

Anelida and Arcite
Geoffrey Chaucer



The Complaint of Fair Anelida and False Arcite

Fierce god of arms, Mars the red, who in the frosty country of Thrace is honored as patron of the land within your grisly, dreadful temple, be present, along with your Bellona¹ and your Pallas², full of grace, and continue and guide my song! Thus I cry to you at my beginning. For it is sunk deep in my thought with pitiful heart to compose in English this old story, which I find in Latin, of Queen Anelida and false Arcite, that age, which gnaws upon and consumes all things, has very nearly devoured out of our memory, just as it has consumed many a noble tale. 14

Be favorable also, Polyhymnia³, who with your joyful sisters on Parnassus⁴, near Helicon⁵, not far from Cirrha⁶, sing with memorial voice in the shade beneath the unwithering laurel; and let my ship come safe to the haven. First I follow Statius⁷, and after him Corinna⁸. 21

And now Theseus, after his fierce battle against the Scythians, was drawing close to his native land in his chariot of laurel, [met] the applause of the joyful people resounding to the stars⁹.

When Theseus with long and arduous wars had overcome the fierce people of Scythia¹⁰, he came back to the homes of his country, crowned with laurel, in his chariot of beaten gold. At this the happy people one and all raised such a clamor that it rose to the stars, and did their utmost to honor him. Before

¹ Bellona. Goddess of war.

² Pallas. Pallas Athena, goddess of wisdom, especially with respect to war.

³ Polyhymnia. One of the Nine Muses, "many hymns"; the Muse of sacred-poetry, sacred hymns, and eloquence.

⁴ Parnassus. Mt. Parnassus, home to the gods and the Muses.

⁵ Helicon. Mt. Helicon, sacred to the Muses because of the two streams, Aganippe and Hippocrene.

⁶ Cirrha. Ancient Greek town at the foot of Mt. Parnassus

⁷ Statius. Ancient Christian Roman author of the *Thebiad*, one of the sources of *Anelida and Arcite*.

⁸ Corinna. Poet of Thebes, the teacher and rival of Pindar, likely of the Sixth Century. Her work is he largely lost.

⁹ And now . . . the stars. From Statius's *Thebiad*, the same as what Chaucer has translated in the next passage.

¹⁰ Scythia. Present day Ukraine.

this duke came trumpeters, in sign of high victory; and on his great banner was the image of Mars. In token of glory all could see many loads of treasure, many bright helmets, many spears and shields, many lusty knights and many joyous people, on horse and on foot, all around the plain. 35

He brought with him splendidly in a chariot of gold Hippolyta¹¹, his wife, the hardy queen of Scythia whom he had conquered, with her beautiful young sister, Emily; and she illumined all the ground around her chariot with the beauty of her face, full of all generosity and grace. With all his triumph and thus laurel-crowned, in all the flower of Fortune's gift, I leave this noble prince Theseus riding on his way to Athens, and I will strive to bring in soon the story of the devious ways of false Arcite with Queen Anelida, of which I began to tell. 49

Mars, who through his furious wrathful course, to fulfill the ancient wrath of Juno, had set afire the hearts of the people of both Thebes and Greece to kill each other with bloody spears, never rested quietly, but thrust among them both, now here, now there, and made them slay each other, so angered were they. 56

And when Amphiaraus and Tydeus as well as Hippomedon and Parthenopaeus were dead, and proud Capaneus¹² was slain and the two wretched Theban brothers¹³ also, and King Adrastus¹⁴ had gone to his home, Thebes stood so desolate and bare that no creature there knew any cure for his distress. And when the old Creon saw how the royal blood was brought down, he held the city by tyranny and persuaded the gentle people of that country to be his friends and dwell in the town. So for love of him, and for fear, the people of noble blood were drawn to the town. 70

Dwelling in the town among all these people was Anelida, Queen of Armenia¹⁵, more beautiful than the shining sun. Her name so spread throughout the world that every creature had desire to look upon her;

¹¹ Hippolyta. Queen of the Amazons.

¹² Amphiaraus and Tydeus . . . proud Capaneus. Heroes who met their deaths in the Siege of Thebes. See Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* 5, 1485-1510.

¹³ Theban brothers. Eteocles and Polynices, who agreed to rule Thebes in alternate years. When the former refused to hand over the throne after the first year, the former, with the Seven of Thebes, attacked the city. *Tr.* 1505-08.

¹⁴ King Adrastus. King of Argos, one of the Seven Against Thebes, often noted as the leader.

¹⁵ Armenia. Country bordering present day Turkey in the east.

for in truth of all the women in this world's domain there was none like her. This queen was young, twenty years of age, of middle stature, and of such beauty that nature rejoiced to behold her; and to speak of her constancy, she surpassed Penelope¹⁶ and Lucrece¹⁷. And, if she is to be comprehended in few words, nothing in her could have been bettered. 84

This Theban knight Arcite, to tell the truth, was also young, and a lusty knight too, but he was deceitful in love and in no way truthful, and more skillful than any in that art. With his cunning he won this bright lady; for so he assured her of his faithfulness that she trusted him above any creature. 91

What more should I say? She so loved Arcite that, when he was at any time absent, soon she felt her heart burst in two. For in her sight he bore himself humbly, so that she deemed she knew all his heart. But he was false. It was but feigned appearance, such artfulness as men have no need to learn. Nevertheless he had much work to do before he could win his lady, and swore he should die for distress, and should go out of his wits. Alack the while! For it was a grief and sin that she should have mercy on his sorrows; but the false and the true think in no way alike. 105

Arcite found her generosity such that all that she had, great or small, was his, and to no creature did she make a pleasant appearance beyond than was pleasing to Arcite. There was no fault to find in her; as she was so devoted to pleasing him that all that pleased him contented her. No type of letter was sent to her from any person concerning love, unless she showed it to him before it was burnt. She was so open and did all she could to hide nothing from her knight, lest he upbraid her with any charge of unfaithfulness. Without delay she obeyed his command. 119

And he made himself jealous over her, so that, when any man spoke to her, immediately he would pray her to swear what those words were, or he would be displeased. Then she thought that she had gone out of her wits; but all this was only slyness and flattery. Without love, he pretended to be jealous. And all this she took so meekly that in every wish of his she

found good reason, and always loved him more and more tenderly, and honored him as a king. With a ring was her heart wedded to him. Her mind was so fixed to be faithful that wherever he went her heart went with him. When she should eat, her mind was so on him that she scarcely noticed her food, and when she was brought to her rest, she thought always of him until she slept. When he was absent, she wept secretly. Thus lived fair Queen Anelida for false Arcite, who did all this evil to her. 140

In his lust for novelty, because she was so lowly and true to him, he took little delight in her constancy, and saw another lady, a stranger and proud, and soon clad himself in her color--I know not whether white, red or green--and was false to the fair Anelida. Nevertheless it was no great marvel even if he were false, for since the time of Lamech¹⁸ so long ago it has been the nature of man to be as false in love as ever he can be. Lamech was the first patriarch who loved two women, and lived in bigamy; and, unless men lie, he first invented tents. 154

This false Arcite, when he became false, had to pretend somewhat to cover his treachery, like a horse that can both bite and whine. So he accused her of treachery and swore he discovered her double-dealing and that all she declared to him was false. Thus this thief swore and went his way. Alas! For pity and woe what heart could endure to tell her sorrow? Or what man has the cunning or wit? Or what man could remain in the room if I rehearsed to him the hell that the beautiful Queen Anelida suffered for the false Arcite, who brought her all this pain? 168

She wept and wailed and piteously swooned, and fell as if in death to the ground like a stone. She writhed her limbs in knots. She spoke as if her wit were gone, and was all of ashen color. She spoke no other word, great or small, than, "Mercy, my cruel heart, Arcite!" And this lasted until she was so spent that she could not sustain herself on her feet, but forever languished in this state. 175

Arcite had neither pity nor sorrow for this. His heart was elsewhere in new, blooming love, and did not stoop to think on her woe; he cared not whether she swam or sank. His new mistress held him in so tightly by the bridle and under her lash that he feared every word like an arrow. Her coldness made him bow and bend, and turn or go as she wished; for

¹⁶ Penelope. Long-suffering wife of Odysseus, who waited faithfully for twenty years for her husband's return from the Trojan War.

¹⁷ Lucrece. Sixth Century BC wife of the Roman retainers of King Tarquin, whose son, Sextus Tarquinius, raped her. Rather than facing what she saw as terrible disgrace, she took her life. See Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, 1680-1885.

¹⁸ Lamech. Sixth-generation descendent of Cain (Genesis 4:18); as Chaucer notes, the first recorded biblical polygamist.

never in her life did she grant him any grace for which he would wish to sing, but ever drove him on. Scarce did she care to know that he was servant to her ladyship, and lest he become proud she kept him in a humble state. Thus he served without fee or hire, and she sent him at times on land and at times by sea; and because she gave him his fill of coldness, she had him at her command. 196

All you prudent women, take example here from Anelida and false Arcite; because she wished to call him 'dear heart,' and was so meek, therefore he loved her little. The nature of man's heart is to delight in what is held back, so may God save me! For he desires what he cannot have. 203

Now let us return to Anelida, who day by day pined and languished. But when she saw that she gained nothing, one day, sorrowfully weeping, she thought to compose a complaint. And with her own hand she wrote it, and she sent it to Arcite, her Theban knight. 210

The Complaint of Anelida the Queen
upon false Arcite.

Prologue

The sword of sorrow, whetted with false pleasure, so pierces with the point of memory my heart, bare of bliss and black in hue, that all my dancing is turned into quaking, and my confidence into bewilderment, since it does not help to be loyal; for she who is truest, she who serves love and always devotes herself to one and changes to no new love, shall regret it most. 219

Strophe¹⁹

1. I know it myself as well as any; for with all my heart and might I love one a hundred thousand times more than myself, and called him my heart's life, my knight, and was all his, as far as was just. And when he was glad, I was happy; and his distress was soon my death. And he in turn pledged me his word, to declare me his lady evermore. 228

2. Now, alas! He is false, and without cause; and so pitiless of my woe that he does not stoop once by a word to bring peace to my sorrowful heart, for he is caught in another leash. He laughs at my pain as he

¹⁹ Strophe. Originally the first of three parts of a Greek choral interlude, in which the chorus chanted and moved from one side of the stage to the other; more generally the first movement in an ode.

wishes, and yet I cannot stop my heart from loving him forever. And for all this I know not to whom to lament. 237

3. Alas, this harsh hour! Shall I complain to my foe, he who wounded my heart and yet desires my harm to be greater? No, truly! Further, I will never seek any other help to probe my wounds. My destiny decreed this long ago; I will have no other medicine or teachings. I will forever be where I was once bound; what I have once said, may it be said forever. 246

4. Alas! Where is your noble gentleness, your words full of delight and humility, your devotion so humble, your watchfulness and your attentiveness to me, whom you called your mistress, your sovereign lady here in this world? Alas! And would you concede neither words nor kindly looks for me in my heaviness? Alas, I buy your love all too dearly! 255

5. Now surely, sweet, though thus without cause you are the cause of my mortal adversity, your manly reason ought to refrain before you slay your friend, and especially me, who never yet has in any way wronged you, so surely as I hope. May he who knows all things save my soul from woe! But because I showed you, Arcite, all that men would write me, and, saving my honor, had such zeal to please you, was so meek, kind, and generous--for all this therefore you put blame on me, and care not a mite for me, though through your cruelty the sword of sorrow would bite my woeful heart. 271

6. My sweet foe, why do you act this way? For shame! And do you think your reputation will be bettered to take a new love and be faithless? No! And to put yourself now into scandal and blame, and bring adversity and grief upon me, who (God well knows) ever loves you best? Yet return some day and be honest again, and then shall this that is now all wrong turn to mirth and be entirely forgiven, as long as I live. 280

Antistrophe²⁰

1. Lo, dear heart, all this is to ask if I shall I make a petition or lament? Which is the way to make you true? For either I must have you in my chain, or you must separate us the two of us by death; there are no other new courses between these. For may God have

²⁰ Antistrophe. The second part of the choral interlude or ode, chanted while the chorus moved in the opposite direction they had move in the strophe. (The third part is the epode, in which the chorus stood still.)

such pity on my soul, as you truly are slaying me with pains; that you may perceive from my hue without deceit. 289

2. For so far have I gone toward my death, I murder myself with my secret brooding. I weep, wake, fast, for pitiful sorrow over your cruelty. Nothing helps; I forsake all joys that I care for, I avoid company, I flee from gladness. Who may boast more of heaviness than I? And into this plight you have brought me, guiltless--for that I need no witness. 298

3. And should I petition you, and cast aside womanhood? No, rather death than do so foul a deed! And, being innocent, what need is there to ask mercy? And if I lament my wretched life, you do not care; that I know, without doubt. And if I profess to you my oaths to excuse me, a mock shall be my reward. Your manner flowers, but does not seed; long ago I should have seen that. 307

4. For even if I had you back tomorrow, I might as well withhold April from rain as expect you to make yourself steadfast. Almighty God, Sovereign of truth, where is the truth in men? Who has slain it? Anyone who loves them shall find them as secure as a rotten mast in a tempest. Is that a tame beast that is at all time glad to run away when he is least frightened? 316

5. Now have mercy, sweet, if I speak amiss; have I spoken ill, I pray? I know not; my wit is gone. I am like the song "Now Singing, Now Weeping" for now I lament, and now I am mirthful. I am so bewildered that I am dying. Arcite has carried away the key to my entire world and my good fortune. For in this world there is no living creature in more restlessness than I, and nobody endures more sorrow. And if I sleep a little time, then it seems to me that your figure stands before me, clad in the azure of constancy, to profess again a new assurance of faithfulness and to pray me for mercy. 332

6. This wondrous vision I have through the long night, and in the day I die of fear. And of all this you care not a bit, in sooth. Nevermore are my two eyes dry, and I call upon your pity and your faith. But alack! They are too far to fetch! Thus my destiny keeps me a captive. And my wit is so weak, it cannot stretch to direct or guide me out of this fear. 341

Conclusion

Then, since I can do no more, I end thus, and abandon hope now and forever. For I shall never more put my security in the balance, or learn the

teachings of love. But as the swan, I have long heard tell, sings in his pains before his death, so sing I here my destiny or fate, how Arcite has pierced Anelida so sorely with the point of memory. 350

When Anelida, this woeful queen, had written in this fashion with her own hand, she fell into a swoon, her face as if dead, between pale and green. And then she arose and with a sorrowful visage vowed a sacrifice unto Mars within his temple, which was fashioned as ye shall now hear. 357

[Unfinished]

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