), they decide to remain behind to defend their city against the Athenians.

Arcite and Palamon decide to defend their city, family, and friends against Theseus's army because upholding the code of chivalry is more important to them than any personal hang-ups they might have about their uncle Creon. In this passage, Arcite also suggests that it's their destiny to fight the army. It's imperative that the cousins remain in Thebes to fight because to flee would be akin to running away from the destiny the gods have assigned to them: it's acting as though they know better than the gods.

When Arcite describes "th' event / That never-erring arbitrator," he refers to time. According to Arcite, only time can know for sure what the outcome of the Thebans battle against the Athenians will bring. Therefore, they must remain behind and fight because it's where their destiny lies.

When Arcite proclaims that he and Palamon must "follow / The becking of our chance," he states that the cousins must accept their fate. To run from the battle would be to turn their backs on fate. Because the cousins believe in divine Providence, they have to stay and fight and follow the paths the gods have paved for them.

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

> Their knot of love,
> Tied, weaved, entangled, with so true, so long,
> And with a finger of so deep a cunning,
> May be outworn, never undone. I think
> Theseus cannot be umpire to himself,
> Cleaving his conscience into twin and doing
> Each side like justice, which he loves best.

Related Characters: Hippolyta (speaker), Theseus, Pirithous, Emilia, Creon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.3.48-54

Explanation and Analysis

Hippolyta and Emilia are in the temple praying for Theseus, who has just left to lead the Athenian army in a battle against the corrupt King of Thebes, Creon. The women have also been discussing the relationship of Theseus and his close friend, Pirithous.

Hippolyta's description of Theseus and Pirithous's relationship as a "knot of love, / Tied, weaved, entangled, / And with a finger of so deep a cunning, / May be outworn, never undone" emphasizes the close bond Theseus and Pirithous share. The men are so familiar with each other and their lives so interconnected that it's as though they are one rope arranged in a tight, intricately tied knot. Hippolyta's description underscores the strength of Theseus and Pirithous's bond and alludes to cultural attitudes toward friendship common in Classical antiquity (the play is set in Ancient Greece) as well as ideals of friendship familiar to Shakespeare and Fletcher's Renaissance culture, which themselves drew from Classical ideals of friendship, in particular those espoused by Aristotle in *Nichomachean Ethics* and by those that appear in Cicero's treatise on friendship, *Laelius de amicitia* ("On Friendship").

Hippolyta's praise for Theseus's and Pirithous's friendship is also essential in establishing a model for the ideal friendship against which the play implicitly compares Arcite and Palamon's friendship. Although Arcite and Palamon's friendship begins much like Theseus and Pirithous's, it deteriorates once they allow their honor, pride, and obsession with Emilia to tear them apart. Establishing what a meaningful friendship looks like sets up the ultimate tragedy at the heart of the play: the senseless destruction of Arcite and Palamon's close bond.

You're out of breath,
And this high-speeded pace is but to say
That you shall never—like the maid Flavina—
Love any that's called man.

Related Characters: Hippolyta (speaker), Emilia, Flavina, Arcite, Palamon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.3.94-97

Explanation and Analysis

Emilia tells Hippolyta about loving her close friend, Flavina, who died in childhood. Hippolyta notices that Emilia is "out of breath" after fervently recalling Flavina at a "high-speeded pace" and speculates that Emilia "shall never—like the maid Flavina— / Love any that's called man." What Hippolyta means by this is that Emilia is incapable of loving a man as much as she loved Flavina. Hippolyta's words are somewhat vague, but it is possible to interpret her observation as evidence of Emilia's homosexuality: Emilia cannot love a man the way she loved Flavina because she is attracted—romantically, or perhaps just physically—to women rather than men.

Alternatively, Hippolyta's observation might underscore the superiority of friendship to romantic love. Emilia can't love a man as much as she loved Flavina because the bond of Emilia and Flavina's friendship was more fulfilling than any romantic bond could ever be. Although the Renaissance culture of Shakespeare and Fletcher's day placed a high value upon close friendship, it typically left women out of this conversation based on the assumption that their inferior minds were not capable of forming the intellectual, profound bonds achieved in male-male friendships.

At any rate, Hippolyta's observation about Emilia's relationship with Flavina suggests that while the their gender might make their relationship fundamentally different from the connections formed between close male friends, the friendship was incredibly significant to Emilia nonetheless and was meaningful in its own way. Lastly, this passage is important because it lays the foundation for Emilia's central struggle throughout the play, which is how her desire not to marry a man complicates the guilt she feels concerning her unwitting complicity in Arcite and Palamon's deadly feud.

Act 1, Scene 4 Quotes

Th' impartial gods, who from the mounted heavens
View us their mortal herd, behold who err
And, in their time, chastise.

Related Characters: Theseus (speaker), Creon, Three Queens, Arcite, Emilia, Palamon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.4.6-8

Explanation and Analysis

Theseus has just conquered Creon, enabling the Three Queens to retrieve their husbands' remains and honor them with funerals and proper burial rites. Theseus's reflection on his victory emphasizes the theme of divine Providence.

Theseus attributes his victory to the will of "impartial gods" who look down upon humans "from the mounted heavens." The gods' privileged position in the "mounted heavens" allows them to be all-seeing and all-knowing in a way humans cannot be. Theseus sees the gods as shepherds of "their mortal herd," humanity. The gods watch over humanity and reward those who are noble (like Theseus) with fortune, and they "chastise" people like Creon who "err," or behave dishonorably.

Theseus will apply this same logic to the unexpected reversal of fate that occurs at the end of the play when Arcite's sudden death spares Palamon's life and allows him to wed Emilia. Theseus's belief in divine Providence allows him to take comfort in the fact that the "impartial gods"—whose privileged position in "the mounted heavens" offers them a more complete view of the world—will ensure that all mortals receive precisely what they deserve.

Act 1, Scene 5 Quotes

This world's a city full of straying streets,
And death's the market-place where each one meets.

Related Characters: Three Queens (speaker), Theseus, Creon, Arcite

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.5.17-18

Explanation and Analysis

Theseus's army conquers Creon and the Thebans, which allows the Three Queens to hold long-overdue funeral rites for their deceased husbands. During the funeral procession, Third Queen remarks, "This world's a city full of straying streets, / And death's the market-place where each one meets." In this passage, Third Queen uses figurative language, describing the entire world as "a city full of straying streets" that all lead to a central "market-place,"

which is death.

While there are many paths one can take through life, the specific path one takes does little to change the final destination, since nobody can escape death. Even though there are many "straying streets" to take in life, ultimately, everyone's life is headed in the same direction: that is, toward death, which is the "market-place" where these paths converge. Humans might feel as though they have some degree of free will in their lives, but in reality, their mortality leaves them fated to die, and there's nothing they can do to change that. Furthermore, because a person's fate is always in the hands of the gods, it is wise to realize that death can happen at any time, even when one least expects it. In fact, the Queen's grave words even foreshadow the unexpected fate that meets Arcite, whom fate propels from the height of victory to the depths of death in the instant it takes for him to be thrown from his horse and mortally wounded.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

Nay, most likely, for they are noble suff'rers.
I marvel how they would have looked had they
been victors, that with such a constant nobility enforce
a freedom out of bondage, making misery
their mirth and affliction a toy to jest at.

Related Characters: The Jailer's Daughter (speaker), Arcite, Palamon, The Jailer, The Wooer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.1.33-37

Explanation and Analysis

The Jailer's Daughter, the Jailer, and the Wooer discuss Arcite and Palamon, the latest prisoners to arrive at the jail. The Jailer's Daughter remarks on Arcite and Palamon's noticeably cheery disposition. Even though they will likely spend the remainder of their lives in prison, the cousins are "making misery / their mirth and affliction a toy to jest at." In other words, Arcite and Palamon are making the best of their imprisonment, even seeming to enjoy themselves despite it. In fact, the cousins are so cheerful that the Jailer's Daughter can't imagine how their demeanor would improve "had they / been victors" instead of prisoners.

The cousins' cheerful disposition is at odds with the fact that, for all they know, they will likely spend the rest of their days in prison. In addition to their powerful bond with each other, the Jailer's Daughter's observation draws on another key feature of Arcite's and Palamon's personalities: their commitment to upholding the chivalric code. She states, "they are noble suff'rers," suggesting that Arcite and Palamon take their imprisonment in stride and perhaps even see it as a sort of honor. Arcite and Palamon can weather their imprisonment so well because they take pride in the fact that they are there, since they the "noble," honorable thing by fighting to defend their city.

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

Yet, cousin,
Even from the bottom of these miseries,
From all that fortune can inflict upon us,
I see two comforts rising, two mere blessings,
If the gods please: to hold here a brave patience,
And the enjoying of our griefs together.
Whilst Palamon is with me, let me perish
If I think this our prison!

Related Characters: Arcite (speaker), Palamon, Theseus, Emilia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.2.60-67

Explanation and Analysis

Arcite and Palamon are in jail after being captured by Theseus's army and brought back to Athens as prisoners of war. Although they expect to spend the rest of their lives behind bars, they accept their fates and take solace in each other's company.

Arcite states, "Even from the bottom of these miseries, / From all that fortune can inflict upon us, / I see two comforts rising, two mere blessings." Arcite's observation is important because it establishes his belief that he and Palamon are in their current situation because it is the gods' will for them to be there. Furthermore, Arcite's proclamation gives credence to the Jailer's earlier observation about the cousins being good sports about their imprisonment. Their chivalric pride and friendship allow them to live out their prison sentence proudly.

Arcite exhibits reverence toward the gods here, not cursing them for the "miseries" they've inflicted upon the cousins but speculating that there might be "blessings" even in this unfortunate situation, and he asks the gods for permission to interpret their situation as such. The "blessings" of which Arcite speaks refers to the simple fact that he and Palamon

can live out their sentence together: "to hold here a brave patience, / And the enjoying of our griefs together." To Arcite, Palamon's company is such a blessing that it allows him to "enjoy[]" rather than suffer "their griefs."

What's more, the presence of his good friend has a transformative, freeing effect: "Whilst Palamon is with me, let me perish / If I think this our prison!" proclaims Arcite. In other words, he would die before allowing himself to think of their jail cell as a prison. Prison isn't prison if Palamon is with him. Arcite's grandiose proclamation underscores the profoundly close friendship he and Palamon have. It also lays a foundation for the tragedy they will undergo by the end of the play, when they allow their competing love for Emilia to tear them apart. They had such a good thing going, but they lose sight of it and ultimately suffer the consequences.

> Men are mad things.

Related Characters: Emilia (speaker), Woman, Arcite, Palamon, Theseus, Hippolyta, Flavina

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.2.148

Explanation and Analysis

Emilia walks through the garden with one of her female servants. Spotting a flower known as a narcissus, Emilia recalls the Greek myth of Narcissus, who was the flower's namesake. Narcissus was so in love with his reflection that, while staring at himself on the surface of a pond one day, he leaned in too close, fell in, and drowned.

Thinking about Narcissus and men in general, Emilia cautions her maid to be wary, for "Men are mad things." Emilia's remark foreshadows Arcite and Palamon's decidedly "mad" infatuation with her, resulting in the dissolution of their friendship and, ultimately, Arcite's death. Like Narcissus, Arcite and Palamon's love for Emilia is so irrationally obsessive that it becomes self-destructive.

Emilia's comment conveys her belief that men can be single-minded about their pursuits, particularly when it comes to romance. Emilia foreshadows the love triangle in which she becomes unwillingly involved. She also demonstrates how her gender allows her to observe the fancies of men skeptically and critically. It later becomes clear that Emilia and Hippolyta are the only characters to realize how "mad" and foolish Arcite and Palamon's obsession is. Arcite and Palamon remain wholly blinded by their passion, and even Theseus allows his appreciation for the cousins' valor and pride to blind him to the underlying irrationality that motivates their quest to secure Emilia's love.

Lastly, Emilia's comment reinforces her disinterest in men and marriage. She has already conveyed her disinterest to Hippolyta in Act 1, when she reflected on not being able to love a man as she loved her deceased childhood friend, Flavina. Here, she dismisses men yet again, rejecting them because they are "mad things" whose irrationality she has little patience to entertain.

> It is the very emblem of a maid.
> For when the west wind courts her gently,
> How modestly she blows and paints the sun
> With her chaste blushes! When the north comes near her,
> Rude and impatient, then, like chastity,
> She locks her beauties in her bud again,
> And leave him to base briers.

Related Characters: Emilia (speaker), Woman, Arcite, Palamon, Theseus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.2.168-175

Explanation and Analysis

Emilia walks through the garden with one of her female servants, admiring the flowers and talking about men and love. She spots a rose and uses metaphorical language to show how the flower "is the very emblem of a maid," or virgin. This passage is important because it further develops the play's flower symbolism. Here, Emilia explicitly presents a rose as a metaphor for female virginity.

The point Emilia makes in her poetic comparison is that women, like roses, respond well to gentleness and reject rudeness. "For when the west wind courts her gently," explains Emilia, "How modestly she blows and paints the sun / With her chaste blushes." Just as a rose blooms in response to the mild, careful breeze of the "west wind," so too do women receive a suitor who is tender and patient—this, at least, is what Emilia says here.

In contrast, just as the "rude and impatient" north wind causes the rose "lock[] her beauties in her bud again," so too will a woman reject a suitor who is too aggressive and brash.

In short, if a man wants to woo a woman and, to put it frankly, convince her to sleep with him, he'll have more luck if he's kind and patient than if he's presumptuous and bold.

Adding a layer of dramatic irony to this scene is the fact that Arcite and Palamon are currently watching Emilia from their prison cell window as she makes this comparison to her servant. However, they can't hear what she's saying. The defining feature of Arcite and Palamon's love for Emilia is how irrational and senseless it is and how unaware they are of what Emilia actually wants—to be wooed gently, not boldly.

Emilia's blueprint for the ideal courtship stands in direct opposition to the approach Arcite and Palamon end up taking when they try to win her love. The cousins are immediately "rude and impatient" and go to great, foolish lengths to secure a spot by her side. For example, Arcite illegally remains in Athens after Theseus exiles him, Palamon breaks out of prison, and both cousins plan to have a violent duel to determine which of them can pursue Emilia—none of which comes close to resembling the "gentl[e]" wooing Emilia would prefer.

> Have I called thee friend?

Related Characters: Palamon (speaker), Arcite, Emilia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.2.231

Explanation and Analysis

Arcite and Palamon see Emilia from behind their prison cell window and instantly fall in love with her. However, Palamon insists that Arcite has no right to show interest in Emilia because he (Palamon) saw her first. Palamon becomes enraged when Arcite refuses to honor his request and immediately denounces their friendship.

This scene is important because it marks the onset of the destruction of Arcite and Palamon's close friendship, which is the central tragedy of the play. The rapidity with which the cousins transform from kinsmen to foes emphasizes how irrational their behavior is. They were literally just praising their friendship and pledging allegiance to each other, but as soon as Emilia enters the picture, all this goes out the window. "Have I called thee friend?" Palamon asks Arcite, as though he hadn't verbally dedicated himself to their friendship only moments before.

This passage is also crucial in developing the contrasting personalities of Arcite and Palamon. While Arcite is clever and uses logic and wordplay to manipulate and trick others, Palamon is more inclined to impulsively go wherever his passions lead him. At the same time, while the chivalric notion that it's dishonorable for Arcite to pursue a woman Palamon has claimed as his own partially fuels Palamon's rejection of Arcite, seething rage and jealousy also factor heavily into his decision. The outburst Palamon displays here is one example of his tendency to react impulsively, following his heart rather than his head.

> I shall live
> To knock thy brains out[.]

Related Characters: Palamon (speaker), Arcite, Emilia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.2.181-182

Explanation and Analysis

Palamon and Arcite see Emilia from behind their prison cell window and fall in love with her at virtually the same time. Palamon believes that because he saw Emilia first, Arcite should relinquish his right to pursue her. Arcite refuses, and Palamon makes it his life's goal to defend his love, honor, and pride against Arcite, whom he believes has dishonored him by pursuing Emilia.

This moment is crucial because it sets in motion the goal that determines Palamon's actions for the remainder of the play: "I shall live / To knock thy brains out," Palamon vows. Every decision he makes for the remainder of the play—noble or otherwise—is geared toward accomplishing this new life's goal. Interestingly, although their love for Emilia is supposedly what inspires the cousins to feud in the first place, securing Emilia's love isn't what Palamon or Arcite "live" to do. Rather, they live to defend their honor against the other, whom they see as having insulted them. They become so wrapped up in upholding a set of values outlined in the chivalric code that they lose sight of their love for Emilia and their love for each other. Already, then, it's clear that love isn't what drives the cousins apart (after all, at this point, they haven't met Emilia, and Emilia remains oblivious to their existence). In reality, what drives them apart is their wounded pride.

This passage also develops Palamon's tendency to act on impulse, following his heart rather than his head. This passage emphasizes his thoughtlessness by using intentionally simple, superficial language: "I shall live / To

knock thy brains out," declares Palamon. It's a stupid, childish thing to say (indeed, Arcite also points out earlier in this scene how immature Palamon's outburst is) and shows how Palamon conducts his campaign against Arcite without much forethought, going instead wherever his passions take him.

Act 2, Scene 4 Quotes

[...] To marry him is hopeless;
To be his whore is witless.

Related Characters: The Jailer's Daughter (speaker), Palamon, The Jailer, Emilia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.4.4-5

Explanation and Analysis

The Jailer's Daughter sits alone and bemoans her unrequited love for Palamon. She states, "To marry him is hopeless; / To be his whore is witless." The Jailer's Daughter realizes it is just as foolish for her to think Palamon would wed her as it is for her to consider having a sexual relationship with him outside of marriage. Because the Jailer's Daughter is a commoner, it is unthinkable that society would approve of her marrying Palamon, a nobleman. Furthermore, their vastly different social positions mean it is unlikely that Palamon would even suspect her feelings for him in the first place. They exist in entirely different orbits, and it would never enter his mind that the common woman who brings him food and tends to his prison cell would be interested in him romantically.

Not only does the Jailer's Daughter realize the unlikelihood of a relationship with Palamon, but she also sees the romance as a foolish thing to pursue in the first place: it is "witless" to try to engage sexually with him because nothing good would come of it. There is no world in which an illicit affair with Palamon ends well for her: she could face social ostracization for fraternizing with an enemy soldier, she could damage her father reputation, she could get pregnant, or Palamon could abandon her.

Nevertheless, the Jailer's Daughter almost immediately takes a significant (and highly foolish) step toward making her impossible romance a reality by freeing Palamon from prison. In many ways, the Jailer's Daughter's unrequited love for Palamon mirrors Palamon's unrequited love for Emilia. However, the Jailer's Daughter's love is perhaps even more irrational because she acknowledges the unlikelihood of a real relationship developing between her and Palamon, but she pursues it anyway. Palamon, in contrast, remains painfully ignorant of how his love for Emilia is foolish, destructive, and doomed.

Act 2, Scene 5 Quotes

Mark how his virtue, like a hidden sun,
Breaks through his baser garments

Related Characters: Pirithous (speaker), Arcite, Palamon, Emilia, Theseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.5.33-34

Explanation and Analysis

A disguised Arcite impresses Theseus and the other nobility with his athleticism during the May Day competitive games. Arcite has been lying by omission, claiming to be a gentleman by birth who lives far away (which is technically accurate), but he doesn't explicitly reveal who he really is. Arcite must conceal his true identity because he broke the terms of his release from prison by staying in Athens after Theseus explicitly exiled him.

Here, Pirithous notes how Arcite's "virtue, like a hidden sun, / Breaks through his baser garments." Pirithous's observation means that Arcite's "virtue" and noble character are so great that they overpower the "baser garments" he has donned to disguise his true identity (though Pirithous and the other nobility remain unaware of Arcite's disguise). Pirithous conveys the impressive nobility of Arcite's character and his evident commitment to upholding the chivalric code. Pirithous's observation reinforces Arcite's radiant pride and internalized sense of honor, which are defining features of his character. After all, despite Theseus having banished Arcite from Athens, Arcite's pride motivates him to put his life at risk by staying behind to secure a position near Emilia and prove himself more deserving of Emilia's love than Palamon.

Ironically, Pirithous's remark is more accurate than he could know, since there is something "hidden" beneath Arcite's clothing. Beneath Arcite's "baser garments," he conceals the reality that he is Theban nobility whom Theseus has banished, and it's only a matter of time before his true identity, "Breaks through his baser garments" and reveals him to be the enemy soldier he really is.

Act 2, Scene 6 Quotes

I love him beyond love and beyond reason
Or wit or safety. I have made him know it;
I care not, I am desperate.

Related Characters: The Jailer's Daughter (speaker), Palamon, The Jailer

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.6.11-13

Explanation and Analysis

The Jailer's Daughter has just freed Palamon from prison. Alone, she contemplates the significance of her actions. The Jailer's Daughter's feelings for Palamon have rapidly transformed into an all-consuming obsession. Although she previously bemoaned the foolishness of pursuing Palamon and the virtual impossibility of their ever being married in Act 2, Scene 4, she no longer binds herself to reality. Instead, she acts on emotional impulse alone. "I love him beyond love and beyond reason / Or wit or safety," she admits. The Jailer's Daughter knows her love for Palamon will destroy her: she has already put her and her father's lives at risk by freeing Palamon. Furthermore, she has made herself emotionally vulnerable by admitting her feelings to Palamon and risking his rejection: "I have made him know it," she states.

Regardless of the danger involved in pursuing her emotions and the unlikelihood that the pursuit might lead to an actual romance, the Jailer's Daughter dives headfirst into her love for Palamon. She remains relatively sane at this point in the play (she acts insanely but acknowledges the foolishness of her actions), but from here on out, her sanity steeply declines, and she completely loses touch with reality.

Lastly, this scene does not reflect well on Palamon, since it suggests that he exploited the Jailer's Daughter's emotions to escape prison and then abandoned her without a second thought for her wellbeing. It is decidedly unchivalrous behavior to exploit the vulnerable to satisfy one's desires.

Act 3, Scene 6 Quotes

Here, Palamon. This hand shall never more
Come near thee with such friendship.

Related Characters: Arcite (speaker), Palamon, Emilia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.6.139-140

Explanation and Analysis

Arcite and Palamon are about to begin an unsanctioned duel in the woods to decide which of them is more deserving of Emilia's love. As is customary, Arcite and Palamon shake hands before they fight.

The cousins' commitment to upholding proper decorum for dueling shows how seriously they believe in following the chivalric code. Palamon's passion causes him to abandon reason and recklessly destroy his friendship with Arcite. However, he never becomes so wrapped up in his emotions that he forgets the proper protocol he must follow as a nobleman and soldier. The cousins shake hands despite their ongoing feud because it is an unspeakable offense to let passion and personal hang-ups come between their duty to remain chivalrous.

As the cousins shake hands, Arcite addresses Palamon in what appears to be a genuine acknowledgment of the friendship they have forgone for the sake of love, pride, and pettiness. "This hand shall never more / Come near thee with such friendship," he promises Palamon. By saying this, Arcite acknowledges the friendship that they've lost. Furthermore, he acknowledges that, as proud, self-respecting knights, there's only one way this duel will end: with one of them dying. Both cousins would consider it cowardly to start a fight they are not committed to finishing. This moment underscores the cousins' almost comically rigid adherence to honor and pride. They could just as easily call off this fight and keep their lives, but they willfully enter into a duel that they expect only one of them to exit.

Lastly, Arcite's recognition of this moment as the last time he will "Come near [Palamon] with such friendship" implies a certain remorse that Arcite feels for their feud. He's mourning the bond the cousins have lost in their mutual pursuit of Emilia.

I'll be cut a-pieces
Before I take this oath!

Related Characters: Palamon (speaker), Arcite, Theseus, Emilia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.6.319-320

Explanation and Analysis

Theseus's party encounters Arcite and Palamon engaged in an unsanctioned duel in the woods. Angry at Arcite for breaking his vow to leave Athens and at Palamon for escaping prison, Theseus sentences both men to death. Emilia interferes and offers a compromise in which Theseus spares the cousins their lives if they agree to leave Athens and not contact each other ever again, but they both immediately reject the offer.

"I'll be cut a-pieces / Before I take this oath!" Palamon obstinately replies. Arcite, too, refuses to accept Theseus's generous counteroffer to spare them their lives. Palamon's response in this passage highlights his absurd commitment to upholding the code of chivalry. He is so wrapped up in defending his honor and (what he perceives as) his right to Emilia's love that he would rather stay in Athens and "be cut a-pieces" than preserve his own life.

Emilia's interference gives both cousins a chance to avoid Theseus's death sentence, yet they immediately reject this fortuitous opportunity. This passage demonstrates how Arcite and Palamon's commitment to honor and pride—and their obsessive love of Emilia—leads them to make irrational and counterproductive decisions.

other words, Arcite believes banishment is a fate worse than death. Arcite would rather die than accept banishment because he sees the latter as a blow to his pride, since he is essentially admitting defeat by ending his pursuit of Emilia prematurely.

Underscoring the irrationality of Arcite's decision to stay in Athens and risk dying is the fact that he knows being with Emilia is a long shot. He states, "though I think / I shall never enjoy her, yet I'll preserve / The honor of affection, and die for her, / Make death a devil!" Arcite acknowledges that he "shall never enjoy her" if he refuses Theseus's offer of banishment, since staying in Athens means he'll have to face Theseus's former arrangement, which was that Arcite and Palamon accept a death sentence.

Nevertheless, for Arcite, death is a preferable fate, since it allows him to "preserve / The honor of affection, and die for her," which he believes is a braver, nobler way to act on his love. Arcite's commitment to the chivalric code has instilled in him the belief that accepting banishment to avoid death is a cowardly, shameful act. As a result, he would rather stay behind in Athens and die a heroic, tragic lover than leave and force himself to live out the rest of his days as a coward.

❝ No, never duke. 'Tis worse to me than begging
To take my life so basely; though I think
I shall never enjoy her, yet I'll preserve
The honor of affection, and die for her,
Make death a devil!

Related Characters: Arcite (speaker), Palamon, Emilia, Theseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.6.331-335

Explanation and Analysis

After finding Arcite and Palamon engaged in an unsanctioned duel, Theseus sentences both men to death, but Emilia interferes and convinces him to reduce their sentence to banishment from Athens—as long as they promise never to speak to each other again. However, Palamon and Arcite instantly reject the offer. Arcite's response underscores his exaggerated commitment to upholding the chivalric code and the irrationality of his obsessive love for Emilia.

Arcite's livid response expands on the stubborn reply Palamon has just given Theseus. Arcite proclaims, "'Tis worse to me than begging / To take my life so basely." In

Act 4, Scene 2 Quotes

❝ What sins have I committed, chaste Diana,
That my unspotted youth must now be soiled
With blood of princes, and my chastity
Be made the altar where the lives of lovers—
Two greater and two better never yet
Made mothers joy—must be the sacrifice
To my unhappy beauty?

Related Characters: Emilia (speaker), Theseus, Arcite, Palamon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.2.65-71

Explanation and Analysis

Emilia sits alone, anxiously comparing portraits of Arcite and Palamon. However, she remains unable to determine which man she'd prefer as her husband. Compounding her anxiety is the fact that it's almost time for them to carry out their battle. After a messenger announces the cousins' return to Athens, Emilia prays to Diana, a deity associated with fertility and virginity, and laments the unhappy situation the cousins' love has created for her.

"What sins have I committed, chaste Diana, / That my unspotted youth must now be soiled / With blood of princes[?]" she asks the goddess. The phrase "Unspotted youth" carries multiple meanings, referring simultaneously to Emilia's innocence, virginity, and disinterest in either cousin. She finds her situation—being indirectly responsible for the death of whichever cousin loses the battle—particularly cruel because she has no feelings for either cousin and has done nothing to invite or encourage their love.

Emilia continues by asking Diana why "[her] chastity / Be made the altar where the lives of lovers— / Two greater and two better never yet / Made mothers joy—must be the sacrifices / To my unhappy beauty?" Here, Emilia metaphorically refers to her "chastity" (or virginity) as an "altar" where "the lives of lovers" will serve as "sacrifices." Again, Emilia reinforces her disinterest when she specifies that the cousins are leaving "sacrifices / To [her] unhappy beauty." The cousins are making the ultimate sacrifice of all—their own lives—to a goddess who remains unwilling to accept their offerings.

Unlike Theseus, Arcite, or Palamon, Emilia doesn't see the cousins' willingness to go to battle for her as brave or honorable. Instead, she sees their sacrifices as foolish and tragic. Her opening plea to Diana to know "What sins [she has] committed" recasts the cousins' chivalric willingness to fight for her as a punishment the gods have fated her to suffer. By extension, she will see her marriage to whichever cousin emerges victorious as a punishment rather than a reward.

> 'Tis pity love should be so tyrannous.—
> O, my soft-hearted sister, what think you?
> Weep not till they weep blood. Wench, it must be.

Related Characters: Hippolyta (speaker), Emilia, Arcite, Palamon

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.2.175-177

Explanation and Analysis

Arcite and Palamon return to Athens to participate in a battle to decide who will win Emilia's hand in marriage and who will die. Hippolyta notes her sister's forlorn reaction to the impending battle and urges her to "Weep not till they weep blood," meaning that Emilia should hold back her tears until one of the cousins has died.

Hippolyta urges Emilia to save face, and her criticism of the cousins' impending bloodshed is glib compared to Emilia's many anguished speeches. Nevertheless, Hippolyta's remark suggests that, like Emilia, she sees the problematic, foolish nature of Arcite and Palamon's willingness to fight to the death to secure Emilia's love. "'Tis pity love should be so tyrannous," she observes. The juxtaposition of the harmoniousness of "love" with the terror of "tyrann[y]" emphasizes how irrational it is for the cousins to resort to violence to prove their love for Emilia.

Still, although Hippolyta sees the irrationality of the cousins' behavior, she simultaneously accepts that "it must be." As women living in a male-dominated society, though, Hippolyta and Emilia have little power to sway the opinions of the men who condone Arcite and Palamon's behavior and view the battle as an exercise in chivalry.

> Poor wench, go weep, for whosoever wins
> Loses a noble cousin for thy sins.

Related Characters: Emilia (speaker), Arcite, Palamon, Hippolyta, Theseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.2.187-188

Explanation and Analysis

Arcite and Palamon have returned to Athens to participate in a battle Theseus arranged to determine who will wed Emilia and who must die. Once alone, Emilia laments the dismal situation the cousins' love has created for her. "Poor wench, go weep," she instructs herself, indirectly responding to the advice Hippolyta has just given her to save her tears until one of the cousins has killed the other.

Here, Emilia disregards Hippolyta's advice, implying that she can cry now, for she doesn't need to wait until the battle has begun to know that there is no scenario in which both the cousins emerge unharmed. The conditions Theseus outlined for the battle are that the victor wins Emilia's hand in marriage and the loser dies, so one cousin is fated to die before the battle has even begun, and Emilia finds this fact worthy of her tears.

Emilia's reasoning that "whosoever wins / Loses a noble cousin for [Emilia's] sins" hearkens back to Emilia's earlier prayers to Diana, wherein she asks the goddess what sins she's committed to bring such suffering upon herself. Part of the reason Emilia finds Arcite and Palamon's fate so

distressing is that she has no interest in either cousin. Therefore, she cannot positively regard the outcome of their battle, since whichever cousin wins her hand in marriage will not feel like a reward to her. Instead, Emilia focuses on what the cousins lose in their battle rather than what she or they gain.

Regardless of which cousin wins the battle, the victory will be tainted by tragedy, as that victory can only come from a loss. At the center of Emilia's woe is the play's principle belief that kinship is a more profound, meaningful tie than romance. To Emilia, the loss the battle's victor will incur of his "noble cousin" far outweighs the reward he'll gain by winning her as a wife.

Act 5, Scene 1 Quotes

Hail, sovereign queen of secrets, who hast power
To call the fiercest tyrant from his rage
And weep unto a girl[.]

Related Characters: Palamon (speaker), Arcite, Emilia, Knights

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.1.85-87

Explanation and Analysis

Before Arcite, Palamon, and their respective knights commence their battle, they take turns praying before the altar of their chosen god. Ever the romantic, Palamon addresses Venus, the goddess of love, referring to her as the "sovereign queen of secrets, who hast power / To call the fiercest tyrant from his rage / And weep unto a girl[.]" Palamon's praise for Venus makes a case for how it's possible for Palamon to claim victory over Arcite, who is arguably the more skilled warrior: backed by Venus, Palamon and his knights stand a chance against Arcite because love can conquer even "the fiercest tyrant," reducing him to tears. Although Arcite prays to Mars, the god of war, for victory in battle, Palamon thinks praying to Venus might equip him with the power he needs to weaponize his passion for Emilia against Arcite's comparatively stronger military prowess.

Palamon's praise of Venus also draws attention to the intoxicating force of love that has led to his battle against Arcite in the first place: the "power" of Emilia's love was strong enough to destroy Arcite and Palamon's formerly unbreakable bond as friends and kinsmen.

Act 5, Scene 3 Quotes

Is this winning?
O all you heavenly powers, where is your mercy?
But that your wills have said it must be so,
And charge me live to comfort this unfriended,
This miserable prince, that cuts away
a life more worthy from him than all women,
I should and would die too.

Related Characters: Emilia (speaker), Arcite, Palamon, Theseus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.3.163-169

Explanation and Analysis

Arcite defeats Palamon in the battle to wed Emilia. Theseus escorts Arcite to claim his prize, but Emilia cannot bring herself to celebrate alongside him because she cannot stop thinking about what Arcite has lost rather than what he has gained. "Is this winning?" asks Emilia of Arcite's victory. She laments all Arcite has given up to win her hand in marriage and the gods who have had a hand in executing the tragic fate. "O all you heavenly powers, where is your mercy?" she asks.

In allowing that "it must be so," Emilia accepts Arcite's victory as divine Providence. However, while she might admit that the outcome of the cousins' battle is divine Providence, she ultimately questions and conveys her disapproval of the gods' judgment, specifically how incompatible the ruling is with her and Arcite's happiness. In so doing, Emilia reimagines what Theseus considers a victory for Arcite as a punishment for both Arcite and herself.

By allowing Arcite to exit the battle victoriously, the gods have robbed him of a friend and subjected Emilia to an unhappy life of comforting her new husband in the aftermath of a profound loss. By allowing Arcite to win, the gods "charge [Emilia] to live to comfort this unfriended, / This miserable prince that cuts away / a life more worthy from him than all women[.]" Emilia's assessment prioritizes kinship over romantic love. She predicts that Arcite will be "miserable" once he realizes that Emilia's love isn't enough to assuage the profound loss of Palamon.

Finally, when Emilia proclaims, "I should die and would die too," she conveys just how wholly unsatisfied she is with this arrangement. Emilia has agreed to wed Arcite to fulfill her part of the agreement, but when she thinks about the magnitude of the loss Arcite must suffer to be with her, it's

enough to make her want to die. Just as Palamon and Arcite would rather die than surrender their honor, Emilia would rather die than bear the burden of her guilt.

Infinite pity
That four such eyes should be so fixed on one
That two must needs be blind for 't.

Related Characters: Hippolyta (speaker), Emilia, Arcite, Palamon, Theseus

Related Themes:     

Page Number: 5.3.170-172

Explanation and Analysis

Arcite defeats Palamon, and Theseus escorts him to Emilia to claim his prize. Everyone accepts Arcite's victory and Palamon's fate to die as divinely sanctioned by the gods. However, Hippolyta and Emilia can't help but think about the tragedy that overshadows Arcite's supposed victory.

Hippolyta goes so far as to convey Arcite's victory as an "Infinite pity," noting the injustice that "four such eyes should be so fixed on one / That two must needs be blind for 't." The "four eyes" Hippolyta speaks of refers to Arcite and Palamon's eyes, which were "so fixed on" Emilia's "two" eyes that they allowed themselves to become irrationally obsessed and single-minded. In other words, it's an "infinite pity" that Arcite and Palamon allowed their love, pride, and obsession to get so out of control that they resorted to violence—that is, to the metaphorical "blind[ing]" of one of them to fulfill their obsession.

It's possible to interpret the two "blind" eyes in the final section of this passage in multiple ways. First, it could refer to the blinding or destruction of Palamon, who now must die, per the agreement. On the other hand, the "blind" eyes might also refer to Arcite's eyes, which have "fixed" their gaze so narrowly on Emilia that he becomes blind to what is truly important in his life—that is, his noble kinship with Palamon. As a result of this blindness, Arcite allows pride and obsession to justify the death of Palamon and the role he plays in executing that sentence.

In short, Hippolyta's comment draws on the tragedy that is inseparable from Arcite's victory: to secure himself his true love, he has to destroy what he loves most: his closest friend. Moreover, his irrational obsession with Emilia allows him to justify this destruction, recasting it as a proud victory rather than a personal tragedy. Hippolyta's comment also shows how the play's female characters offer a more critical perspective on the worldviews (like the importance of chivalry) in which the play's male characters so wholeheartedly invest themselves.

Act 5, Scene 4 Quotes

His part is played, and though it were too short,
He did it well.

Related Characters: Theseus (speaker), Arcite, Palamon, Emilia

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5.4.123-124

Explanation and Analysis

Arcite dies after being thrown from his horse in a sudden twist of fate, which spares Palamon's life and enables him to wed Emilia. As everyone adjusts to this new reality, Theseus praises Arcite and takes solace in divine Providence's role in giving everyone the fate they deserve. "His part is played, and though it were too short, He did it well," states Theseus, referring to Arcite. By suggesting that Arcite's part was "too short," Theseus expresses sorrow for what he perceives as a premature—or at least, unexpected—death.

Still, Theseus doesn't grieve Arcite's death as unjust or cruel. Instead, he justifies Arcite's death as having always been fated to happen in this way. Theseus suggests that Arcite's death reflected that "His part is played." Arcite—and all other mortals, for that matter—are mere players whose roles the gods have assigned. Therefore, one can explain everything that happens in life—all rewards and punishments one receives, all the tragedies and good fortune one receives—as mere plot points in the play the gods have composed for humanity to perform.

Theseus sees Arcite's death not as a tragic reversal of his earlier victory in battle but as another victory: "He did it well," Theseus notes, referring to Arcite's successful execution of the role the gods assigned to him. Theseus sees Arcite's death as justified by the gods and, therefore, something to celebrate.

[...] O you heavenly charmers,
What things you make of us! For what we lack
We laugh, for what we have are sorry, still
Are children in some kind.

Related Characters: Theseus (speaker), Arcite, Palamon, Emilia

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 5.4.154-157

Explanation and Analysis

In a reversal of fate, Arcite's unexpected death spares Palamon his life and enables him to marry Emilia. Theseus remarks on the whims of the gods and humanity's inability to understand their reasoning or fully take stock of their circumstances.

"O you heavenly charmers," Theseus addresses the gods, "What things you make of us!" Theseus's remark highlights the hierarchical division that separates mortals from the gods. The unexpected twist that leads to a happy ending for Palamon and a sudden death for Arcite reminds Theseus that mortals should never grow too confident in their ability to predict or understand fate, fortune, and divine Providence. An unexpected reversal of fate like that which unfolds in the play's final scene is always possible.

Theseus continues by saying, "For what we lack / We laugh, for what we have we are sorry, still / Are children in some kind." He paints a humble, foolish portrait of humanity as making the same mistakes repeatedly while refusing to learn from them. Time and again, mortals "laugh" or long for "what [they] lack" while they "are sorry" for, or complain about, "what [they] have." Theseus observes how mortals' perpetual dissatisfaction and lack of gratitude for what the gods have given them make them not unlike spoiled "children."

Theseus sees the reversal of fate that occurs in the play's final moments as the gods making an example of mortality's presumptuousness: just when they thought things were a certain way, the gods put them in their place by changing things up. Theseus's take paints divine Providence in a positive light. Rather than bemoaning the human inability to control fate or predict the future, he takes comfort in the fact that everything will turn out according to plan if everyone honors the gods and trusts in their ability to manage fate. In the aftermath of Arcite's sudden, unexpected death, Theseus's parting lines to his party are to appreciate everything the gods have given them, know that everything can change instantly, and go out and enjoy the life they have.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

The Prologue enters and addresses the audience. He compares new plays to virginity, stating that both are highly desirable if they remain healthy and robust. Furthermore, a good play is like an anxious new bride: nervous to lose its "honor," yet still appearing outwardly modest after the "holy tie and first night's stir." The Prologue hopes his theatrical troupe's play will be like this, for there has never been a more "learned" or "famous" poet than Chaucer, on whose work this play is based.

According to the Prologue, one knows a play is good if it seems new or fresh despite being performed or seen many times. A good play doesn't seem stale or monotonous just because one has seen it before: the Prologue's implication is that such a play is like a new bride who still appears fresh, youthful, and enticing, despite no longer being a virgin. The Prologue's comparison is sexist and insinuates that women are less appealing and valuable once they lose their "honor" or virginity. However, Shakespeare and Fletcher's contemporary audience wouldn't have taken issue with this, even if it's somewhat troubling to a contemporary audience. This passage is also important because it explains that the play is based on a work by Chaucer ("The Knight's Tale" from The Canterbury Tales). That the playwrights turned to Chaucer for inspiration implicitly emphasizes the theme of honor: the play is the playwrights' way of honoring the great Chaucer, whom they regard as one of the most "learned" and "famous" poets of all time.

The Prologue declares that if his troupe disgraces Chaucer's memory with a subpar play, Chaucer will turn in his grave and curse the writers who make a mockery of his works. While the Prologue knows that it is ambitious to aspire to Chaucer, he asks the audience to applaud anyway, and the troupe will do their best. Although the play may not live up to Chaucer, the Prologue hopes it will at least entertain the audience—and if it doesn't, the troupe will have to leave.

The Prologue introduces the play's central theme of honor and chivalry, noting how the actors have an obligation to honor Chaucer's memory with their play. If they give a bad performance, they disrespect Chaucer's memory. That Chaucer would turn in his grave if the play were unsuccessful underscores what a serious offense it is to dishonor someone. The Prologue further establishes the importance of honor by insinuating that actors will need to leave if they put on a lousy performance, implying that dishonoring Chaucer is unpardonable enough to warrant their quitting acting altogether.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

Music plays, and a boy dressed in white enters, tossing **flowers** as he sings. Hymen enters next, carrying a burning torch, and a Nymph wearing a "wheaten **garland**" follows Hymen. After this, Theseus enters, flanked by nymphs. Hippolyta, his bride, enters next, escorted by Pirithous and wearing a garland on her head. Emilia enters after Hippolyta, followed by their attendants. The boy sings a song about the flowers he scatters around the bride and groom's feet. These flowers will bless the couple, ensuring that their marriage remains harmonious.

Flowers symbolize rebirth, renewal, and fertility. The boy scatters flowers around Theseus and Hippolyta to celebrate their marriage as a new beginning. His actions also bless their new union, ensuring that Theseus and Hippolyta will give birth to many children and enjoy many happy years together. In ancient Greece, garlands—or wreaths—symbolized victory and fertility. The garlands several people wear in this scene emphasize the celebratory, harmonious mood of the scene.

Just then, Three Queens dressed in black and wearing veils enter and kneel before Hippolyta's sister, Emilia. The First Queen begs Theseus to hear their request, and the Second and Third Queens appeal to Hippolyta and Emilia, respectively. The Third Queen begs Emilia to help them "for the sake / Of clear virginity." The wedding party orders the Queens to rise, and Theseus agrees to hear the First Queen's request. The First Queen explains that "cruel Creon" defeated their kingdoms and won't let them cremate their husbands' ashes. She asks for Theseus's pity and help in retrieving their dead husbands' bones so they might have a proper funeral for the fallen men.

The entrance of the Three Queens dressed in their mourner's clothing immediately destroys the festive mood of the wedding. The Three Queens' need to give their fallen husbands a proper burial underscores the theme of honor: they can't end their mourning period until they've performed the respectful funeral rites their noble husbands deserve. That the queens consult Theseus to help them defeat Creon suggests that Theseus has a reputation for being a brave, just leader.

Theseus feels for the Three Queens and regrets making them kneel in light of their hardships. He recalls meeting the First Queen's husband, King Capaneus, "by Mars's altar" on their wedding day. Theseus also remembers that the First Queen was a lovely bride whose long locks of hair were finer than "Juno's mantle," and on whom Fortune smiled. Theseus tells the Queens that he's heard of their fallen kingdoms and pities them.

Theseus's invocation of pagan imagery underscores the central role of the gods in the characters' lives. Accepting the gods' role in determining humanity's fate is part of their worldview. Mars is the god of war, and Juno is Mars' mother, known as a protector of nations. For Theseus to associate the First Queen and her fallen husband with these deities illustrates his belief that they are noble people favored by the gods—people who, therefore, he must defend against the comparatively corrupt Creon.

The First Queen begs Theseus to be merciful. The Second Queen praises Hippolyta for her strength and military prowess. She remembers how Hippolyta would have defeated the male sex had not her husband captured her force and her heart. But the Second Queen knows that Hippolyta has just as much power over Theseus since has captured his strength and heart, too. The Second Queen begs Hippolyta to use her womanly wiles to convince Theseus to help them defeat Creon. Hippolyta ensures the Second Queen that she and Theseus are moved by their suffering and want to help. She promises that Theseus will let them know his decision soon.

The Queens see the power Hippolyta has over Theseus, recognizing that she can influence his opinion. Women in this ancient society hold little power independently of men, but they can indirectly exercise power through manipulation. The queens base their strategy of getting to Theseus through Hippolyta on the assumption that women are more merciful than men. If the Queens can't convince Theseus to extend mercy toward them, they might have a better chance of eliciting sympathy from Hippolyta.

The Second Queen rises, and the Third Queen kneels to address Emilia. Emilia sees the Queen's tear-streaked face and orders her to rise. The Third Queen tells Emilia her grief is deeper than anything her face can possibly express. Emilia replies that "Being a natural sister of our sex," she feels a natural sympathy for the Third Queen and promises that she will transfer some of this pity to Theseus.

Emilia might be a noblewoman, but she's still quite humble: she asks the Third Queen to rise because she wants to eliminate the hierarchical distinction between the two of them. In asking the Queen to rise, Emilia allows the Queen to address her as an equal. Since humility is a big part of chivalry, Emilia's actions portray her as a noblewoman not only in title but in practice, as well. Emilia's comment about feeling like "a natural sister" to the queens suggests that there's a closeness that develops between mutually oppressed women living in a sexist society. Denied many of men's rights, women have discovered that they can partially make up for that lost power if they join together as a unified force.

Theseus is eager to resume the wedding proceedings and tries to usher the party into the temple, but the First Queen begs him to think of her and the other Queens' dead husbands, who were all good kings and didn't deserve their fates. She explains that being able to give their husbands a proper burial will at least bring the women peace. Furthermore, Theseus will have the best chance at defeating Creon if he attacks immediately, while Creon and his army are still distracted by their recent victory. Theseus asks Artesius to assemble an army while Theseus resumes his wedding. The Second Queen apologizes for coming to Theseus at a bad time but reminds him what little power and control anyone has when tragedy strikes.

Theseus seems more concerned with moving forward with his wedding than helping the Queens. He's a noble leader, yet the intoxicating allure of new love represented in his marriage is persuasive enough to make him forget his chivalric duty to help the Queens. The Second Queen's comment about what little control anyone has when tragedy strikes alludes to the powerlessness of humanity to control the whims of the gods, who dole out good fortune and tragedy alike.

Theseus tells the Queens that his wedding is more important than any war. The First Queen worries that Theseus will be too distracted by his new marriage to help them, since the amorous emotion Theseus is feeling would persuade even Mars to drop his weapons. The Second Queen asks Hippolyta to imagine what she would do if it were Theseus whose body was rotting away in a field.

Theseus's remark that his wedding is a higher priority to him than helping the queens avenge their husbands' death is confirmation that his love for Hippolyta distracts him from upholding his chivalrous duty to help them. By suggesting that even Mars, the god of war, would be distracted by a new marriage, the First Queen presents love's all-consuming, irrational nature as a universal experience.

Hippolyta says that postponing the wedding will only deepen her and Theseus's desire. She urges him to strongly consider helping the Three Queens as soon as possible. The Queens beg Emilia to appeal to Theseus, as well. Emilia tells Theseus that she'll never ask him for anything again—or get married herself—if Theseus honors Hippolyta's request.

The Second Queen's strategy of forcing Hippolyta to put herself in the Three Queens' shoes is successful: Hippolyta urges Theseus to extend mercy to the Queens and help them retrieve their husbands' remains. The Queens' consultation of Emilia yet again shows how the women join forces to cleverly achieve the power society refuses to afford them as individuals.

Theseus gives in. He orders Pirithous to escort Hippolyta to the temple to pray to the gods for victory. Next, he tells Artesius to meet him at the banks of Aulis and assemble an army. Finally, Theseus kisses Hippolyta and instructs Pirithous to carry out the wedding festivities as planned–he's confident he will return to Athens before the scheduled events are over.

The women have managed to sway Theseus, who now prepares to travel to Crete to defeat the corrupt king Creon. Theseus is confident that he'll return in time to catch the tail end of his wedding celebration because he believes the gods favor him to be victorious in battle. Moreover, Theseus's faith in the whims of the gods provides him with an air of reassurance that he, an ignorant mortal, would otherwise lack.

The Queens praise Theseus, and the Second Queen proclaims that he's "Equal with Mars." Theseus humbly replies that it's only right for him to help the Queens, since "being sensually subdued, / We lose our human title." Everyone exits.

The Queens praise Theseus as "Equal with Mars," or godlike, for agreeing to help them, but Theseus counters this with the explanation that "being sensually subdued, / We lose our human title." What this means is that if humans allow themselves to be "sensually subdued," or unaffected by the suffering of others, they "lose [their] human title," or give up their humanity. In other words, helping the women is humane—not the godlike thing to do. Theseus isn't so much a god as a noble, virtuous human who concerns himself with the suffering of others.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

Arcite and Palamon enter. Arcite addresses his dear, innocent cousin Palamon and suggests that they leave Thebes before its evil temptations corrupt them any further. Palamon agrees with Arcite. Since they first arrived here for school, they've seen many atrocities, including poor, disheveled soldiers who have become poor beggars without any new battles to fight. Seeing the soldiers' suffering makes Palamon wish that Juno would start another war. Arcite contends that people besides soldiers are suffering. Palamon explains that seeing noble people suffer particularly bothers him. But there's suffering everywhere, Arcite says, explaining that what he meant is that he wants to leave before they, too, conform to the evil ways of Thebes.

Thebes is a city defined by suffering, misery, and corruption. Arcite wants to leave it because he believes that the simple act of being in Thebes will be enough to turn him and his cousin evil. Arcite's stance doesn't leave much room for free will: he seems to believe that he and his cousin have little control over their actions—that something as simple as existing in Thebes is enough to ruin them completely. Palamon, too, doesn't seem all that invested in free will: his wish that Juno, a Roman goddess known for protecting nations, would start another war credits the gods with inciting wars rather than the humans who actually fight in those wars.

Palamon disagrees, arguing that they can "be masters of [their] own manners." Furthermore, what most disturbs him is the cruelty of their uncle, Creon, "whose successes / Makes heaven unfear'd," and "almost puts / Faith in a fever, and deifies alone / Voluble chance." Palamon longs for leeches to suck out the blood that binds him to Creon's corruption.

Palamon's worldview seems to allow for more free will than Arcite's: he believes they can "be master of [their] own manners." Palamon believes humans can orchestrate their fates to a certain degree. Still, they can't escape all fate: even if he and Arcite want to be noble, they must live with their fate to be related to their uncle Creon, "whose successes / Makes heaven unfear'd" and "almost puts / Faith in a fever, and deifies alone / Voluble chance." What makes Creon evil is that he believes he "deifies alone / Voluble chance," or that he can escape or subvert fate. Palamon's critique of their evil uncle establishes that it is wrong to question fortune and good or virtuous to accept fate.

Arcite suggests he and Palamon leave Creon's court to save their reputations; if they stick around, it's only a matter of time before they adopt Creon's evil ways. Palamon agrees. Valerius enters and announces that Creon has called for the cousins. He says that Creon is enraged because Theseus, who is nearby, has announced his intention to conquer Thebes.

Arcite seems more concerned about whether he and Palamon appear virtuous than actually being virtuous: this is what motivates him to want to leave Thebes, since their association with their uncle mars their reputation, which is just as bad as if they were actually corrupt themselves. However, Theseus's approaching army complicates the cousins' decision. Now, they are faced with choosing between distancing themselves from a cruel leader and dishonorably abandoning their city, or honoring their duty to fight and supporting their friends and family.

Arcite claims not to be afraid of Theseus, but he feels conflicted about defending Thebes due to their disrespect for Creon. Palamon insists that they'd be defending Thebes—not their uncle. Furthermore, it would be dishonorable to remain neutral. The cousins resolve to accept their fate and fight for Thebes.

The cousins decide that their chivalric duty to fight outweighs their disapproval of their uncle. They thus demonstrate their chivalry by putting their city, friends, and family above their own desires. Furthermore, while Creon might be corrupt, he's still family, and in Arcite and Palamon's society, turning one's back on family is a dishonorable act—regardless of the moral character of one's kin.

Arcite asks Valerius if the war has started yet, and Valerius confirms that it has. Palamon tells his cousin they now must go to Creon, though he regrets the blood they'll have to shed on his behalf, since Creon isn't nearly as honorable a man as Theseus. Arcite, too, accepts that they must "follow / The becking of [their chance]." They exit.

When Arcite instructs Palamon to join him in "follow[ing] / The becking of [their chance]," he means that he and Arcite should continue down the path the gods have laid out for them. To run from war would be to run from (and try to control or alter) fate, which is a sin of which Creon is guilty, so it's something the cousins should avoid. Therefore, to do what is brave and virtuous, they boldly accept their fate and put their futures in the hands of the gods, whom they accept as more powerful and more knowledgeable .

ACT 1, SCENE 3

Pirithous, Hippolyta, and Emilia enter the temple. Before Pirithous leaves, Hippolyta asks him to send her best wishes to Theseus. Emilia seconds Hippolyta and tells Pirithous to let Theseus know they are praying to "the great Bellona" to aid in his victory. Hippolyta remarks how their concern for Theseus makes them soldiers themselves. She insists that they must not weep when their army goes to war, nor when they come back and tell of the atrocities they've seen in battle. Finally, Pirithous wishes them peace while he leaves to join his friend in war.

"Bellona" refers to the Roman goddess of war. The play references gods and goddesses from Roman and Greek mythology in a seemingly arbitrary way. The point of evoking mythology is not for historical accuracy so much as to emphasize the play's theme of divine Providence. Here, Hippolyta and Emilia pray to gods associated with war to aid in Theseus's victory. They trust that the gods will hear their prayers and ensure that the rightful army is victorious.

After Pirithous leaves, Emilia asks Hippolyta if she's noticed how Pirithous has lost interest in everything since Theseus left: he seems distracted and indifferent about whether Athens wins or loses. Hippolyta agrees with Emilia. She explains that Theseus and Pirithous have been together through thick and thin. Although they've "Fought out together where Death's self was lodged," fate has kept them alive. This shared history has made them so close that they almost share a brain. While this might be true, Emilia contends that Hippolyta is still Theseus's number one love.

The hardships Pirithous and Theseus have endured together strengthen their friendship. Their close bond makes them almost the same person: two bodies sharing one brain or soul. The play borrows this logic from ideals of friendship espoused during the Renaissance, which were themselves borrowed from Classical ideals of friendship. The idea of close friends existing as one soul in two bodies comes from Aristotle.

Emilia remembers her close childhood friend, Flavina, who died when they were only 11 years old. Her friendship with Flavina was not as developed as Pirithous's and Theseus's love and was more innocent. She recalls how she liked whatever Flavina liked and mimicked her behaviors—if Flavina plucked a **flower** to pin to her breast, Emilia would do the same. Likewise, if Emilia hummed an original tune, Flavina would sing it in her sleep. Emilia observes how "the true love 'tween maid and maid may be / More than in sex dividual." Hippolyta sees how fervently Emilia speaks of her lost friend and predicts that Emilia, like Flavina, will never love a man. Emilia agrees.

In the play, flowers symbolize virginity, fertility, and sexuality, so one can interpret Flavina and Emilia's flower pinning as having romantic or sexual undertones. When Emilia observes that "the true love 'tween maid and maid may be / More than sex dividual," she suggests that friends' love is superior to romantic love, or that female-female love (romantic or otherwise) is more potent than female-male romantic love. This scene might hint at Emilia's homosexuality, though this is only one way of interpreting her words.

Although Hippolyta believes Emilia will change her mind about marriage, she adds that if she "were ripe for [Emilia's persuasion]," Emilia's impassioned speech would be enough to win her away from Theseus. Still, Hippolyta prays for Theseus, knowing that she (and not Pirithous) is his number one love. Finally, Emilia tells Hippolyta that she won't argue anymore, though she stands firmly behind what she just said.

Hippolyta believes that Emilia's "persuasion" toward female-female love is a phase she will grow out of, but Emilia remains certain she will never want to marry. Hippolyta seems to have adopted a practical stance toward what is expected of her in society. In mythology, Hippolyta was an Amazon (mythic female warrior), so there's a symbolic hint that she seems to have compromised a lot to marry Theseus. On the other hand, her sister Emilia remains resistant to these expectations. Whether this is a testament to Emilia's innocence or a veiled hint at her homosexuality is subject to debate.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

A cornet sounds, and a victorious Theseus enters accompanied by Lords and Soldiers. The Three Queens enter and fall to their knees before Theseus, praising him. Theseus explains that the gods will always reward the noble and punish the wicked. He orders the Queens to find and honor their husbands' bones three times over. He orders them to make sure the people he assigned to undertake the funeral rites perform them with the utmost dignity. The Queens exit.

Theseus's victory shows that the gods favor him over Creon: the gods are all-knowing and never wrong, which means Theseus's victory is deserved and not an accident. Furthermore, Theseus's decision to give the kings dignified funeral rites ultimately reinforces his character as a virtuous leader who cares about upholding certain chivalric values, one of which being that honor and respect are essential.

A Herald and some Attendants enter, carrying in the unconscious prisoners (Palamon and Arcite) on two hearses. The Herald identifies Arcite and Palamon as Creon's nephews and tells Theseus that the men are gravely wounded. Theseus recognizes Arcite and Palamon from battle, where he witnessed the cousins fighting mightily. He orders the Herald to ensure that the prison treats the cousins respectfully and does everything in its power to make them survive. Although Theseus would've preferred that the cousins died in battle, he values their nobility and also recognizes that the men are worth more alive than dead. Finally, Theseus asks Herald to gather their forces in the city; from there, Theseus will lead the return procession to Athens.

Theseus saves the cousins because he respects their nobility. However, he also has practical, strategic reasons for keeping them alive: their status as noblemen means they could be valuable for future negotiations if kept as prisoners of war. Put bluntly, they're simply worth more alive than they are dead.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

The funeral procession for the Three Queens' husbands is underway. Someone sings a mournful song about how grief appears more deadly than death. Before separating to mourn their respective husbands, the First Queen laments how "Heavens lend / A thousand differing ways to one sure end," and the Third Queen compares the world to a city in which "death's the market-place where each one meets." The Queens exit.

The Queens' observations acknowledge the unavoidable nature of death. Although "heavens lend" many different paths through life, the fact remains that "death's the market-place where each [path] meets." In other words, all human lives end in death. It's a unifying experience and an unavoidable one. The queens' observations underscore what little control humans have over where their lives go. They can take whichever path they want, but everyone must meet their fate in the end.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

The Jailer and Wooer enter the jail. The Jailer tells the Wooer that he won't be able to give him much money while he's alive. Although his jail is for noblemen, they're rare to come by, and he is not as wealthy people think he is. Nevertheless, the Wooer ensures the Jailer that he will be happy with whatever the Jailer promises the Jailer's Daughter.

The Jailer establishes himself as an honest, honorable man. Although he doesn't have much, what humble earnings he does accumulate he will pass along to his daughter. The lack of proper names attributed to these characters (Wooer, Jailer, Daughter) signifies their relatively lower class: they are not noblemen or noblewomen like Hippolyta, Arcite, Palamon, Emilia, and Theseus.

The Jailer's Daughter enters carrying grasses to line the floor of the prisoners' chamber. She observes that while it's a shame they are in prison, it would also be a shame if they were free. Furthermore, the jail is proud of these prisoners, who "have all the world in their chamber." The Jailer agrees with his daughter and adds that the new prisoners are supposed to be "a pair of absolute men." Supposedly, they were the only ones fighting in battle. His daughter agrees and describes the two men as "noble suff'rers" who weather their imprisonment and make light of their battle wounds. Additionally, the men eat well, appear content, and comfort each other on rare occasions when they lose heart.

The Jailer's Daughter's comment about Arcite and Palamon "hav[ing] all the world in their chamber" implies a positive angle to their imprisonment. Indeed, they appear to be weathering their heavy sentence quite well. The Daughter calls them "noble suff'rers," implying that they accept their sentence in stride and waste no time on self-indulgent things like self-pity. Her remark reinforces the Jailer's observation that the cousins are "a pair of absolute men," meaning that they are a prime example of the esteemed sort of nobleman this jail is supposed to host but who are rare to come by. This scene further develops Arcite and Palamon's characters: the Jailer's Daughter's remarks show that the cousins are noble and virtuous—so virtuous, in fact, that their positive qualities shine through even in the dire circumstances of their imprisonment.

The Wooer says he hasn't seen the prisoners yet, and the Jailer's Daughter explains that the men and the Duke (Theseus) arrived late at night. The Jailer gestures toward the floor above them, where the prison cells line the wall: Palamon and Arcite have just come into view. When he swaps the names of the two men, his daughter points at them to correct her father's mistake. Before she departs, the Jailer's Daughter remarks how much she enjoys looking at Palamon and Arcite.

The Jailer's Daughter's admission that she enjoys looking at the cousins implies that she is attracted to them. Her attraction could foreshadow the development of a romance between herself and one of the cousins.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Palamon and Arcite remain above. Although they make light of their situation, Palamon fears that they'll be prisoners forever. Arcite agrees, noting that he has resigned himself to accepting this fate. Palamon anxiously wonders about their "noble country" of Thebes, and their friends and family who live there. He wonders if they'll ever return, and laments, "O, never / Shall we two exercise, like twins of honor, / Our arms again, and feel our fiery horses / Like proud seas under us."

The cousins might have accepted their imprisonment, but this doesn't mean it's easy for them. In particular, they are upset by their inability to "exercise, like twins of honor, / [Their] arms again, and feel [their] fiery horses / Like proud seas under." It's not their freedom they mourn but their pride. Palamon's remarks underscore the cousins' commitment to upholding the chivalric code, emphasizing the importance of bravery, duty, and honor.

Arcite commiserates with Palamon, mourning the fact that they're wasting their youths in prison. Worst of all, they'll die without ever marrying or experiencing love. Arcite imagines the songs the maidens will sing about their exile, "curs[ing] ever-blinded Fortune" for the punishment she has inflicted upon them. Palamon agrees with Arcite. Furthermore, they won't be able to engage in noble battles ever again, which will cause their inner sense of duty and bravery to diminish over time.

The cousins lament the many experiences their imprisonment will keep them from pursuing—especially romantic affairs with women. However, what they despise most is that their prison sentence prevents them from performing their chivalric duties. Part of being chivalrous is behaving *chivalrously: if they're not actively defending their honor, they're not living up to their duty as noblemen.*

While they are right to bemoan their dismal futures, Arcite reminds Palamon that their cell cannot be a prison so long as they have each other. Palamon agrees and expresses how lucky they are that "[their] fortunes / Were twined together." Arcite suggests the cousins make the best of their situation and "think this prison holy sanctuary." Remaining in prison enables them to continue down an honorable path and not be led astray by temptation. Furthermore, it prevents outside factors like war, women, business, or quarrels from coming between their friendship. Palamon thanks Arcite for comforting him. He adds that it's actually a positive thing that "the loving gods found this place for [them]," because, had they remained in Creon's corrupt and wicked court, they almost certainly would have become corrupt and wicked themselves.

Despite the cousins' inability to exercise their bravery, they are fortunate to have each other's company. Their profoundly intimate bond is strong enough to transform their prison cell into a "holy sanctuary." The language Palamon evokes when he refers to "[their] fortunes" as "twined together" parallels Hippolyta's earlier remarks about Theseus and Pirithous's friendship. Palamon seems to believe that he and Arcite are one soul shared between two bodies. His later remark about how "the loving gods found this place for [them]" shows how a belief in divine Providence helps them accept their fates. They don't bemoan their circumstances but see them as part of some larger plan the gods have in store for them. Palamon theorizes that imprisonment might be a blessing because it has removed them from the corrupt kingdom of Thebes.

Palamon and Arcite continue to praise their friendship. Arcite insists that even after they die, their spirits will remain intertwined. Just then, Emilia and her Woman enter below. Emilia asks about a specific **flower**, and her Woman tells her the flower is a Narcissus. Emilia scoffs at Narcissus, who was "but a fool / To love himself" when so many women were after him. Emilia instantly catches Palamon and Arcite's attention. They listen for her to continue speaking. Emilia and her Woman joke about Narcissus and good looks, and Emilia cautions her servant to be wary of men, who "are mad things."

Emilia's comment about Narcissus refers to the myth of Narcissus, a beautiful mortal who was so in love with himself that he leaned in too close to see his reflection in the water and drowned. Narcissus's vanity and love drove him to feel an irrational degree of self-worship. When Emilia remarks that men "are mad things," she suggests that Narcissus isn't so different from any man: they all let their passions drive them to act foolishly, irrationally, and—in many cases—self-destructively.

Arcite notices something is up with Palamon and asks what's bothering him. Palamon replies, "Never till now I was in prison, Arcite," and proclaims Emilia to be "a goddess." Arcite laughs, but Palamon doesn't budge. Emilia continues to browse the flowers with her Woman and remarks how she likes **roses** best, because they are "the very emblem of a maid." She explains that "when the west win courts her gently," she responds "modestly," and "with chaste blushes." However, when the north wind jostles her briskly, "then, like chastity, / She licks her beauties in her bud again." Now Arcite is intrigued, and he admits that Emilia is very beautiful.

The winds have shifted in a matter of moments. Although the friends just declared their cell a sanctuary, their confinement is now torturous because they've both fallen for the "goddess" Emilia. Emilia uses figurative language here, comparing maids (virgins) to roses. She makes the essential point that roses bloom "with chaste blushes" when approached gently but close their petals to bolder, more aggressive advances. Applied to women, she's saying that a woman is more likely to entertain a wooer who treats her gently than a wooer who is rude, aggressive, and presumptuous.

Emilia and her Woman move inside. Palamon and Arcite rave about Emilia's beauty. When they both admit to falling in love with her, Palamon insists that Emilia is his to love because he saw her first. Arcite claims this is irrelevant and cleverly proposes an arrangement for them both to love Emilia: Palamon will "worship her" as "a blessed goddess," and Arcite will "love her as a woman." Palamon refuses. He maintains that Emilia is his and that Arcite is a traitor if he tries to make a move.

Palamon's assertion that he deserves Emilia because he saw her first is juvenile and petty, since the cousins practically saw her at the same time. Moreover, that either of the cousins could reasonably lay claim to her is irrational and ludicrous because neither has met Emilia. In fact, Emilia doesn't know that Arcite and Palamon even exist at this point in the play.

Arcite insists that he has just as much a right to love Emilia as Palamon does. He claims that he's always been a faithful friend to Palamon and insinuates that Palamon's rage is unjustified. Furthermore, since, as close friends, they experience each other's emotions, it makes no sense for one of them "to love alone." In short, Palamon is behaving quite "unlike a noble kinsmen" when he insists that only he may love Emilia. Palamon tells Arcite that while he is free to feel love for Emilia, it would be wrong to act on that love. Arcite counters this, asking whether it would be acceptable not to charge an enemy and lose one's honor because another soldier spotted the enemy first. Palamon refuses to play along and tells Arcite that if he pursues Emilia, he "Be as that cursed man that hates his country, / A branded villain." Arcite tells Palamon he's behaving childishly and illogically.

This scene is essential in developing the personality traits that set the cousins apart. Arcite relies on crafty wisdom to make his point, using logic to try to manipulate Palamon. Here, Arcite shrewdly claims that the fact that the cousins are close enough to be the same person justifies their loving and pursuing the same woman, too. In contrast to Arcite's cool cleverness, Palamon is passionate and volatile. Suddenly, he's willing to go against everything he knows about being noble and virtuous and chivalrous out of sheer jealousy, not wanting Arcite to have the woman he wants for himself alone.

Palamon wishes he and Arcite were free so they could engage in a duel. He threatens to kill Arcite if he looks out the window at Emilia one more time. Arcite smugly tells Palamon he'll jump out the window and into Emilia's arms—just to anger Palamon.

The once brotherly friends are now willing (or at least, Palamon is) to fight to the death over a woman they have only glimpsed from afar. Palamon's instinct to settle their differences with violence is unhinged, irrational, and far too extreme for what the situation warrants. Arcite, in turn, seems to take pleasure in egging Palamon on. All in all, things have decidedly taken a turn for the worse.

Palamon continues to fume. The Jailer enters and tells Arcite that Theseus expects him. They depart. Alone in his cell, Palamon anguishes about why Theseus has sent for Arcite. He wonders if Theseus has noticed Arcite's noble appearance and selected him to marry Emilia. Palamon directs his attention toward the garden outside his cell and longs to be a tree that could bear fruit for Emilia to eat.

It is highly illogical of Palamon to assume that Arcite has gone from imprisoned enemy soldier to the prime candidate for Emilia's husband in such a short span of time. Already, love has caused him to lose his grip on reality. Palamon's longing to be a tree that bears fruit for Emilia to eat symbolizes how consumed he is by his love for her.

The Jailer enters above and tells Palamon that Theseus has released Arcite on the condition that he never steps foot in Athens again. Palamon bemoans Arcite's luck: now that he's free, he can prove himself "a worthy lover" of Emilia by exhibiting bravery in battle—all out of spite toward Palamon.

Palamon's irrational thinking continues when he assumes that Arcite will risk his life by staying in Athens to pursue Emilia. However, Palamon's anxiety also illustrates how invested he and Arcite are in defending their pride: it's not unthinkable that Arcite might put himself in danger just to show Palamon up by wooing Emilia.

The Jailer interrupts Palamon's brooding to order him to back away from the window. Palamon begs the Jailer to let him see the garden, but the Jailer says no and threatens to put him in chains if he doesn't back away from the window. Palamon bemoans his wretched existence and longs for death.

Palamon continues to let his extreme emotions get the best of him. Over the past scene alone, he has experienced profound love, searing rage, and utter hopelessness.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

Arcite enters. He praises his good luck at being free while bemoaning his banishment, which inhibits him from seeing Emilia. In contrast, Palamon is lucky because he can look out the window and gaze upon Emilia each morning. He predicts that Palamon will soon speak to Emilia and win her over with his charm. Arcite resolves not to leave Athens since Thebes is in ruins and doing so might also ensure that Emilia would belong to Palamon. He vows to make things work in his favor, and if he can't have Emilia, he'd prefer to die.

Arcite's speculation about Palamon is a moment of dramatic irony. Contrary to what Arcite might imagine, the Jailer has barred Palamon from looking out the window, so he can no longer see Emilia. In no time, Arcite's obsession with Emilia causes him to entertain the same irrational paranoia as Palamon about the threat each poses to the other's ability to woo Emilia. Arcite, too, would rather die than suffer the wounded pride of seeing his cousin win the woman he loves.

Four Countrymen enter. One wears a **garland**. They happily discuss their plans to set aside the day's ploughing to attend the May Day games. One man decides to go even though his wife will be upset with him, and the others joke that he can make it up to her in the bedroom. They discuss their plan to dance beneath the May tree to outperform the men from Athens and honor their town. The men wonder if the Schoolmaster will follow through with his promise to speak well of them to the Duke when they perform their dance for him in the forest.

Dating back to classical antiquity, May Day is a festival the ancients held to celebrate the arrival of spring. The garland (wreath) the countryman wears (traditionally made of flowers, leaves, or branches) symbolizes the growth and abundance of the new season. The dance the men discuss references the tradition of dancing beneath a Maypole to celebrate the arrival of spring. This scene depicts the importance of honor, as well: the purpose of the men's dance is not only to celebrate spring but also to pay homage to their hometown and present themselves as just as noble as the city folk of Athens.

Just as the Four Countrymen are about to leave, Arcite emerges to ask them where they are going. The men regard Arcite suspiciously since everyone knows about the games. Arcite ensures them he's from nearby, and the men tell him about today's lineup games, including wrestling and running. They invite Arcite to accompany them, but he refuses. The men leave. Alone, Arcite concocts a plan to attend the games in disguise, win prizes, and, in so doing, prove himself an honorable suitor for Emilia.

The countrymen subplot primarily fulfills a practical function to create a reason to place Arcite near Emilia. However, this particular scene also illustrates Arcite's cleverness. Arcite needs to conceal his true identity since he's supposed to be in exile, yet his commitment to chivalry prevents him from completely lying to the men. So instead, Arcite reaches an ethical compromise where he lies by omission: technically, he is from nearby, since he's just been released from a nearby prison. In reality, though, Arcite's strategic language allows him to conceal the truth that he is from Thebes, not Athens. Arcite's cleverness allows him to maintain his honor while protecting his cover.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Back at the prison, the Jailer's Daughter sits alone in a room and bemoans her bad luck to fall in love with Palamon: things won't work out between them because she is the "base" daughter of Palamon's cruel imprisoner, and Palamon is himself a prince. The Jailer's Daughter knows she can neither marry Palamon nor be his lover. Even though Palamon's cousin is just as handsome, the Jailer's Daughter only loves Palamon. She recalls the sad songs Palamon sings and the way "he bows his noble body" to thank her for bringing him water in the morning. One time, he even kissed her. She wonders how to prove her love to Palamon and ruminates over the possibility of betraying her family and breaking the law to set him free.

The Jailer's Daughter recognizes the irrationality of believing she and Palamon could have a future together since she is a commoner and he is nobility. Even the way Palamon holds himself and "bows his noble body" shows her that they exist in totally different spheres. Still, her love for him is so strong that she is willing to ignore the fact that they'll likely not end up together and pursue him anyway, and she devises a plan to free him from prison to get him to notice her. Unfortunately, the Jailer's Daughter's pursuit of a relationship with Palamon is as foolish as it is unachievable: freeing Palamon, a prisoner of war, will put her and her father's life at risk. Finally, this scene paints an unflattering portrait of Palamon if one assumes that Palamon's feelings for Emilia leave him uninterested in the Jailer's Daughter. If this is so, Palamon appears to be exploiting the Jailer's Daughter's emotions, kissing her not out of genuine attraction but as part of a strategic plan to woo her to the point that she is willing to help him escape.

ACT 2, SCENE 5

Cornets sound to mark the entrance of Theseus, Hippolyta, Pirithous, Emilia, and Arcite (who's in disguise). Theseus compliments Arcite on his admirable wrestling, comparing him to Hercules. He asks Arcite where he's from, and Arcite lies and says he was born in Theseus's kingdom—but far away from Athens. When Theseus asks if Arcite is a gentleman, Arcite replies, "My father said so, / And to those gentle uses gave me life." Theseus asks Arcite about the qualities that make him a gentleman. Arcite cites his many "noble qualities," such as talents for hunting and horsemanship, as well as his history as a soldier. Everyone proclaims Arcite to be a very noble man. Emilia compliments Arcite's beautiful face, which he must have inherited from his mother. Pirithous notes the way Arcite's virtue shines through his shabby clothing.

Arcite's plan was a success: he has demonstrated his nobility to Theseus by performing victoriously in a May Day athletic contest. Once more, Arcite demonstrates his cleverness by bending the truth to hide his identity while just being truthful enough to maintain his honor. When Theseus asks Arcite if he's a gentleman, Arcite doesn't respond in the affirmative exactly, offering, instead, the vague response that "[his] father said" he was a gentleman, and following this up with a list of his "noble qualities." Thus, Arcite manages to conceal and deny his actual status as an exiled Theban nobleman. Pirithous's casual remark about Arcite's inner virtuousness shining through his shabby clothing is closer to the truth than Pirithous could imagine: Arcite really is concealing a position of nobility beneath his disguise of shabby clothes.

Theseus asks Arcite what brought him to Athens, and Arcite explains that he came here to make a name for himself and offer his services to Theseus, "For only in [Theseus'] court, of all the world, / Dwells fair-ey'd honor." Theseus orders Pirithous to make sure Arcite is taken care of. Pirithous gives Arcite the "most noble" job of serving Emilia, who promises to treat Arcite better than his lowly rank deserves.

Arcite continues to be simultaneously truthful and deceptive: he really did return to make a name for himself, but he doesn't admit to Theseus that the specific way he intends to do that is by wooing Emilia and defending his pride against Palamon. At any rate, Arcite's charade pays off, and he gets what he came for: a position serving Emilia, which offers him the opportunity to grow closer to her.

Pirithous invites Arcite to ride with him later that afternoon. Arcite agrees. Theseus announces that the party will depart for the woods at sunrise tomorrow morning. He tells Arcite he has won the honor of leading the group. Theseus turns to Emilia and tells her she has a servant who "would be [Theseus'] master," but tells Emilia she is "wise." Emilia replies, "I hope too wise for that, sir."

It's rather ironic for Theseus to decide that Arcite is worthy of the honor of leading the hunting party. Arcite has behaved decidedly dishonorably by not being completely upfront with Theseus, effectively betraying the man who has already been unduly merciful by sparing his life and granting him an early release from prison. On another note, Emilia's remark that she "hope[s]" to be "too wise for that" reaffirms her previous stance about not wanting to marry.

ACT 2, SCENE 6

The Jailer's Daughter is alone at the prison. She's just freed Palamon and sent him into the woods to hide. He'll remain there until she can return to bring him food, drink, and files to saw off his shackles. The Jailer's Daughter bemoans betraying her father out of love for Palamon but knows she had no choice: Her love for Palamon is "beyond love and beyond reason," which she's confessed to Palamon, as well. Furthermore, should her actions come to light and the law decides to execute her, she'll "[die] almost a martyr," since freeing Palamon was, in fact, a noble deed.

The Jailer's Daughter's obsession with Palamon is developing alarmingly fast. Although she initially acknowledged the irrationality of loving Palamon and the unlikelihood of their being together, she now loves him "beyond love and beyond reason." Like Palamon and Arcite, she, too, is willing to risk her life for love, and she, too, tries to justify her needlessly reckless, senseless behavior by recasting it as noble and brave.

Despite the Jailer's Daughter's belief that it was noble to free Palamon, she's bothered that Palamon has yet to thank her for his freedom. She fears that he might leave her behind but can't believe he would be so ungentlemanly. The Jailer's Daughter hopes Palamon will come to his senses, and she vows to follow Palamon wherever he goes. She hopes that by the time the alarm sounds to alert the town to the escaped prisoner, she'll be "kissing the man they look for" and swiftly exits to prepare for her imminent departure.

That the Jailer's Daughter continues to put her life at risk for Palamon, who is not interested in her in the slightest, further underscores the foolishness of her behavior. Her fantasy that she'll be "kissing the man they look for" by the time the town finds out about Palamon's escape is a naive, misguided fantasy. Nonetheless, she latches onto to this fantasy as a way of justifying her senseless decision to run away from home.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

Cornets sound as people celebrate May Day in the woods. Arcite enters alone. Theseus and Hippolyta have parted ways to attend to their respective May Day responsibilities. Arcite thinks about Emilia, whose beauty would "challenge too the bank of any nymph / That makes the stream seem **flowers**." He hopes that a "poor man" like himself might occasionally enter her thoughts. Arcite invokes Lady Fortune to ask if it's foolish to chase after Emilia's love. Still, Emilia pays much attention to him, keeps him by her side, and even gave him an excellent pair of horses this morning. Arcite thinks of Palamon, who wrongly believes Arcite has returned to a miserable existence pining for Emilia in Thebes. He imagines how furious Palamon would be if he knew the truth.

Nymphs are female divinities associated with fertility and nature in Greek mythology, often depicted as beautiful maidens. Arcite's remark that Emilia's beauty would "challenge too the bank of any nymph / That makes the stream seem flowers" references her attractiveness while also emphasizing her virginity as a prized attribute. The virginity that Arcite wants to take from Emilia, though, is exactly what she wants to keep if one is to trust her previously stated disinterest in marriage.

Still shackled, Palamon emerges from a bush and curses his "traitor kinsman." He promises that Arcite would know the full depth of his rage if his hands were unshackled and free to grasp a sword. Palamon accuses Arcite of lying about Emilia being his and proclaims his cousin to be "A very thief in love, a chaffy lord, / Nor worth the name of villain."

In an instant, both cousins see how wrong they were about the other's circumstances when they unexpectedly encounter each other in the forest. The insult Palamon assigns to Arcite, "traitor kinsmen," shows how wholly their competition to woo Emilia has transformed their friendship. In Palamon's mind, Arcite has morphed from a noble kinsman to a "traitor kinsman" and a "thief." Palamon's language is contradictory: he claims Arcite isn't "worth the name of villain," yet he insults him using a number of villainous terms (traitor, thief, etc.) This shows that Palamon doesn't have a guiding philosophy to justify his anger toward Arcite: he's simply reacting, following his heart rather than his head.

Arcite starts to respond to Palamon, addressing him as "Dear cousin," but Palamon calls Arcite "Cozener Arcite" and demands that Arcite drop the charade of friendship. Arcite insists that he's done nothing to deserve Palamon's insults and offers that Palamon's "passion" is making him overreact. He suggests that Palamon treat him as an equal so they can settle their dispute like civil gentlemen. Palamon refuses to play along. He admits that while he has seen Arcite behave as an admirable knight in the past, even good men can lose their honor "when they incline to treachery, / And then they fight like compelled bears—would fly / Were they not tied." Arcite tells Palamon he should look in the mirror.

Arcite is more committed to maintaining a hold on courtly manners on Palamon, continuing to address Palamon with respect, calling him "Dear cousin" even as Palamon continues to insult him. Notably, Palamon replies to Arcite's address of "Dear cousin" with the insult "Cozener Arcite," punning the title "cousin" with the term "cozener," which refers to a deceitful trickster. Still, Arcite's calm demeanor is not entirely honorable: he's simply using logic and cleverness to manipulate Palamon's emotions. Arcite maintains that he has nothing to apologize for because he knows it will infuriate Palamon. Furthermore, both cousins' desire to outperform the other stems from their shared chivalrous duty to defend their honor and pride. Arcite wants to justify his actions for the same reason Palamon wants to condemn Arcite's behavior: they both have a chivalric incentive to stand their ground and defend their right to woo Emilia.

Palamon asks Arcite to help him remove his chains and asks if Arcite can bring him some food. He promises that if Arcite is truthful about Emilia being his, he'll forgive Arcite for his betrayal. Even if Arcite should kill Palamon, Palamon will go to the underworld praising Arcite as "brave and noble."

Even though the cousins are feuding, their dedication to uphold the chivalric code prohibits Arcite from taking advantage of Palamon's disadvantaged position and murdering him on the spot: it's essential for them to do things the right, honorable way and have a fair fight. This is why Palamon claims he would regard Arcite as "brave and noble" if Arcite murdered him: to Palamon, it is preferable to die defending one's honor and pride than to live as a dishonored coward. Palamon would prefer that Arcite kill him fair and square than unjustly woo Emilia.

Arcite orders Palamon to return to his hiding place before someone sees him. He promises to return with clothes, food, and files to remove Palamon's shackles. Palamon looks at his cousin and remarks that only Arcite can be so guilty yet appear so noble. "Sweet Palamon," says Arcite, but Palamon doesn't return his cousin's affection. Palamon embraces his cousin but promises Arcite that he is only doing so to thank Arcite for his help; it would be hypocritical of him to want anything besides death for Arcite.

Arcite and Palamon oscillate between feeling an instinctual drive to be friendly with each other and an obligation to uphold their chivalric duty to defend their honor (though Palamon is the cousin who appears more invested in the latter). This underscores the foolishness of their feud: they don't appear to want to hate each other, but they still perpetuate their feud out of some misguided attempt to uphold a cultural ideal of nobility and chivalry.

Arcite tells Palamon that he must return to his hiding place or else Theseus's party might find them. He affectionally urges his cousin to stay strong. Palamon again rejects Arcite's outward attempts at kindness. A horn sounds in the distance. Arcite identifies the sound as an alert to assemble the scattered masses to the banquet and tells Palamon that he is expected there. Palamon replies that Arcite's attendance there "Cannot please heaven," since Arcite earned his place there dishonorably. Arcite disagrees.

Both cousins stubbornly refuse to acknowledge how they undercut each other's attempts to be noble. Palamon refuses to admit that his anger is childish and unjustified, and Arcite refuses to acknowledge that he earned a position in Theseus's court by deception. When Palamon claims that Arcite's deception can't possibly "please heaven," then, he accuses Arcite of acting in ways the gods will view as dishonorable by earning his position through trickery.

Arcite tells Palamon that it's clear a duel is the only way they will settle their differences. However, Palamon insists on having the last word and tells Arcite to remember that when Arcite looks at Emilia, he looks at Palamon's mistress. When Arcite tries to interject, Palamon cuts him off. He tells Arcite to enjoy himself while he still can, as Palamon will "enforce [his] remedy" as soon as Arcite returns.

Arcite continues to behave chivalrously, and Palamon continues to behave childishly. It's a petty attempt at a power move for Palamon to claim that Arcite should know that he's looking upon Palamon's woman whenever he looks at Emilia. Furthermore, Palamon's claim isn't even true: at this point, Emilia still doesn't know Palamon exists, so it's presumptuous of him to claim her as his own. The cousins continue in their delusional thinking, as they devote themselves to some absurd notion of honor while indulging their own romance-driven madness.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

The Jailer's Daughter returns to the forest. When she can't find Palamon, she assumes he must be waiting for her at the wrong location. In anguish over her absent lover, she proclaims that she would rather wolves devour her than leave Palamon entrapped in his shackles and left to fend for himself in the woods. She contemplates calling for Palamon but fears attracting a wolf, though she ultimately decides that wolves must have already killed him. Having accepted Palamon's likely death, the Jailer's Daughter considers her situation: the city will hang her father for Palamon's escape, and they'll hang her, too, though she no longer cares to live, anyway. Additionally, it's been days since she's eaten. Wanting to die and not wanting to commit suicide, the Jailer's Daughter longs for death to take her naturally.

The Jailer's Daughter sinks deeper into madness, as well. It's wishful thinking at best for her to assume that Palamon has accidentally wandered off in the wrong direction, since he's given her practically no indication to suggest that he's interested in her romantically. Yet, her obsession compels her to see the best in him and give him the benefit of the doubt. Lastly, the Jailer's Daughter's desire to die naturally rather than commit suicide reflects her respect for the gods' will. Like other characters, she believes the gods dictate her fate, not her. Her desire for death also reflects her awareness of badly she's messed up by allowing her love for Palamon to dictate her actions. While she's carried away by love and acts irrationally because of it, she still has some sense of reality and sanity left. At the same time, though, it does appear that her overall sense of stability is quickly deteriorating.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

In another part of the forest, Arcite returns to Palamon with food, meat, and files. Palamon insults Arcite, but Arcite orders him to drink and regain his strength first—then they'll talk. Palamon considers aloud the possibility that Arcite might poison him, but Arcite says he "must fear [Palamon] first." Arcite toasts to Palamon's health and drinks. When he promises not to mention Emilia, Palamon gives in and drinks. Afterward, Palamon ravenously feasts on the meat Arcite brought him. The cousins continue to drink and banter back and forth about women from their pasts. When Arcite emits a sigh, Palamon angrily accuses him of thinking about Emilia. Arcite tells Palamon he's imagining things, and Palamon accuses Arcite of lying.

The juxtaposition of scenes featuring the Jailer's Daughter and scenes featuring Arcite and Palamon confirms that Palamon has abandoned her, contrary to her misguided beliefs. When Arcite cites the fact that he "must fear [Palamon] first" as an explanation for why he won't poison him, he means that he must "fear" Palamon, or see him as an equal before initiating an attack. This is the noble thing to do, since attacking while Palamon remains at a disadvantage would be a cowardly and decidedly unchivalrous act. Meanwhile, Palamon disregards Arcite's attempts to maintain courtly manners and lashes out whenever he pleases. Here, Palamon neurotically accuses Arcite's (likely) harmless sigh as evidence that Arcite is maliciously fantasizing about Emilia to antagonize Palamon. This is a crazy accusation to throw around and shows how unhinged love has made Palamon.

The cousins exchange insults. Arcite promises to return in two hours with clothing and files, and Palamon reminds him to bring weapons, too. After Arcite leaves, Palamon vows to kill Arcite when he returns.

Arcite leaves to obtain the tools necessary to ensure that he and Palamon will have a fair fight. He continues to act nobly despite Palamon's repeated verbal assaults.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

Elsewhere in the forest, the Jailer's Daughter wanders around in the dark, cold, hungry, and lost. She cries out for Palamon before remembering that he's probably dead. She spots the sea and watches a ship crash against a rock hidden beneath the sea's surface. The ship develops a massive leak, and the Jailer's Daughter calls out to the ship's crew to hoist the sails or face certain death.

It's unclear whether the Jailer's Daughter has actually witnessed the ship crash or if she's dreaming or imagining it. Either way, one may interpret the violence and destruction of the sinking ship as a reflection of the inner turmoil that gnaws at her as she suffers in her heartbroken, lonely state of mind.

The Jailer's Daughter wishes she could find a frog to tell her the world's news, and she imagines sailing atop a cockleshell to have the King of Pigmies read her fortune. She realizes that the Jailer likely will hang tomorrow morning but vows that she'll "say never a word." The Jailer's Daughter sings a nonsensical song about riding a white horse to search for Palamon and about piercing her breast with a thorn like a nightingale in order to sleep.

The Jailer's Daughter's nonsensical rambling confirms her worsening psychological condition. What's more, she no longer seems to care about her father's welfare. Lastly, the Jailer's Daughter's song about a nightingale references a story from medieval Persian literature in which a nightingale presses herself against a rose and is pricked by the rose's thorns. In the story, the nightingale symbolizes a lover and the rose symbolizes the idealized, unattainable object of the lover's affection. When the Jailer's Daughter sings about a nightingale, then, she laments loving Palamon in vain. The nightingale is also a symbol found in other cultures. Greek mythology associates the nightingale with Philomel, a young woman whose brother-in-law, Tereus, assaults her before turning her into a nightingale to prevent her from speaking out about the attack. In general, the nightingale evokes a mood of grief and lamentation, which definitely applies to the Jailer's Daughter's current situation.

ACT 3, SCENE 5

In another part of the forest, the Schoolmaster berates six Countrymen for their inability to follow his directions. Yet again, he reviews the plan for their performance: the Countrymen will hide in the trees. Theseus will appear and chat with the Schoolmaster about intellectual subjects. When Theseus orders the Schoolmaster to begin his performance, the Schoolmaster will signal to the Countrymen, who will emerge from the trees and begin their dance.

The Schoolmaster is annoyed with the Countrymen because he doesn't want them to mess up the performance when Theseus arrives, which would wound his pride. Now that this subplot has fulfilled its function in placing Arcite in a position to grow closer to Emilia, its primary purpose is to provide comedic relief.

The Schoolmaster tries to discern which of his players are present and which have yet to arrive. The Taborer arrives, followed by five Wenches and the Bavian. One of the Countrymen tells the Schoolmaster that the rest of the musicians have scattered about the woods, per the Schoolmaster's instructions. However, the last woman, Cecily, is nowhere to be found. The men curse Cecily, and the Schoolmaster laments his failed performance.

A taborer is a musician who plays the drum, or "tabor." A Bavian is an antiquated term for baboon and refers to one of the dancer's costumes. The role of this dancer would have been to dance lewdly and provide comic relief. The Schoolmaster is anxious about embarrassing himself in front of the nobility if his performance fails; the general chaos of this scene and the absent performers suggests that the Schoolmaster does have some cause for concern.

Suddenly, the Jailer's Daughter appears, singing a nonsensical song about warships, fools, and an owlet. The Countrymen suspect that the Jailer's Daughter is mad but decide they can probably use her as their final dancer. When the Schoolmaster approaches her, she offers to tell his fortune before spouting nonsense about how eating white bread will make his teeth bleed. These ramblings confirm the Jailer's Daughter's insanity, but the Schoolmaster decides he can use her in his performance anyway and orders the men to guide her to her starting position in the trees. The Schoolmaster hears a horn call in the distance and prepares for Theseus's approach.

Even amid the chaotic dance rehearsal, the Jailer's Daughter appears mad, which speaks to her health's worsening condition. Her appearance right when the performers are short one female dancer and right before Theseus arrives is almost too fortuitous to be a coincidence. One might interpret this lucky situation as a comical whim of the gods, who have placed her exactly where she needs to be in order to save the Schoolmaster's performance.

Theseus, Pirithous, Hippolyta, and Emilia enter. Theseus orders the Schoolmaster to proceed, and the Schoolmaster gives a lengthy introduction about the morris dance. He pardons the unpolished characteristics of the play that are unfit for Theseus's "noble race" to hear before introducing its cast of characters: the Lord of May and his lady, the Chambermaid and Servingmen, Host and his Wife, the traveler, the Clown, the Fool, and—finally—the Bavian.

A Morris dance is a traditional English folk dance typically performed by a group of dancers who often held implements such as sticks, bells, or handkerchiefs. The earliest mention of Morris dancing dates back to the mid-fifteenth century, when they were performed in court and in rural settings. The dance the countryfolk are performing incorporates a mummers play (a folk play performed by amateur actors) and celebrates the arrival of spring. The Schoolmaster's comment about the performance being unfit for Theseus's "noble race" emphasizes the class disparity between Theseus and the countryfolk. In addition, one can interpret the remark as a gesture on the Schoolmaster's part to appear humble and reverent toward Theseus and the other nobility.

The Schoolmaster signals for his players to begin, and the Countrymen, Countrywomen, and the Jailer's Daughter emerge from the trees and perform a morris dance. Afterward, Theseus and his party give their compliments to the Schoolmaster and Pirithous hands out money to the players. Theseus and his party return to their hunting as the Schoolmaster congratulates his players on their performance, proclaiming, "Come, we are all made. *Dii deaeque omnes*."

Theseus's decision to reward the countryfolk with money demonstrates his honorable character: he shows that he's a merciful, generous, and chivalrous leader. The Schoolmaster's remark, "Dii deaeque omnes," is Latin and translates to: "All you gods and goddesses." The Schoolmaster means that Theseus's generosity has ensured their success in life, implying that Theseus has made the countryfolk as fortunate as gods and goddesses.

ACT 3, SCENE 6

Palamon emerges from the bush where he's been hiding. He reflects on the duel he and Arcite will have once Arcite arrives with swords and armors. If Arcite doesn't bring these supplies, reasons Palamon, "He's neither man nor soldier." Now that Palamon has regained his strength, Arcite is a fair enemy once more. Palamon knows he and his cousin must duel soon, lest people think he prefers loafing around and eating to fighting like an honorable soldier.

When Palamon declares that Arcite is "neither man nor soldier" if he returns without the weapons they need to duel, he insults Arcite for not wanting to kill him. He finds it more insulting that Arcite would deny him the chance to defend his honor than if he were to kill him. Palamon's ludicrous commitment to chivalry shows how seriously knights regarded their sense of duty.

Arcite arrives. Palamon apologizes for inconveniencing him, but Arcite insists that it "is but a debt to honor and [his] duty." Palamon tells Arcite he wishes he'd be as honorable a kinsman as he is a foe. Arcite says they've done enough talking. He offers to postpone the duel if Palamon hasn't fully regained his strength, but Palamon insists that he's ready. The cousins select their weapons and armor, which Arcite admits he stole from Theseus. They banter affectionately with each other as they arm themselves, reminiscing about past battles. Arcite recalls striving to emulate Palamon's valor and bravery. He offers Palamon the superior sword, but Palamon refuses because Arcite will need it to defend his life.

Like Palamon, Arcite plays the role of the chivalrous knight, reasoning that it's no inconvenience for him to bring weapons because it "is but a debt to honor," suggesting that it's his "duty" to do so. Palamon's wish for Arcite to be as honorable a kinsman as he is a foe refers to his desire for Arcite to admit that he's wrong to pursue Emilia, who is (according to Palamon) rightly Palamon's.

After the cousins finish arming themselves, they bow and exchange final words. Palamon tells Arcite that they share whatever blood they'll shed and that he and the gods will forgive Arcite if Arcite kills him. Palamon takes Arcite's "noble hand." Next, Arcite tells Palamon to call him a "coward" if he dies. The cousins say goodbye to each other and are about to begin their duel when a horn sounds in the distance.

There is much formality involved in the cousins' feud. The juxtaposition of the reason for their feud (passion, love, and jealousy) and the courtly execution of their duel is almost comical and highlights the absurdity of their fight. If they can reason their way through all the rules and conventions of the duel, one would think they could rationally take a step back and solve their disagreement without any bloodshed. And yet, they stubbornly insist on going through with the duel because they are so wrapped up in defending their honor. Lastly, Palamon's remark that the gods will forgive Arcite if he kills Palamon reflects Palamon's belief in divine Providence. If Palamon loses the battle, Arcite is morally in the clear because Palamon would only lose if the gods wanted it to be that way. Conversely, Arcite's victory would be a sign that the gods favor him.

Arcite tells Palamon that the horn signals the approach of Theseus's hunting party. He orders Palamon to return to his bush to hide, for Theseus will put him to death for escaping prison if he finds him. Palamon refuses, believing Arcite is trying to trick him into abandoning the duel and shaming himself. Arcite tells Palamon he's crazy, but Palamon doubles down and reminds Arcite that he will kill him for getting in the way of his love for Emilia. Arcite tells Palamon that dying comes as naturally to him as speaking or sleeping, but he worries that if they proceed now, it will be the law that puts them both to death. Regardless, they begin to duel.

Palamon would rather risk being discovered by Theseus—which would most certainly have grave consequences for him, since he's an escaped prisoner of war—than appear cowardly in front of Arcite. Once more, Palamon demonstrates that he would rather die than wound his pride. Arcite and Palamon argue back and forth, both wanting to appear braver and more chivalrous than the other. Arcite attempts to dissuade Palamon from fighting. He reasons that if they fight now and Theseus discovers them, they risk both of them being put to death by the state rather than by each other, which prevents them from suffering the noble, honorable deaths they desire. But, as per usual, Palamon fails to subdue his passion, and the cousins commence their unsanctioned duel.

Just then, Theseus, Hippolyta, Emilia, and Pirithous arrive. When Theseus spots the dueling knights, he calls them traitors and angrily tells them they will die for fighting without his permission. Palamon tells Theseus to hold his breath and comes clean about everything: he and Arcite are traitors, yes, but not how Theseus thinks. He explains that he is Palamon, the escaped prisoner, and he reveals the truth about Arcite pretending to be a lowly servant. Palamon tells Theseus he came here to punish Arcite for his treachery. If Theseus only lets Palamon finish the task of killing Arcite, he will beg Theseus to kill him when the duel ends.

In their efforts to defend their honor, Arcite and Palamon have committed a grave courtly faux pas by engaging in a duel without Theseus's permission. They are so stubbornly committed to upholding their own honor (and, in turn, vanity) that they end up behaving unchivalrously, which contributes to the absurdity of their feud. What's more, Palamon would be willing to die for the chance to kill Arcite. The cousins are so invested in preserving their honor, then, that they actively seek out death if it means they can defend their pride.

When Theseus refuses to relent, Arcite offers some words of his own. Arcite tells Theseus that he and Arcite aren't looking for mercy. He claims that he only acted disobediently after Palamon denied that he had been an honorable and worthy servant to Emilia, whom he loves. Arcite suggests that Emilia decide whether or not he's a traitor.

Unlike Palamon, who repeatedly begs for bloodshed if it means a chance to retaliate against his cousin, Arcite seems more conflicted about how far he will go to defend his honor. Here, he seems to exploit Emilia's merciful nature to spare his own life. Arcite's strategy is clever since it allows him to live while potentially indebting himself to Emilia and thus pulling one over Palamon.

Palamon interjects to beg Theseus to show neither of them any mercy. He pleads with Theseus to let them die together, as long as he can kill Arcite slightly earlier so he can be sure Arcite never has Emilia. Theseus honors Palamon's request, citing the undeserved mercy he showed Arcite by freeing him after the cousins initially committed the same crime.

Palamon interferes with Arcite's attempts to manipulate his way out of capital punishment. Palamon's petty request that Theseus kill them both—but that he kill Arcite slightly sooner—plays for comedic effect and also underscores the extent to which Palamon's supposedly honorable quest to defend his pride is, at least in part, nothing more than an impassioned, impulsive campaign to get back at Arcite.

Hippolyta turns to Emilia and pleads with her to show mercy on the men and beg Theseus not to put them to death. Emilia admits that while she doesn't want the cousins to die, they brought their fates upon themselves. Nevertheless, she resolves to "be woman and have pity." She asks Hippolyta to stand by her as she calls upon "the powers of all women." Hippolyta and Emilia take turns addressing Theseus in short, fragmented speech. Pirithous kneels to support the women's request for Theseus to show the cousins mercy.

Theseus finds some logic to Palamon's ridiculous request for more bloodshed. In contrast, the women seem more attuned to the senselessness of the situation: even though it's undeniable that the cousins have dug themselves into a hole, it would be just as easy for Theseus to "have pity" on the cousins and let them go. Emilia's invocation of "the powers of all women" casts women as naturally more merciful and understanding than men. In calling on "the powers of all women," Emilia combats Theseus's harshness with mercy.

Theseus asks Emilia what she'd suggest as an alternative to killing the cousins. Emilia suggests banishment. However, Theseus fears that if he lets Arcite and Palamon live, they'll inevitably kill each other over their competing love for Emilia. He suggests that it's better for the cousins to die "by th' law than one another" and reminds Emilia of the oath he made to put the brothers to death.

Theseus's ethical stance rests on the chivalric notion that it is worse to lose one's honor than die. Therefore, he thinks it's preferable for the brothers to face certain, honorable death in Athens than risk the possibility of dying in a senseless, dishonorable scuffle after being set free and left to their own devices. Even though the former option guarantees bloodshed and the latter does not, Theseus finds the former morally preferable because it actively preserves honor.

Emilia reminds Theseus that he made this oath in a state of anger. She also reminds Theseus of the oath made earlier, which has a foundation of love and authority, and which he hadn't made in a fit of rage: to "ne'er deny [Emilia] anything." Emilia asks Theseus to uphold this earlier oath and honor her request to spare the cousins. Moreover, she insists that the cousins' deaths will ruin her reputation in the eyes of the cousins' mothers and the women who have loved them. Emilia asks Theseus to spare Arcite and Palamon their lives on the condition that they stop fighting over her, never again interfere in Theseus's kingdom, and remain "ever strangers / To one another."

Emilia shrewdly uses Theseus's commitment to the chivalric code to get him to spare Arcite and Palamon. She knows that Theseus's commitment to chivalry means he will never break an oath. Hence, she cites an oath he made to her earlier in which he promised to grant her a favor. Her specific request that the cousins remain "ever strangers / To one another" means that the cousins should never be allowed to interact with each other again.

Palamon dramatically proclaims that he'll kill himself before taking such an oath and forgetting his love for Emilia. He reaffirms his duty to kill Arcite. Arcite, too, refuses to take the oath. Even though he knows he'll never end up with Emilia, he'd rather die than be forced to surrender his "honor of affection." Emilia's speech instilled some sympathy in Theseus, and the cousins' refusal to take the new oath leaves him confused about how to move forward. He asks Emilia if she'd be willing to take one of the cousins as her husband if the other were dead. They're noble princes, after all. The cousins agree, and Theseus proclaims that whomever Emilia refuses must die.

Once more, Palamon and Arcite reject another chance to avoid bloodshed. To both cousins, death is preferable to a wounded ego. Their commitment to chivalry and honor is so exaggerated that their rejection of the newly proposed arrangement puzzles even Theseus, who is the embodiment of chivalry, nobility, and honor. At any rate, it's clear to everyone that the men are stubbornly committed to preserving their "honor of affection," so Theseus devises a new plan that allows them to defend that honor in a setting sanctioned by his court.

Emilia refuses to have any part in either cousin's death. Theseus draws up a new agreement: the cousins will return to Thebes. They'll return to Athens within the month, accompanied by three knights. Theseus will construct a pyramid on the battlefield, and whichever cousin can force the other to touch the structure first will have Emilia's hand in marriage—and the other will be put to death. Palamon and Arcite are satisfied with these new conditions. Emilia reluctantly agrees. Theseus agrees to treat the winner as a friend and promises to award him a position in his kingdom.

Emilia now plays an active, central role in whether the cousins live or die, yet she is hardly consulted about how she feels. The new arrangement Theseus draws up places her in the ethically murky position of being responsible for the death of whichever cousin loses the battle waged to determine who will wed her. Even though Emilia has previously expressed her disinterest in marriage, she goes along with the plan because she, too, feels a responsibility to perform the duties expected of her.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

The Jailer asks his friends if they've heard any more village gossip about him related to Palamon's escape. First Friend tells him that—with a few conditions—Theseus will pardon the cousins due to Hippolyta, Emilia, and Pirithous's urging. However, there's nothing new to report regarding the Jailer's fate. Second Friend announces that Palamon has cleared the Jailer by identifying the Jailer's Daughter as the person responsible for breaking him out of prison. Theseus pardoned her, too, and Palamon will give her a dowry as thanks for helping him escape.

Palamon makes amends for the dishonorable behavior he exhibited earlier when he exploited the Jailer's Daughter's feelings as a way to escape prison. Still, he won't give her the one thing she actually wants from him: love.

The Wooer enters and asks if the Jailer's Daughter's condition has improved, and the Jailer informs him that his daughter is still behaving strangely. The Jailer suspects that his daughter's love for Palamon has caused her madness. The Wooer recalls finding the Jailer's Daughter: he was fishing when he found her hiding in the reeds and surrounded by freshwater **flowers**. She'd been singing a nonsensical song about Palamon, her father, and a willow tree. The Wooer rescued her and brought her to land, but she slipped away and ran toward the city. Luckily, the Jailer's Brother intercepted her before she could escape again.

The Wooer remains committed to the Jailer's Daughter despite her feelings for Palamon. Even though the Wooer is a commoner, he appears to have a more noble character than Palamon, who is actually a nobleman. The flowers surrounding the Jailer's Daughter when the Wooer finds her evoke love and fertility. She appears to have descended deeper into madness and now believes she is involved in a fantasy romance with Palamon.

The Jailer's Brother and the Jailer's Daughter enter. The Jailer's Daughter sings a nonsensical song. She asks about her wedding gown and insists she must lose her virginity by daybreak. Then, she breaks into song once more. The Jailer's Brother tells the Jailer it's best if he simply humors his daughter's madness—she lashes out otherwise. The Jailer's Daughter asks the men if they've heard of Palamon, and they tell her they have. She then insists that all the maids in town are in love with Palamon and that he's impregnated at least 200 of them. She also claims that all these babies will be boys who must become castrati to sing for Theseus's wars. "This is strange," remarks Second Friend.

The full extent of the Jailer's Daughter's madness becomes clear once she enters the room. Now, not only is she obsessed with Palamon, but she seems to believe in the absurd fantasies she's concocted about his sexual prowess. Her insistence that Palamon begets male children who must become castrati (boy singers who are castrated to preserve their higher-pitched voices) is particularly absurd. Theseus's friend's comment, "This is strange," is a comical understatement.

The Jailer's Daughter doesn't recognize the Jailer as her father and asks if he's the master of a ship; the Jailer humors her and says yes. She orders him to point his compass to the north, to the woods—where Palamon is waiting for her. The men pretend to sail aboard a ship as the daughter sings another song.

It's possible to interpret the Jailer's Daughter's inability to recognize her father as a sign of her suppressed guilt about freeing Palamon and putting her father's life at risk. According to this viewpoint, she doesn't recognize him because she can't bear to face him after how carelessly and foolishly she put his life in jeopardy.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

Emilia sits alone, holding two portraits: one of Arcite and one of Palamon. She resolves to choose between the two cousins to stop them from killing each other. First, she looks at Arcite's picture and praises his beautiful face. Emilia thinks that if Nature were a mortal woman, she would immediately fall in love with him. Next, Emilia likens Arcite to Ganymede, who possessed Jove to kidnap the beautiful boy and place him beside him on the constellation. Emilia compares Arcite's brow to Juno's as well. She proclaims that "Fame and Honor […] should clap their wings and sing / To all the under world the loves and fights / Of gods and such men near 'em."

In Greek mythology, Ganymede was a beautiful mortal whom Zeus kidnapped to serve as the gods' cupbearer (a person who pours and serves drinks) in Olympus. In poetry, Ganymede came to be depicted as a younger, beautiful male who inspired homosexual desire. For Emilia to depict Ganymede in these terms might imply that she sees Arcite's objective beauty but isn't attracted to him sexually. This is further evidence of Emilia's possible homosexuality, though this interpretation is subject to debate. Another interpretation could be that Emilia sees Arcite as inspiring male-male love—much like the love he and Palamon used to enjoy, before their love for her turned them against each other. Again, this distances Emilia from Arcite and shows her lack of interest in him, since she can't even look at him without seeing the loss of friendship he incurs by loving her. Lastly, Emilia's praise of Arcite further establishes him as a noble, honorable character whose commitment to chivalry is so great that it's immediately recognizable just by looking at him.

Next, Emilia turns to Palamon's picture and determines that he is Arcite's foil: Palamon isn't nearly as handsome as Arcite and has sad, expressive eyes. His smile lacks a "sharpness," and he has a lifeless demeanor. However, Emilia wonders if such deficiencies actually might be assets: after all, Narcissus, too, was a gloomy boy. Emilia grows frustrated and questions what women find attractive about men in the first place. She declares herself a fool and claims she's "lied so lewdly / That women ought to beat [her]."

In contrast to Arcite, whose primary feature is his noble character, Palamon is more accurately characterized by his passion: this is evident in his expressive eyes and gloomy demeanor. Emilia's comment about having "lied so lewdly / That women ought to beat [her]" seems to refer to how she has tried to convince herself that she can choose one man over the other when, in fact, she cannot. She thinks women should beat her because, in her responsibility for sending one of these undeserving men to their death, she fails to live up to the merciful character she is supposed to possess as a woman.

Emilia drops to her knees and asks for forgiveness. She first addresses Palamon, whom she sees as the unique and beautiful cousin with the expressive eyes, and then Arcite, who is the embodiment of nobility. Emilia curses her inability to decide between the cousins. If Theseus were to ask her which cousin she prefers, she'd select Arcite; but if Hippolyta were to ask her, she'd be more inclined toward Palamon. And if Hippolyta and Theseus asked her together, she'd be lost entirely.

It is unclear if Emilia's keen observations about the cousins indicate that she is warming to the idea of marriage (despite having rejected it in Act 1, Scene 3). However, she might have simply accepted that she has no choice but to marry, now that Theseus has settled on this new arrangement. Moreover, Emilia's inability to choose one cousin over the other could also indicate her equal indifference to both of them.

A Gentleman enters Emilia's room to inform her of the knights' arrival. Emilia laments her impossible predicament and invokes Diana for guidance.

Unable to choose between the cousins herself, Emilia looks to the divine guidance of Diana—a goddess associated with virginity and chastity—for help.

Theseus, Hippolyta, Pirithous, and their attendants enter. Theseus orders the attendants to send in Palamon, Arcite, and their assembled knights. Theseus tells Emilia she must love one of the cousins; Emilia wishes she didn't have to choose so she could spare both men their lives. A Messenger enters, and Theseus asks him to describe the knights who have just arrived. The Messenger describes a knight who accompanies Arcite as having a dark complexion, a noble face, and stern, brave eyes.

True to their word, Arcite and Palamon have returned to Athens to fight each other. Although the men could have simply left Athens and not returned, they willingly choose to jeopardize their lives because they believe death is preferable to cowardice and dishonor.

Next, Pirithous and the Messenger describe Palamon's knight. Like Arcite's knight, this man looks like a prince and bears the mark of greatness. He's larger than the first knight, but he has a sweeter face and a ruddier complexion. One can tell that he firmly believes in what he's fighting for, and his face appears hopeful. He, too, can be angry, but his anger is calmer and less reactive than the first knight's. His blonde hair is thick, curly, and looks like ivy. His hairless face makes him look like a militant girl. After battle, his lips will be "fit for ladies."

Arcite and Palamon's knights are just as noble and virtuous as their lords. Their knights also mirror their respective lord's dispositions: just as Arcite's knight evokes Arcite's noble aura, Palamon's night evokes his passion and romantic sensibility.

Emilia asks if these men have to die, too. Pirithous interjects to note this second knight's musical voice and ideal masculine features. The Messenger describes a third knight who is small but muscled. His eyes are grey and compassionate. He looks like a lover when he smiles and a soldier when he frows. Pirithous ensures Theseus that all these knights are "the sons of honor."

These detailed descriptions of the knights pain Emilia because she realizes that these good men will die for her. Now, it's not only the cousins whose lives are in her hands but also the lives of these additional innocent knights, all of them "sons of honor" who, unlike Emilia, are willing to accept death if it means defending their lord's pride.

Hippolyta admits to being excited about seeing the brave knights fight, though she wishes love weren't "so tyrannous." She turns to Emilia and begs her not to cry. Theseus tells Emilia that she "ha[s] steeled 'em with [her] beauty" and orders Pirithous to ensure the battlefield is ready for the fight.

Hippolyta seems less affected by the moral aspect of the duel than Emilia. She thinks it's a shame that the cousins' lives must result in such "tyrannous" bloodshed, but she doesn't seem tortured by this tyranny like Emilia. Still, Hippolyta's glib criticism is more than most male characters have offered regarding the event.

Everyone exits but Emilia, who bemoans her impossible situation: "Poor wench, go weep, for whosoever wins / Loses a noble cousin for thy sins."

Emilia's lamentation conveys her depth of suffering. She is so wracked with guilt over her complicity in this bloodshed that she assumes her situation must be a punishment the gods are forcing her to incur for some unspecified, horrible sin—otherwise, she thinks, why would she be in this position? Emilia also criticizes the notion that there could ever be a true winner in the cousins' duel, since whoever is the victor will ultimately lose "a noble cousin" as a direct consequence of the triumph.

ACT 4, SCENE 3

The Jailer, Wooer, and Doctor enter. The Doctor asks if the Jailer's Daughter ever shows signs of improvement. The Jailer says that his daughter always appears mad—she's constantly dreaming about a perfect fantasy world and rambling on about Palamon.

The Jailer's Daughter remains fully immersed in her fantasy world, completely discombobulated and out of touch with reality because of her unreciprocated love for Palamon.

The Jailer's Daughter enters and utters nonsense about Emilia's schoolmaster, Geraldo. She claims that Dido will see Palamon in the afterlife, fall in love with him, and leave Aeneas. The Doctor looks on the Jailer's Daughter with pity. The Jailer's Daughter rambles on about a silver coin Palamon needs to board a ferry, spirits, and lovesick maids. She and these maids, she explains, will spend their days picking **flowers** with Proserpine. After this, she'll give Palamon a nosegay he can use to claim her as his own.

The Jailer's Daughter's fantasy world isn't completely separate from reality. A lot of what she rambles about recalls her recent past. For example, her mention of the Schoolmaster alludes to her coincidental participation in the Morris dance in the woods. The Jailer's Daughter's comment about Palamon needing silver to board a ferry alludes to the Greek myth of Charon, the ferryman who carries souls across the river to Hades (the underworld). Having accepted that she and Palamon are not fated to be together in this lifetime, the Jailer's Daughter concocts a new fantasy where she and her beloved reunite in the afterlife: she picks flowers with Proserpine, the Roman goddess of spring, nature, and the underworld, and gives Palamon a nosegay he can use to claim her as his beloved.

The Jailer's Daughter continues to ramble. She talks about her miserable existence in the other world full of fire, flames, and suffering. People who kill themselves and who impregnate maids also go to this world. The Doctor starts to see the Jailer's Daughter's affliction as "melancholy" rather than simple madness. The Jailer's Daughter launches into a song about stars and fate and exits the room.

The Jailer's Daughter portrays a vivid depiction of hell, implying that she feels guilty about the destruction her foolish, love-driven actions have imposed on her father. The Doctor's observation that the daughter might be suffering from "melancholy" rather than simple madness recasts her affliction as an actual medical illness (melancholy was thought to be caused by a surplus of black bile). This suggests the seriousness of her condition.

The Jailer asks the Doctor what he thinks of the Jailer's Daughter. The Doctor asks if the Jailer's Daughter loved anyone before Palamon, and the Jailer gestures toward the Wooer. The Wooer explains that the Jailer's Daughter did love him once, and he claims that he'd forfeit half his fortune for them to be on the same page again.

The Wooer demonstrates his noble character by supporting the Jailer's Daughter through her madness.

The Doctor suggests that the Wooer disguise himself as Palamon, invite the Jailer's Daughter to share a meal with him, and confess his love for her. He instructs the Wooer to bring **flowers** to the Jailer's Daughter and sing her the songs Palamon sang to her while he was imprisoned. The Wooer should also find the Jailer's Daughter's friends and ask them to visit her with gifts they should claim come from Palamon. In short, they must combat the Jailer's Daughter's fantasy life with additional fantasies. The Doctor has successfully used this strategy on other patients, and predicts it will work on the Jailer's Daughter, too.

Flowers symbolize sexuality and rebirth. Both meanings apply here: the flowers the Doctor instructs the Wooer to bring reflect the intimacy of their relationship and the possibility of a new start they could experience together if the Doctor's strategy is successful.

ACT 5, SCENE 1

Theseus, Pirithous, Hippolyta, and their Attendants enter. There are three altars arranged onstage. Theseus orders the knights to enter the temple to pray to the gods: because they have such "noble work" to do, they must honor the gods. Palamon, Arcite, and their respective knights enter the temple. Theseus announces that the time has come for the cousins to settle their fight once and for all. He wishes the cousins luck and leaves the temple.

This scene reinforces the theme of divine Providence. Arcite and Palamon must pray to prove themselves to the gods and ensure that the gods favor them to win the battle.

Palamon tells Arcite that if there were any part of himself that resisted going into battle against Arcite, he would destroy it, even if it meant causing himself bodily harm. Arcite replies that he is doing his best to forget about their history of love and friendship. Palamon gives Arcite what he proclaims to be their final embrace. The cousins say goodbye, and Palamon and his Knights exit.

In a backhanded way, Palamon admits to Arcite that he feels some regret about their imminent battle. He admits the possibility that there's a part of him that doesn't want to go through with all the bloodshed their battle will entail. However, Palamon ensures Arcite that he would cut out this piece of himself from his body, suggesting that while he might realize the foolishness of willingly engaging in violence, his passion to defeat Arcite and defend his honor is strong enough to overpower those hesitations.

Arcite invites his Knights to join him at Mars's alter, and the men drop to the floor and kneel. Arcite addresses Mars. He praises the god for causing chaos on the battlefield and destroying crops, castles, and cities. Arcite asks for Mars's help and begs for the god to show some sign of approval. Just then, the sound of clanging armor and thunder rattles through the temple. Satisfied, Arcite leads his Knights out of the temple.

Arcite demonstrates his desire for victory by praying to Mars, the Roman god of war. The sound of thunder and clanging armor—a sign that Mars heard and approved Arcite's prayers—reinforces the martial strength with which Mars imbues Arcite and his knights.

Next, Palamon enters with his Knights to pray to Venus for strength and victory. "Our argument is love," proclaims Palamon. Palamon and his Knights kneel before Venus's altar, and Palamon addresses the goddess. He praises her power to make fierce men weep, "to choke Mars's drum / And turn th' alarm to whispers" with a mere look, and to will a King to serve his subject. Palamon refers to himself as Venus's "vowed soldier, who do bear thy yoke / As 'twere a wreath of **roses**" and asks the goddess to give him her grace.

In contrast, Palamon prays to Venus, the goddess of love. This scene reinforces the main difference between the two cousins: Arcite's defining characteristics are his nobility and warrior ethos, whereas Palamon's are his passion and romantic sensibility. The different gods they pray to also reinforce the difference that started their feud in the first place: Palamon waged war over his love for Emilia, and Arcite did so to defeat Palamon and claim Emilia for himself. Finally, Palamon's praise of Venus reflects the play's stance on female power, which (in this context) lies in the ability to manipulate men with emotion. This is what Emilia and Hippolyta have done throughout the play: used their naturally merciful demeanor to persuade Theseus to be kind and understanding.

Palamon offers a list of characteristics that exemplify his inner nobility: he has never had sex with another man's wife, indulged in gossip, or tried to take advantage of young women at feasts. Furthermore, he never brags and criticizes people who do. Finally, there are no lovers truer or more faithful than he.

Palamon paints himself in a positive light so that Venus will hear his prayers and favor him in the battle against Arcite. He lists all the ways in which he is noble and therefore deserves to win both the battle and Emilia's hand.

Next, Palamon asks Venus to show him some sign that she has accepted his prayer. Suddenly, the sound of music pulses through the temple, and doves flutter above. Palamon and his Knights drop to the floor and kneel before Venus's alter once more before bowing and exiting the temple.

Venus offers Palamon a sign of harmonious music that represents the power of passion and love—a power that will drive Palamon in his quest to defeat Arcite.

Emilia enters dressed in white and accompanied by her maids. She wears a **wheaten wreath** on her head and flowers in her hair. She places a silver figure of a hind (a mythological deer-like creature that symbolizes Diana as a goddess of the hunt) containing some incense upon Diana's alter and sets it on fire. Emilia's maids curtsy and kneel. Emilia addresses Diana, describing the goddess as a "sacred, shadowy, cold, and constant queen" who protected her female knights from spilling more blood "than will make a blush." She asks Diana to listen to the last prayer she will make to her as a virgin and asks for her help in ensuring victory for the cousin who best loves her and most deserves to win, and whom Emilia will allow to "take off [her] wheaten garland."

The wheaten wreath Emilia wears symbolizes virginity and victory. The fact that she wears it shows Diana her wish for the most suitable cousin to be the victor who will eventually take her virginity—an act symbolized by the removal of the wreath. Still unable to decide between the cousins, Emilia turns to Diana to tell her which cousin is most deserving of her love.

Suddenly, the hind disappears from the alter, and a **rose** tree bearing a single rose appears in its place. Emilia interprets the rose to mean that both knights will lose the battle, and she will remain an "unplucked" flower. Suddenly, music flows through the temple, and the rose falls to the ground. Emilia sees this as an omen of her impending marriage. She can't tell for sure what Diana's actions mean, but she thinks the goddess appears pleased. Emilia and her maids curtsy and exit the temple.

At first, Emilia sees the single "unplucked" rose as a sign that neither cousin will win the battle and she'll remain a virgin, which pleases her. However, when the rose falls, Emilia takes it as a sign that she'll be forced to wed one of them after all. Emilia's disappointment at seeing the rose fall betrays her true feelings about her looming engagement: she is no more willing to marry than before but simply accepts it as a matter of duty.

ACT 5, SCENE 2

The Doctor and the Jailer enter a room in the prison, followed by the Wooer, who is disguised as Palamon. The Doctor asks the Wooer for updates on the Jailer's Daughter's condition. The Wooer happily reports that her friends have convinced her he is Palamon, and she's begun to behave affectionately toward him. The Doctor reminds the Wooer to humor the Jailer's Daughter in every way possible—even if she asks him to have sex with her. This causes the Jailer to stir, but the Doctor reminds him that they must do whatever is necessary to cure his daughter. The Jailer insists it's more important to protect his daughter's virginity than her sanity, but the Doctor is adamant and orders the Jailer to fetch his daughter.

The gods appear to reward the Wooer for his noble efforts in supporting the Jailer's Daughter, considering that she's warming up to him and is on the road to recovery. The Jailer's initial hesitance to risk spoiling his daughter's supposed purity reflects the sexist norms of the time, implying that the Jailer values his daughter's purity more than her sanity.

After the Jailer leaves, the Doctor grumbles about his foolishness and insinuates that the Jailer's Daughter might not be a virgin anyway. The Doctor reminds the Wooer to "please her appetite" in whatever way possible. The Wooer promises to do just that.

It's unclear what the Doctor's comment about the Jailer's Daughter not being a virgin alludes to—perhaps she and Palamon engaged in a sexual affair before she freed him from prison. This would further complicate Palamon's status as a truly noble character. The idea that the Wooer might have to "please her appetite" to cure her provides a comedic effect. It also shows that although the Wooer is doing a noble thing by sticking with the Jailer's Daughter, his actions are not entirely selfless since he clearly stands to benefit from them, as well.

Elsewhere, the Jailer approaches The Jailer's Daughter and tells her "Palamon" is here to see her. This news pleases the Jailer's Daughter, and she asks her father if he's seen the horse Palamon gave her. The Jailer humors her and says he has. The Jailer's Daughter starts talking nonsensically about the horse's talent for dancing the morris and his ability to gallop to the beat of music. The Jailer asks if the horse can read, write, and play tennis, too, and the Jailer's Daughter enthusiastically confirms that the horse does have these talents. Next, the Jailer's Daughter tells the Jailer that one of Theseus's mares is in love with her horse, who remains "coy" and unreceptive to the mare's love because he could have any horse he wants.

The Jailer's Daughter's nonsensical story about the horses is yet another example of her idealization of Palamon. The horse she claims Palamon gave her symbolizes Palamon himself. The Jailer's Daughter insinuates that this horse breaks the heart of any horse who loves him because he is universally desirable and could have any horse he chooses. Her nonsensical story suggests that while her condition is improving, as evidence by her warming up to "Palamon" (the Wooer), it's clear she remains quite reliant on her romantic fantasies.

The Wooer and the Doctor step forward, and the Wooer (as Palamon) greets the Jailer's Daughter. They discuss their wedding and banter playfully back and forth. The Jailer's Daughter points toward the Doctor and asks if he's Palamon's cousin, Arcite. Everyone plays along. The Jailer's Daughter excitedly prattles on about the many children she and Palamon will have together.

One has to wonder what the men in the Jailer's Daughter's life consider to be a sign that she is "cured" of her madness. She has a more cheerful disposition now and accepts the Wooer's courtship, but she remains completely wrapped up in her fantasy world, as evidenced by her continuing to not recognize her father or the doctor and her belief that the Wooer is actually Palamon. It appears that so long as she rewards the Wooer's efforts and doesn't cause trouble for any of the men, they are content to let her exist in a state of delusion.

A messenger enters the room to alert the Jailer to the battle that's about to take place between Arcite and Palamon. As the Jailer and the Doctor prepare to leave, the Doctor reminds the Wooer to do anything the Jailer's Daughter says. The Wooer invites the Jailer's Daughter to dine with him and, per her request, promises to kiss her over 100 times. When she asks to sleep together, the Wooer replies, "yes, marry, we will" and promises never to hurt her.

The Wooer further demonstrates his noble character by promising never to hurt the Jailer's Daughter, which is more than Palamon, an actual nobleman, can say.

ACT 5, SCENE 3

Theseus, Hippolyta, Emilia, and their attendants head toward the battlefield. Emilia refuses to go any further, not wanting to see which cousin dies and which prevails. She claims that every stroke of the sword "sounds more like / A bell than blade" and promises that hearing the battle will be punishment enough for her. However, Theseus insists that Emilia attend the battle to witness the "deeds of honor" that Nature has set in motion. Furthermore, Emilia needs to be there because she's the victor's prize. Emilia disagrees with Theseus and argues that it's no longer the cousins' love for her that inspires them to fight: it's their hatred for each other. Hippolyta tries to convince her sister to accompany them. When Emilia refuses, the rest of the party continues without her.

When Emilia claims that the clashing of Arcite and Palamon's swords "sounds more like / A bell than blade," she means that she can't see the battle as noble and exciting because she can't separate the battle from the death that will follow it. In this case, the "bell" Emilia mentions refers to the Elizabethan practice of ringing a church bell to announce a death. Emilia's refusal to witness the battle sets her apart from the rest of Theseus's party, even Hippolyta. Only she remains critical of the supposed "deeds of honor" that will take place there and sees them for what they really are: declarations of hate and the symbolic destruction of a once intimate friendship. Emilia's existence as a woman places her at the periphery of the dominant culture. Not allowed to participate in knighthood and honoring the chivalric code herself allows Emilia to develop an outsider's critical gaze.

Alone, Emilia compares Arcite's and Palamon's portraits. She remarks on Arcite's gentle but intense face and his "mercy and manly courage." In contrast, Palamon appears threatening and somber, and his "graved" face that seems to shift according to his thoughts. Nevertheless, Palamon's melancholy is as noble as Arcite's humor, and his sadness almost becomes a sort of laughter.

This scene parallels Act 4, Scene 2, where Emilia also anguished over Arcite's and Palamon's portraits in an attempt to pick one cousin over the other. That she still can't decide whether she prefers Arcite's "mercy and manly courage" or Palamon's romantic, "graved" face might suggest her genuine disinterest in them. After all this time, she remains uncertain which man—if either—appeals to her. Her disinterest could also stem from her inability to separate the victory of the winner's love from the tragedy of their dissolved friendship.

Emilia hears horns that signal the first charge, and she anguishes over the battle's potential outcomes. For example, Arcite might win, but Palamon might disfigure Arcite's beautiful face in the process. At any rate, Emilia decides, it's good she's not there to distract them.

Emilia remains incapable of separating victory from tragedy. There is no possible outcome of this battle that can exist without its own set of tragedies and casualties. That Arcite defeats Palamon but suffers a scarred face in the process symbolizes the scar that losing Palamon will have on Arcite if he wins the battle.

A Servant enters and tells Emilia that the crowd is shouting "À Palamon," which means Arcite has lost. Emilia offers her condolences to Arcite's picture. She realizes that she wore Arcite's picture on her right side and Palamon's on her left and wonders why before deciding that she "had no end in 't else; chance would have it so."

That Emilia superstitiously wonders whether the placement of the portraits has impacted the battle shows the extent to which she has internalized her responsibility for what will happen. In other words, she seems to blame herself for everything that has happened between the cousins.

The Servant returns and tells Emilia that although Palamon nearly pressed Arcite's body to the pyramid, Arcite fought back and remains in the game. Emilia briefly wishes that the cousins could be "metamorphosed / Both into one" but decides that the combined noble qualities of both men would render any lady undeserving of him.

Emilia's wish for the cousins to be "metamorphosed / Both into one" reflects her frustration at not being able to decide between them. It also symbolizes her wish for the cousins to repair their relationship. She wishes the cousins could be close like they were before she entered the picture and inadvertently drove a wedge between them.

Emilia hears cornets blaring from the battlefield, and the crowd cheers, "Arcite, victory!" The Servant reenters to confirm that Arcite has defeated Palamon. Emilia recalls Arcite's evident strength and realizes she'd predicted he would win and Palamon would lose, though she can't figure out why she thought this. She states, "Our reasons are not prophets / When oft our fancies are."

Emilia's intuition that Arcite would win emphasizes the theme of divine Providence: without putting it into words, Emilia seems to accept that the battle's victor came to her as an answer to her prayers, perhaps. Her observation that "Our reasons are not prophets / When oft our fancies are" draws a distinction between "reasons," or logic, and "fancies," or intuition. While logic cannot always predict the future, some things we intuitively know—perhaps through prayer and faith in divine Providence.

Theseus, Hippolyta, Pirithous, Arcite, and their Attendants enter. Theseus turns to Emilia and proclaims that the gods have given her a knight. Arcite addresses Emilia and tells her that although he has given up what he loves best (second to her) to be with her, it was worth it. Arcite recalls the battle that Emilia missed: Arcite and Palamon fought neck and neck for a long time, and their moves were as indiscernible as the songs of two competing Philomels. However, it soon became apparent that heaven had made one kinsman the winner.

Theseus attributes Arcite's victory to divine Providence: he has won because he is the knight that the gods favor. Arcite's comment about giving up what he loves best to be with Emilia refers to the loss of Palamon. Arcite recalls the battle for Emilia's benefit and the audience's benefit since they, like Emilia, were only privy to the limited sounds and secondhand observations conveyed to Emilia via messengers. "Philomels" refers to nightingales. Within the context of the Philomela Greek myth, Arcite's comparison of the competing knights to nightingales symbolizes the intersection of love and violence at the core of the cousins' pursuit of Emilia.

Theseus orders Arcite to wear the **garland** he's won and claim his rightful prize, Emilia. He orders the losers to receive their punishment, which is something they must surely want, for "their lives but pinch 'em" now. Theseus notices that Hippolyta is crying. Emilia questions whether this is really a victory and wonders what the gods have done with their mercy. She bemoans having to live with her "unfriended" and "miserable prince," who would get rid of someone as noble as Palamon simply to be with a woman. Hippolyta agrees with Emilia and notes what an "infinite pity" it is "That four such eyes should be so fixed on one / That two must needs be blind for it."

Arcite's garland symbolizes victory within the play's literary context and in reality: in ancient Greece, laurel wreaths were awarded to victorious military figures, poets, and athletes. Theseus rightfully claims that the losers will want death. His observation that "their lives but pinch 'em" refers to the unbearable shame knights like Palamon and Arcite would have attached to justly losing a battle and not accepting punishment. Palamon and his knights will eagerly await their execution because accepting punishment is the brave, noble thing to do. Furthermore, their loss is a sign that the gods have not favored them, which gives them further reason to look forward to receiving their punishment. After all, they wouldn't want to question the gods' judgment. Although everyone accepts that the gods have selected Palamon and his knights to die, they can't help but mourn the tragedy of the situation. Hippolyta's remark suggests that she, like Emilia, is particularly sympathetic to the tragic end of Palamon and Arcite's friendship. When she muses what an "infinite pity" it is that "four such eyes should be so fixed on one / That two must needs be blind for it," she means it's a shame that Arcite and Palamon let their obsession with Emilia come between them like this.

ACT 5, SCENE 4

A Guard escorts Palamon and his Knights. The Jailer, the Executioner, and several others follow, carrying a block and an ax. Palamon laments his fate but considers himself lucky to die before he grows too old. This way, he can go to the gods while he's still young and fresh. First Knight agrees with Palamon and states, "O'er us the victors have / Fortune, whose title is as momentary / As to us death is certain."

Reassured by the fact that he has justly defended his honor, Palamon bravely accepts his fate to die and even tries to see his death as a fortunate development, reasoning that at least now he need not grow old. First Knight expands on Arcite's optimism, claiming, "O'er us the victors have / Fortune, whose title is as momentary / As to us death is certain." He means that the victors and the losers have made out evenly in the end. While the victors might have "Fortune" on their side, fortune is "momentary," or fleeting and uncertain. In contrast, while the losers might face "death," they are also afforded the blessing of "certain[ty]." Lastly, the victors and the losers can rest assured that they have played their part in defending honor, which is a victory in itself, regardless of the outcome of the battle.

Palamon turns to the Jailer and asks about the Jailer's Daughter, who was so kind to give him freedom so long ago. The Jailer tells Palamon his daughter will be married in the near future. Hearing this news pleases Palamon, who tells the Jailer to pass along his well wishes to his daughter. He offers the Jailer a purse as a dowry. The other knights add funds to the purse. The Jailer thanks them. Palamon lies down on the block, and the other knights vow to follow his lead.

Palamon occupies himself with making final amends before he dies, providing the Jailer with more money for the Jailer's Daughter to put toward her dowry as an apology for the ungracious way he exploited her emotions to free himself from prison. Lastly, Palamon further demonstrates his bravery by positioning himself to die before his knights.

Before the execution can occur, a Messenger runs in, yelling for everyone to stop. Pirithous trails behind the Messenger. He tells Palamon that he'll meet the gods in another life—but not in this one. Pirithous orders a confused Palamon to arise and summarizes all that has transpired since Palamon lost the battle.

Something has happened to interfere with Palamon's execution. This unexpected turn of fate further emphasizes humanity's inability to predict or understand fortune, which the gods can change or reverse at any time.

According to Pirithous, Arcite was riding a black horse Emilia gave him. The horse didn't have a single white hair on it, which is a bad omen. As Arcite rode the horse through Athens, the horse trotted over the pavement as though it were dancing to music. Suddenly, a stroke of evil, "Cold as old Saturn," overcame the horse and made it go crazy. The horse bucked and bounded as though desperate to throw off Arcite. Arcite held on as tightly as he could, and his legs "seemed with strange art to hang." However, when Arcite's victor's wreath fell from his head, the horse fell backward and landed on top of him. Pirithous informs Palamon that Arcite is barely alive and wants to talk to Palamon.

That a wave of evil, "Cold as old Saturn," suddenly washes over Arcite's horse and causes it to go crazy heavily implies that divine Providence was involved in this unlikely twist of fate. It's as though the "Cold" hands of Saturn (the Roman god of agriculture) reached down and manipulated Arcite's fate himself. Further emphasizing the influence of divine intervention is the way Arcite's legs "seemed with a strange art to hang" onto his horse: this insinuates that whether or not Arcite hangs on or falls off is entirely out of his control and in the hands of the gods. At any rate, this sudden twist of fate changes things immensely: Arcite might have won the battle against Palamon, but now the time he has to bask in his glory is severely limited.

Theseus, Hippolyta, and Emilia enter with Arcite, who is seated in a chair. Palamon laments the tragic end the gods have given his and Arcite's friendship. Palamon conveys his love to the dying Arcite. Arcite tells Palamon to take Emilia and enjoy his time with her. He admits that what he did to Palamon was wrong but not malicious, and he asks for Palamon's forgiveness. Arcite asks for a final kiss from Emilia, and then he dies.

Palamon's concern for his dear friend inspires him to forget their feud, and he proclaims his love for him in a way he hasn't been able to do since they were imprisoned together in Act 2. Arcite, too, allows for their reconciliation by apologizing for pursuing Emilia. It's unclear whether Arcite has known all along that he was wrong to antagonize Palamon or if dying has inspired him to reflect more deeply on his actions. At any rate, the cousins show that while hate might have obscured their bond for much of the play, their friendship never truly disappeared: they still love each other and remain capable of connection and intimacy. Arcite solidifies this fact by giving his blessing for Palamon to wed Emilia. Of course, it's worth noting that nobody bothers to ask Emilia if she's okay with the sudden switch. However, audiences of Shakespeare's time wouldn't have regarded the cousins' treatment of Emilia as odd here or seen her lack of agency as symptomatic of her objectification.

Palamon praises Arcite. Emilia closes Arcite's eyes. She cries as she tells him what a good man he was. Theseus tells Palamon to thank the gods for his life and praises Arcite for so nobly fulfilling his duty. He acknowledges Venus's role in securing Palamon his love and Mars's role in securing Arcite's victory. Theseus orders the attendants to remove Arcite's body.

Theseus reinforces the role divine Providence played in securing everyone's fates. In fact, he sees Arcite's death as proof that the gods have answered everyone's prayers: Mars has answered Arcite's prayer for victory by allowing him to win the battle, and Venus has answered Palamon's prayer for love by allowing him to wed Emilia. That the gods reward both cousins reaffirms their status as noble kinsmen.

Palamon addresses Arcite and laments that they both "desire [things] which do cost us / The loss of our desire." Theseus notes the nuanced game Fortune has played in allowing the winner to lose and the loser to win. Furthermore, the gods have saved Theseus from having to serve justice himself, as "they themselves become / The executioners." Theseus orders Palamon to go off with Emilia and vows to treat Palamon's Knights as friends. The court will hold a funeral for Arcite in a couple of days, after which Palamon and Emilia will marry. "O you heavenly charmers," proclaims Theseus. "What things you make of us!" Theseus urges everyone not to question the gods' motives. Finally, he orders everyone to leave the execution site and make the most of their time.

When Palamon addresses Arcite to express his remorse that they "desire [things] which do cost us / The loss of our desire," he explicitly admits what a shame it was that they let their pursuit of Emilia destroy their friendship. Theseus notes that while it's tricky of Fortune (the gods) to end the cousins' story with a last-minute changeup wherein their fates are seemingly reversed, in the end, everything is how it should be because the gods have willed it to be that way. Theseus sees Arcite's accidental death as evidence of the gods having "become / The executioners," which effectively spares Theseus the burden of having to execute Palamon. Finally, Theseus addresses the gods directly, stating, "O you heavenly charmers." His remark "What things you make of us!" humbles humanity, alluding to how the gods will always put humans in their place since gods—unlike humans—are infinitely knowledgeable about and in control of matters of fate and Fortune. The sudden reversal of fate that leads to Arcite's death and Palamon's engagement to Emilia suggests that humans should never be too confident in their ability to ascribe meaning or significance to Fortune or know precisely how things will end. Theseus leaves his party with the advice to be grateful for what they have and make the most of what the gods have given them.

EPILOGUE

The Epilogue enters. He'd like to ask the audience what they thought of the play, but he's afraid of criticism. The Epilogue promises the audience that he won't be upset if they didn't like the story his theatrical troupe performed. Moreover, if the audience enjoyed the story at all, then the troupe's efforts were successful. The Epilogue predicts that the audience will return to the theater to see many better plays in their lifetime. With these parting words, the Epilogue bids his audience goodnight.

The Epilogue interrogates the audience to gauge whether or not the performers were successful in honoring Chaucer's memory with their play. The Epilogue's lightheartedness ensures that the play ends on a somewhat humorous note. While Arcite's death complicates the typical conventions of a comedy (in a comedy, there are no deaths, and often there is more than one marriage), the overall mood of the ending is one of relief and reassurance, not bleakness and tragedy.

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