

**NAXOS**  
AudioBooks

Geoffrey Chaucer  
**The Knyghtes Tale**

in Middle English

Read by **Richard Bebb**

THE  
COMPLETE  
CLASSICS

UNABRIDGED

POETRY



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1	<b>The Knyghtes Tale</b> – lamque domos patrias...	3:34
2	The eldest lady of hem alle spak...	4:15
3	The rede statue of Mars, with spere and targe...	3:47
4	This passeth yeer by yeer, and day by day...	3:48
5	This Palamon answerde, and seyde ageyn...	3:59
6	This Arcite ful proudly spak ageyn..	4:28
7	How greet a sorwe suffreth now Arcite!	3:56
8	Up-on that other syde Palamon...	5:40
9	<b>The Second Part</b> – Whan that Arcite to Thebes comen was...	4:35
10	Wel coude he hewen wode, and water bere...	4:25
11	Now wol I torne un-to Arcite ageyn...	3:30
12	Whan that Arcite had songe, he gan to syke...	3:49
13	This Arcite, with ful despitous herte...	4:32
14	The destinee, ministre general...	5:07
15	This worthy duk answerde anon agayn...	5:51
16	'To speke of royal linage and richesse...'	3:40
17	<b>The Third Part</b> – I trowe men wolde deme it necligence...	4:44
18	The statue of Venus, glorious for to see...	2:40

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19	Ther saugh I first the derke imagining...	3:48
20	Now to the temple of Diane the chaste...	4:26
21	And right so ferden they with Palamon...	4:51
22	This Theseus, this duk, this worthy knight...	5:02
23	Whan thorisoun was doon of Palamon...	4:48
24	The fyres brenne up-on the auter clere...	6:16
25	The preyere stinte of Arcita the stronge...	4:41
26	<b>The Fourth Part</b> – Greet was the feste in Athenes that day...	5:32
27	The voys of peple touchede the hevene...	5:12
28	Som tyme an ended ther is of every dede...	4:43
29	Duk Theseus, with al his companye...	3:03
30	Swelleth the brest of Arcite, and the sore...	5:41
31	Now wol I speken forth of Emelye...	4:40
32	Tho cam this woful Theban Palamoun...	6:04
33	By processe and by lengthe of certeyn yeres...	5:10
34	Thanne is it wisdom, as it thinketh me...	5:16

**Total time: 2:35:52**

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Geoffrey Chaucer

# The Knyghtes Tale

*The Knyghtes Tale* is a highly adorned chivalric romance, written in a high style. It is the first of all those *Canterbury Tales* which are presented as told by the mixed band of pilgrims who start from the Tabard Inn in Southwark in Chaucer's most famous work. Here it is now dramatically read in Chaucer's own pronunciation by Richard Bebb.

The pilgrims have a competition in telling stories to cheer up the journey they are making on pilgrimage to Canterbury in April (fictionally about 1387) to the tomb of St Thomas à Beckett in Canterbury Cathedral. To listen to the tale in Chaucer's own pronunciation as here, while following a modern edition in the original spelling, makes the experience of Chaucer more authentic and much easier than either reading or hearing on its own. The present text is that of W. W. Skeat (1898).

*The Knyghtes Tale* would probably have won the competition between the pilgrims but Chaucer never completed the whole storytelling scheme. It is the least

'politically correct' of all Chaucer's tales and perhaps the hardest for many modern readers to accept. It presents the chivalric ethos of noble love and war, glorifying both in their extreme forms, though love not war is the main interest. Chaucer sets it in ancient pre-Christian times, though inevitably most of the action and feeling are in idealised fourteenth century terms. In this respect it is the first historical novel in English, though of course medieval romance is very different from the modern idea of a novel.

The core of the story is about two Theban knights, Palamon and Arcite, cousins and blood-brothers, but after some introductory lines to fit it in to the storytelling competition we turn to ancient times to hear of Theseus, Duke of Athens, returning from victorious war against the Amazons and bringing with him their queen whom he has married. It is a fine swaggering passage of a colourful chivalric triumphal parade.

But Theseus is met by the noble widows

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of the defenders of the city of Thebes who complain that the conquering tyrant Creon will not allow them to bury the bodies of their slain husbands. Theseus promises to avenge them, defeats Thebes, and brings back as prisoners two noble young Theban knights, Palamon and Arcite, to imprison them for life. Then from a window in their prison first Palamon then Arcite sees early on a May morning the beautiful young Emily, sister of Theseus's queen, gathering flowers in the castle garden singing as she goes. It is a wonderful archetypal scene. Each falls in love and they immediately become passionate rivals, despite the apparent hopelessness of being prisoners for life. There is a wry humour in their situation, though it is no joke. Eventually they escape at different times, and meet in a grove in May. Arcite courteously provides armour for the unarmed Palamon, and they are discovered fighting desperately by Theseus out on a hunting party which includes Emily.

The fiery Theseus at first condemns them to death as escaped prisoners, but the pleas of the ladies (which recalls the scene of King Edward III's pardon of the burghers of Calais at the intercession of his Queen), persuades him to pardon them. 'Who may be a fool but if he love?' he says, especially

as the lady concerned knows nothing of them. He decrees a tournament between them to decide the issue in 50 weeks' time. Eventually Arcite wins the tournament but is killed in his moment of triumph and the more gentle Palamon wins the lady.

But this thin summary gives no idea of the riches of the poem. The narrative pace is leisurely. We hear the young men's arguments; an account of how Arcite in disguise made his career in Theseus's court; description of the tournament lists with their heathen temples, which have astrological significance; description of the exotic heroes who come to the tournament, and finally a philosophical discourse from Theseus for which Chaucer used *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius (which some critics consider platitudinous but which has much truth to life). In describing the ups and downs of the fortunes of the two noble heroes. As Arcite dies he praises Palamon and reflects:

What is this world? What asketh man to have,  
Now with his love, now in his colde grave,  
Allone withouten any compaignye.  
*The Canterbury Tales I, 2776-8*

There is no comedy but several half-humorous cynical comments by the poet,

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and a number of remarks about writing, more characteristic of Chaucer in his other narrative poetry than of the Knight who is supposedly telling the story.

The final message is expressed by Theseus that one has to make a virtue of necessity.

Chaucer is better known nowadays for his equally polished and courtly but very different sometimes bawdy comedies of low class village life. *The Knyghtes Tale* has been praised as a noble tale by all critics except a few in modern times, but perhaps even in Chaucer's own day it was not as popular as he would have liked. It is first mentioned by Chaucer himself in the first version of the *Prologue to the Legend of Good Women* written about 1386 where he lists his works including:

al the love of Palamon and Arcite  
Of Thebes, thogh the storye is knowen lyte  
(i. e. little).  
*Prologue*

This must surely refer to what became *The Knyghtes Tale* when Chaucer later thought of the idea of *The Canterbury Tales* and used it as suitable for the Knight, as he used other tales written earlier for other characters. Its base is a very long would-be

epic by Boccaccio, called *Teseida* which Chaucer greatly reduced in length to a philosophical medieval romance. (See Derek Brewer, *A New Introduction to Chaucer*, Second Edition, 1998, London and New York, Addison Wesley Longman Ltd).

## Notes by Derek Brewer



Born in London in 1927, **Richard Bebb** was educated at Highgate School and Trinity College, Cambridge. He became an actor in 1947 in Michael Redgrave's *Macbeth* and then spent two years in repertory at Buxton and Croydon, where he met his future wife, the late Gwen Watford. They married in 1952 and had two sons.

From 1950 he worked regularly in all the theatrical media. He has appeared in a handful of West End plays, made over a thousand broadcasts, including sharing the narration with Richard Burton in the BBC recording of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood* and also appeared in almost 200 television plays, including Alan Bennett's *A Question of Attribution*; among other television appearances were *Barchester Towers* and Agatha Christie's *A Murder Has Been Announced*. His one important film appearance was as the successful cricketer in Terence Rattigan's *The Final Test*.

He owns the largest collection of historic 78s of opera singers in England and has lectured at Yale, Harvard, Princetown and the Smithsonian on theatrical and musical subjects. He discovered the unknown cylinder recordings of Sir Henry Irving.

**Derek Brewer** was born in 1923 and after elementary and grammar schools went to Magdalen College Oxford, where his tutor was C.S.Lewis. He was an infantry officer 1942–5. After appointments in the University of Birmingham and in Japan he was elected to a fellowship in English in Emmanuel College Cambridge and later Master (1977–90). He is now a Life Fellow. He has published many books and articles on Chaucer and other English literature. He set up the academic publishing firm Boydell and Brewer.

Geoffrey Chaucer  
**The Knyghtes Tale**

from the Canterbury Tales

in Middle English

Read by **Richard Bebb**

*The Knyghtes Tale* of medieval wars and chivalry is the first tale told to the pilgrims as they set out to Canterbury. It concerns Theseus, returning from fighting at Thebes, also two brother knights Palamon and Arcite, imprisoned but yearning for their loves. But the real hero of this recording is Richard Bebb who, with the help of Professor Derek Brewer, the leading expert on Chaucerian pronunciation, make the original Middle English not only comprehensible to the modern ear, but exciting.

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Total time  
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