GEOFFREY CHAUCER’S *THE KNIGHT’S TALE* AND ITS 2003 BBC ADAPTATION

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1. Introduction

In this dissertation I will try to provide an elaborate comparison between *The Knight’s Tale*, one of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* assumingly written around 1380, and its 2003 BBC adaptation. *The Knight’s Tale* was first written as a separate work, and was only later added to the collective work, the *Canterbury Tales*. Although it is not known whether Chaucer had a fixed order for the tales, *The Knight’s Tale* is the first in most versions. The tale has a unique structure, which contains four parts, and they all have roughly the same length. I have chosen not to include the structural differences in my research, but I have focussed on a thematic comparison. I found this tale particularly interesting, because of the unique plotline. I perceived the situations the characters find themselves in as rather unusual for a story written in the Middle Ages. Therefore, I found it appealing to examine how the directors of the adaptation engaged with these themes, and how they tried to adapt them into a modern time setting. Because the modern adaptation is thus set in a very different time period, almost every aspect of the tale has changed. The result is that there are many elements to compare, and that is why I decided to narrow down the focus of this dissertation to the personal relationships between the characters, and how these relationships affect their personal lives.

My method for the comparison will be based on singling out several scenes from the original tale. These scenes are significant because they tell a lot either about the characters, or about their relationships. I will then analyse the different utterances of the characters or the narrator in that scene, and define what these mean as a part of the bigger theme I am researching in that chapter. Afterwards, if possible, I will quote the corresponding scene from the modern adaptation, again concentrating on different utterances or visual images, and compare these with my previous observations about the original tale.

To make it easier to understand all of the arguments and claims in this dissertation, I will first provide a short summary of both the original version and the modern adaptation of *The Knight’s Tale*. In the original tale, the main characters are the two knights Arcite and Palamon, and the lady Emelye. The characters of the modern adaptation have slightly different names, Ace, Paul and Emily. The same initial letters, or in case of Emelye/Emily the same name, make clear who represents whom. The original tale is set in Athens during the Middle Ages, and is told by an unknown knight, and he immediately introduces the reader to the great duke Theseus, the ruler of the state. The knight describes how on one of his quests, Theseus conquered the land of Femeny, the realm of the Amazons, and how he married their queen Hippolyta. He brought her back to his town together with her sister Emelye. The tale goes on with Theseus and his entourage arriving in a destroyed town.
Amid the bodies of the murdered citizens, they find two knights, Arcite and Palamon, who look almost identical, and are still alive. They decide to bring them back to Athens to imprison them. When in that prison cell together, both Palamon and Arcite lay their eyes upon the beautiful Emelye strolling through the garden. They immediately fall deeply in love with her, which is the beginning of a feud that will eventually destroy their friendship. A couple of years later a friend of Arcite convinces Theseus to release him, which he does, but only under the condition that Arcite never sets foot in Athens again. Palamon remains in prison.

There is again a leap in time of several years, and we find Arcite going back to Athens in disguise, and becoming Emelye’s servant. Meanwhile Palamon escapes from prison, and he goes to the woods, where he hides in a bush. Arcite happens to ride out to that spot, and Palamon hears Arcite lamenting about his situation. Eventually he recognizes him, and comes out of his hiding place. They start arguing, decide they will sort it out through a fight until death, and start fighting. At the same moment, Theseus and his entourage are hunting in the woods, and they see them fighting. Theseus immediately interrupts, and decides to kill them both. After some protest of the women in his company, he decides they each have a year to find a hundred knights and fight each other in a tournament. The one who is able to kill the other will get to marry Emelye. After a year the tournament arrives, and Theseus changes the rules: they have to fight by themselves, and the battle must not end in death. Arcite and Palamon start to fight, and eventually Arcite wins, he will get to marry Emelye. However, during his victory round, his horse is scared by a fury, Arcite falls, and he is fatally injured. On his deathbed he calls both Emelye and Palamon, and gives them his blessing to get married. After a couple years Theseus decides they have mourned enough and he marries Emelye and Palamon.

The modern TV adaptation is set in an unspecified English town in the 21st century, and has no narrator. The story begins when Palamon arrives in prison. He is assigned to a certain cell, and discovers his friend Ace, who has already been in prison for several months, shares the cell with him. Ace immediately encourages Paul to apply to classes to be able to cope with his time in prison. Paul follows up his advice, and they end up in the same literary class. The character of Emily is introduced in two separate scenes, once when she is applying for a teaching job in prison, and later when she is at home with her boyfriend. In these and other scenes with Emily and her boyfriend, it becomes clear that she is not happy in her relationship. Now the three main characters are introduced, the actual story begins. Ace and Paul simultaneously meet Emily when she teaches their first class, and after the lesson they are lying in their beds in their cell, and they start to talk about Emily. The two friends immediately both like Emily, start to ask her personal questions during individual encounters, and both envy the other for doing the same. When Paul has to write a letter as an exercise, he addresses
it to her, and Ace and Paul start discussing their individual feelings for Emelye. They both accuse each
other of having insincere and unreal feelings, and eventually start to fight. This causes Paul to be
taken to another cell, and from then on their friendship is more or less over. Afterwards Paul gets to
know that Ace will soon be released from prison, and wants to prevent this, because he is convinced
Ace will look up Emily. When it comes to another confrontation between Ace and Paul in class, the
prison director is informed of the love triangle between Ace, Paul and Emily. He gives her a warning,
but does not withdraw or replace her. Ace is let out of prison with an ankle tag, and almost
immediately looks up Emily. He even applies to the university she is working at, takes a picture of
them together, and sends it to Paul, who is still in prison. This leads to a discussion between Paul and
Emily. Emily presses the alarm bell, and Paul is transferred to another prison. While being
transported, he manages to escape, and flees to Ace’s apartment, to confront him with the picture.
Emily sees the news about Paul’s escape, and goes to Ace’s apartment as well to go and look for him.
The three of them bump into each other, and Paul and Ace start to fight. They finally agree that it is
best for Paul to hide, and he leaves, but Emily goes with him. Ace follows them, accuses Emily that
she chose Paul, and starts to pour petrol over Paul. When they have just agreed Paul is going to turn
himself in, Ace’s burning cigarette rolls in the puddle of petrol, and Ace dies in the explosion.

Now it is clear what happens in both versions of the tale, it will be easier to understand the
scenes to which I refer in and the course of developing my principal arguments. In this dissertation I
will sometimes repeat some arguments and scenes in order to approach them from a different angle.
When I mention a scene or conversation I have quoted before, I will not quote it again, but rather
provide a short description. As mentioned before, I am especially focussing on the personal
relationships. I will analyse the friendship between the two main male characters Arcite/Ace and
Palamon/Paul, and their individual relationship with the main female character Emelye/Emily.
Because Emelye/Emelye is the main reason the two friends break their bond or friendship, I will
afterwards analyse the role of her character, and how this rupture exactly happens, and what role
their environment plays. Because the actions of the characters are influenced by the genre of the
tale, I will also dedicate a chapter to the examination of the genre of the two versions of the tale, and
how this influences the characters exactly. Finally, I will discuss some secondary characters who are
the leaders of the societies. They are not involved in the love triangle, but they do have an influence
on it. They also have an influence on the society in which the main characters live, and this forms the
content of my last comparison.
2. Themes/personal relationships

2.1 Friendship

The first theme to be considered is that of friendship. The friendship between the main characters Arcite and Palamon (Ace and Paul in the modern adaptation) is a major part of the story and undergoes several developments. In his article for *The Chaucer Review*, Robert Stretter examined this friendship and its developments in the original poem and compared it with another fictitious friendship from John Lydgate’s *Fabula duorum mercatorum*. Since I am only interested in *The Knight’s Tale*, I am not going to take Lydgate’s story into account. Stretter describes the tale as “a perfect love triangle or a triangular desire: desire mediated through a third party, often a rival” (Stretter 234). He further argues, however, that this love triangle is an “unusual love conflict, because of Chaucer’s engagement with a popular type of medieval English romance and exemplum in which one almost never finds a women successfully coming between men, […] the idealized male friendship and brotherhood” (Stretter 234). *The Knight’s Tale* thus portrays a strong bond between the two knights, which is unexpectedly broken by a female character. With this plotline, “Chaucer is the first English writer explicitly to set the friendship tradition against the ideals of fin’ amor. Chaucer evokes a struggle between two competing ideals of affectivity, one a theoretically nonsexual love between men, the other a fundamentally erotic love between the sexes” (Stretter 234). The bond between the men is broken by a woman, which “results in an intensification of sexual desire as an overwhelming force in human affairs” (Stretter 234-5). In order to really understand the impact of the destruction of this bond, I have to know what kind of bond there is between the two knights, in addition to the fact that they are royal cousins. Obviously, this part is only in reference to the original poem, where Arcite and Palamon are actual knights, and not for the modern adaptation, in which Ace and Paul do not embody such a role. Stretter argues that “in depicting the intense bond between Palamon and Arcite, Chaucer could have drawn from two largely distinct friendship traditions: the one, classical *amicitia*, the other, sworn brotherhood” (Stretter 235). Since brotherhood was “a common feature throughout European romance, folklore and exempla”, it is most likely that Chaucer based the bond on sworn brotherhood (Stretter 236). This is confirmed by P. J. Heather, who compares several examples of this kind of bond in his article “Sworn-Brotherhood”. He explains,

> The most notable application of the idea is in the rite of blood brotherhood […]. In the simplest form of this rite, two men become brothers by opening their veins and sucking one another’s blood. Thenceforth their lives are not two but one. […] The ceremony of institution is not always described and in particular the exchange of blood is little dwelt on; but the
oaths that accompanied the initiation are referred to and the permanency of the obligations implied insistently affirmed (Heather 158).

This last part of Heather’s explanation is the most important, because this specific oath is what I find as proof for sworn brotherhood in Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale*, the ceremony of the knights sucking each other’s blood is indeed left out. Palamon refers to this oath, when both he and Arcite are imprisoned and they discuss their love for Emelye. The fact that Chaucer only reveals this oath between Arcite and Palamon after they profess their love for Emely, is something I will come back to later in this paragraph.

This Palamon gan knytte his browes tweye.

“It nere,” quod he, “to thee no greet honour
For to be fals, ne for to be traitour
To me, that am thy cosyn and thy brother
Ysworn ful depe, and ech of us til oother,
That nevere, for to dyen in the peyne,
Til that the deeth departe shal us tweyne,
Neither of us in love to hyndre oother,
Ne in noon oother cas, my leeve brother,
But that thou sholdes trewely forthren me
In every cas, as I shal forthren thee –
This was thyn ooth, and myn also, certeyn;
I woot right wel, thou darst it nat withseyn (Chaucer 40-41).

*Knitting his brow together, Palamon*

*Retorted, ‘It would do you no great honour
Did you prove either faithless or a traitor
To me who am your cousin, and sworn brother,
Each bound by solemn oaths, one to the other,
That even if it means we die by torture,
Neither of us would ever cross the other
In love or any other thing, dear brother,
Till death shall part the two of us for ever!
No, you must always come to my support
As loyally as I must come to yours:*
This was you solemn oath, and mine also,
Which you dare not deny, as I well know (Wright translation 31-32).

The sentences “To me, that am thy cosyn and thy brother Ysworn ful depe, and ech of us til oother,” specifically prove that Arcite and Palamon indeed have the bond of ‘sworn brotherhood’. Not only the audience of the time the poem was written, but also the contemporary readers understand that this kind of bond is very serious, and binding. The fact that this strong bond is nevertheless broken makes one think about its purpose in the story. Why did Chaucer portray this kind of bond, only to let a third character break it? As Stretter argues, Chaucer uses “brotherhood as shorthand for a (theoretically) indestructible male relationship in order to highlight the power of an even stronger force that destroys is – love between the sexes” (Stretter 237-8). The importance and strength of the bond of the sworn brotherhood makes its breaking by Emelye all the more powerful, and strengthens the impact of her character. I will further explore the role of this opposite-sex relationship and the role of Emelye in one of the following chapters.

The question arises if there is a similar bond between Ace and Paul in the BBC’s modern adaptation of the tale. As stated before, there could be no such thing as sworn brotherhood, because the story is situated in the 21st century and the men in question are not knights. To research this, I will now analyse the scene that corresponds to Palamon’s statement about the oath and his and Arcite’s discussion about their feelings for Emelye, this being the scene in which Ace and Paul return to their cell after a class with Emily. Paul is doing a writing exercise, which is simultaneously a love letter to Emily and when Ace reads it, the discussion about their feelings for Emily begins.

Paul gives the letter to Ace
Ace: It’s to her. You were only supposed to be writing a letter as an exercise.
Paul: I wanted to get my feelings down.
Ace: You want to give her this?
Paul: I’d love to. But it don’t do justice to what’s going on inside my brain... what she does to my head.
Ace: There’s a word missing. A big one - F for foolishness. Now copy it out and scrawl it across in big letters!
Paul: You think it makes me sound like a pussy?
Ace: Look, look. Just drop the whole idea of her, all right? And don’t tell me what’s going on in your head. I know how you feel.
Paul: You know how it feels? You ain’t never been in love, man!
Ace: No, I haven’t.
Paul: So, what you saying?
Ace: I know how you feel about her.

*Paul shakes his head*

Paul: Can’t be.
Ace: Well, it is, all right? So get this letter away from me.
Paul: I can’t change what’s in my head.
Ace: I’m the only person you’ve got in here, Paul.
Paul: Not no more.
Ace: You snake, man!
Paul: And you ain’t trying it on me? Listen, she came here exactly the same time as me. We both walked in to that classroom brand new. So we could have been sent here! You know?
Ace: What, fate?
Paul: I can believe in anything now.
Ace: Too much draw over the years is why it’s in the stars.
Paul: Where you looking? Up her skirt and down her blouse? You’re just looking at pussy.
Ace: No ... not this time.
Paul: You think I don’t know you?
Ace: You don’t know me now. I know it can be real, you know? Not your synchronicity bullshit. It happens, you know? Women prison visitors, probation officers, solicitors. Sometimes they see prisoners and they really see them. They can love them.
Paul: The only thing you’ll get from her is a worksheet.
Ace: Shut up. Shut up.
Paul: When she looks at me... she knows the rules can’t stop us. She knows they’re gonna get blown away. She just knows...
Ace: Stop talking like this, or, I swear to God, you’re a dead man, I will kill you.

*Ace punches Paul, they start fighting and get separated*

(24:00 – 27:32)

As one can read in this scene, the oath or bond between Ace and Paul is not focussed upon: they hardly mention that they are even friends at all. The only moment when the reader can deduct that they indeed knew each other beforehand and were friends, is when Paul says the following: “You think I don’t know you?” and Ace replies with “You don’t know me now.” This is the only moment in which the two men confirm they had a relationship before they were put in the same cell in prison. The comparison of these two scenes thus shows us the difference between a relationship between two men in the Middle Ages and in the 21st century. When Chaucer wrote this tale around
1380, the bond of friendship, more specifically the sworn brotherhood, carried much more importance than it does now. Today, the rituals and commotion around it have disappeared. However, this is not the only difference one can deduct from this scene. The two main characters not only confirm their sacred bond, as stated before, they also argue about their love for the same girl, Emelye. For example, when one reads the lines of the original tale, in which the two men confess their love for her (Arcite does this just before Palamon starts his speech about their bond), one can immediately see the difference on the level of depth. The way they talk about their shared bond, is well argued and makes sense, which cannot be said about the way they (try to) demonstrate their love for Emelye. “Whereas brotherhood is traditionally imagined as constant, egalitarian, and selfless, the kind of love Palamon and Arcite feel for Emelye is fickle, domineering, and, above all, selfish” (Stretter 239). They both base their love only on what they have seen, since neither of them has ever met the girl. The ‘feelings’ they have are very simple and superficial. First comes Palamon:

“Cosyn, for sothe, of this opiennoun
Thow hast a veyn yimaginacioun
This prison caused me nat for to crye,
But I was hurt right now thurghout myn ye
Into myn herte, that wol my bane be.
The fairnesse of that lady that I see
Yond in the gardyn romen to and fro
Is cause of al my crying and my wo.
I noot wher she be womman or goddesse,
But Venus is it soothly, as I gesse” (Chaucer 40).

“Truly, cousin, you have the wrong idea. 
Prison was not the reason for my cry,
For I was hurt just now, pierced through the eye
Right to the heart; the wound is killing me.
The beauty of that lady whom I see
There in that garden wandering to and fro,
Made me cry out; she’s cause of all my woe.
I don’t know of she’s woman or goddess,
But it is really Venus, I would guess’ (Wright translation 30-1).

After Palamon expresses his love, Arcite sees her walk by and follows the same path.
And with that word Arcite gan espye
Wher as this lady romed to and fro,
And with that sighte hir beautee hurte hym so,
That, if that Palamon was wounded sore,
Arcite is hurt as muche as he, or moore.
And with a sigh he seyde pitously,
“The fresshe beautee sleeth me sodeynly
Of hire that rometh in the yonder place;
And but I have hir mercy and hir grace,
That I may seen hire atte leeste weye,
I nam but deed; ther nis namoore to seye” (Chaucer 40).

But while he talked, Arcita cast his eye
To where the lady wandered to and fro;
And at the sight, her beauty hurt him so
That if Palamon has been wounded sore,
Arcita is as badly hurt, or more.
And with a sigh, dejectedly he spoke:
‘Beauty so fresh destroys me, as I look
On her who wanders yonder in that place.
Unless I win her mercy and her grace
That I at least may see her every day,
I’m better dead; what more is there to say?’ (Wright translation 31).

As said before, Chaucer only reveals the oath of sworn brotherhood, after these confessions. This could add up to the claim, that their ‘love’ for Emelye is only superficial, as Palamon chooses to use this sacred oath as a means to prove his love. He drags in this oath to his love confession, to strengthen it, because it would otherwise be too weak.

From this contrast in the original tale, I can move on to the modern adaptation. There I can also find a contrast, but this time it is the other way around. As stated before, there is no such thing as an oath or a sworn brotherhood between Ace and Paul, they merely mention they were and still are friends. On the other hand, the feelings they claim to have for their teacher Emily are much more realistic than those of Arcite and Palamon and based on more than just her appearance. They did not just glance at her from a distance, but they actually met her and had several conversations with her. I have already read the sentences in which Paul and Ace prove their love for Emelye in one of the
previous quotes. Paul starts by writing this love letter to her and explains to Ace that he believes he and Emelye are meant to be together: “Listen, she came here exactly the same time as me. We both walked into that classroom brand new. So we could have been sent here! You know?” (20:04 – 20:14). He continues: “When she looks at me... she knows the rules can’t stop us. She knows they’re gonna get blown away. She just knows...” (21:11 - 21:24). Ace replies by saying he understands what Paul feels and he feels the same about her. “Look, look. Just drop the whole idea of her, all right? And don’t tell me what’s going on in your head. I know how you feel. [...] I know how you feel about her” (19:05 – 19:26). He continues that it is possible that she might love him, even when he is a prisoner: “I know it can be real, you know? Not your synchronicity bullshit. It happens, you know? Women prison visitors, probation officers, solicitors. Sometimes they see prisoners and they really see them. They can love them” (20:38 – 21:00).

To conclude this paragraph about the friendship and the breaking of it, in the adaptation, the focus has shifted. In the original tale, the focus is on the fact that Arcite and Palamon are bound to each other through sworn brotherhood and it takes only superficial feelings for a woman to break them apart. In the modern adaptation, the focus is not on the bond between Ace and Paul, but more on the realistic, sincere feelings they both have for their teacher Emily. In the medieval story, the values of friendship and brotherhood are much more important than the reasons to fall in love with someone, while in the 21st century narrative, the bond of friendship is considered inferior to an opposite-sex relationship.
2.2 The knights’ love for Emelye/Emily

In the previous section, I discussed the kind of bond that exists between our two main characters. Given the fact that, in the original tale, Arcite and Palamon are knights and share the bond of sworn brotherhood, they should behave accordingly in every part of their lives. What I am going to examine in this following paragraph, is how these two characters handle their status as sworn knights individually and how this affects their character. I will show how their individual character traits can also be seen in their love for the lady Emelye. When in the previous chapter, I only mentioned that their sacred bond is unexpectedly broken due to their feelings for a female character, I am in this chapter going to specify how that happens in concrete terms. I am going to compare this with the corresponding elements in the modern adaptation. That is to say, how the characters of Ace and Paul are built up and how they act considering their love for their teacher Emily. I am going to make this comparison by looking at descriptions of their actions, given by the narrator, and examine several of their statements in various dialogues.

As said before, Arcite and Palamon should act according to their sacred bond in every part of their lives, which includes the ‘loving of a lady’. Naturally, in the Middle Ages, there are also rules that covered this area: “The lovers in books in the Middle Ages must please their ladies in two ways: by bearing them agreeable company and by distinguishing themselves in arms” (French 323). First, I am going to focus on the second part, which for Arcite and Palamon, since they are striving for the same woman, results in a combat against each other. This means, that “for the story to succeed, the knights must be equal in important respects,” their strengths and battling skills should be equally matched (French 327). Otherwise, if the skills of one knight were not compatible with the skills of the other, there would be no battle necessary and Emelye would just go for the ‘best’ knight. That is why, several critics argue, Chaucer permitted no important differences on the basis of their chivalric skills: “When in the final combat the poet likened one to a lion, the other to a tiger, he was merely stressing their equality” (French 326). Furthermore, “Theseus could not decide between the two except on the basis of a contest” (French 326). It is thus clear that the knights need the battle, they have to show in combat which one of them deserves Emelye more than the other. In the modern adaptation, there is no such thing as a battle. Ace and Paul, however, still feel they have to compete against each other to win over Emily. In that respect, they are equivalent: they are in the same situation, Emily does not know either of the two and one does not have any privileges over the other. Another important factor to think of, in the original tale, is the fact that Emelye did not prefer either of the knights. This is important to bear in mind, because in the modern adaptation, Emily seems to favour Paul over Ace, but I will come back to this later in the chapter about the role of Emelye/Emily.
Since the tale would have no end if Arcite and Palamon were the exact same person, Chaucer did incorporate differences, however on other levels than fighting skills. In this section, I am going to examine the other duty of a courtly lover I mentioned in the beginning of this paragraph, ‘bearing the lady agreeable company’, that is the domain, in which Chaucer made the distinction between his two knights. The knight is, however, not completely bound to these courtly rules. “A lover, while he must not be deficient in any part of his service, might find one branch of [his duties] preferable to the other”, so Arcite and Palamon can choose what to focus on in the competition for Emelye (French 325). I shall now examine how they do this, both in the original tale and the modern adaptation. In the original tale “there are some distinctions made between them - Palamon has the higher devotion, thinking of her as a goddess as much as woman; he looks to ends where Arcite looks to means” (Cooper 77). Especially the last part of this quote is important, but this will become clear later in this section. Palamon is portrayed as the softer person, “the lover who cared less for glory than for his lady’s company” (French 325). Palamon does not care about fame; he “defines possession of Emelye as his highest priority” (Elbow 99). I can also conclude this from his prayer in the temple of Venus:

[...] That make I myn avow, so ye me helpe!
I kepe noght of armes for to yelpe,
Ne I ne axe nat tomorwe to have victorie,
Ne renoun in this cas, ne veyne glorie
Of pris of armes blowen up and doun;
But I wolde have fully possessioun
Of Emelye, and dye in thy servyse (Chaucer 55).

[...] If you will help me, this shall be my vow.
I have no wish to brag of feats of arms,
Nor that tomorrow should bring victory,
Nor for renown, nor for the hollow glory
Of honour won, trumpeted up and down;
But what I want is the sole possession
Of Emily, and to die serving you (Wright translation 59).

Palamon emphasizes he only wants “fully possessioun of Emelye”, as stated before, he focusses on the ends, having Emelye, and he closes with promising his lifelong “servyse” to Venus. Venus is seen “as a good-hearted soul, more interested in the seriousness of love than the wantonness of sexual desires”, which contributes to Palamon’s character (Bolton 184). To emphasize
his sole purpose, he ends his prayer with these strong words: “Yif me my love, thow blissful lady deere” (Chaucer 55). From this prayer I can thus deduce that Palamon completely dedicates his life to his feelings and focusses on the lady. The corresponding character in the modern adaptation, Paul, carries the same personality traits. He is also considered the gentler character, who is more preoccupied with what he feels. When he arrives at prison and attends his first class, he is the silent one, who gets laughed at. When he thinks about Emily, he thinks about how she is doing: “I wonder if she’s going home to anyone tonight. That Emily” (15:23 – 15:28). He does not only focus on what he himself is feeling. When he talks to her, he wants to know how she feels and he wants to share his feelings with her. He wants to know why she looks tired and most importantly, he really wants to get to know her, even when he knows that is against the prison rules.

Paul: Everything all right?
Emily: I’m not allowed to answer personal questions. Remember?
Paul: You could have just said “fine”, but you didn’t, so you have answered it.
Emily: That’s all you’re getting.
Paul: Well, I hope you got someone you can tell.

Emily looks down
Paul: That’s tough. You could just break the rules and tell me.

(19:52 – 20:26)

Arcite on the other hand is a man of combat; he is presented as the one who focusses on his knightly fighting skills. “He prayed to Mars for victory and assumed that possession of the lady would follow” (French 325). While Palamon puts the possession of Emelye above victory, Arcite prays to win:

And wel I woot, er she me mercy heete,
I moot with strengthe wynne hire in the place,
And wel I woot, withouten help or grace
Of thee ne may my strengthe noght availle.
Thanne help me, lord, tomorwe in my bataille,
For thilke fyr that whilom brente thee,
As wel as thilke fyr now brenneth me,
And do that I tomorwe have victorie.
Myn be the travaille, and thyn be the glorie! (Chaucer 57).

Before she’ll promise me her heart, it’s plain
I must by main strength win her in the lists;
And well I know that without help or grace
From you, my lord, my strength will not avail.
Then give me aid tomorrow in the battle,
For that fire that once burned you long ago,
As well as for that fire that burns me now,
So that tomorrow brings me victory —
Let mine be all the doing, yours the glory! (Wright translation 63).

Arcite only thinks about the strength he needs to win the battle, and does not even mention Emelye; he clearly focusses on the means. He mentions a ‘she’ whose heart he has to win, but does not specify that he is talking about Emelye. To summarize, these prayers of Palamon and Arcite to Venus and Mars respectively show us what the two knights each give priority to, winning the lady or winning the battle. When I look at other parts of their prayers, however, one can see they both mention the other god as well. Palamon says:

For though so be that Mars is god of armes,
Youre vertu is so greet in hevene above
That if yow list, I shal wel have my love.
Thy temple wol I whorshipe evermo (Chaucer 55).

Though it be true that Mars is god of arms,
Your power is so great in heaven above,
That, if you wish, I’ll surely gain my love.
I’ll worship in your temple ever after (Wright translation 59).

Palamon does not only praise the powers of Venus, he also distinguishes her from Mars. Even when he knows that with the support of Mars, he will have power in arms, he still believes he should be praying for love, in order to get his lady. Arcite also mentions the other god, but with different intentions. He mentions Mars’ involvement with Venus, to compare it with his own feelings. I will come back to this part of Arcite’s prayer later in this paragraph, as it contains another important aspect of Arcite’s character. Now I can also take the description of Arcite’s character further to his corresponding character in the modern adaptation, Ace. Ace is the extravert one of the two friends. While Paul, as mentioned before, is the silent one in class, Ace is the conman. He is the class clown who fools the teacher and puts the other prisoners in their place, when they are teasing and laughing at Paul. When, one evening, they are talking about women in their cell, Ace only describes them in graphic terms, he proposes to picture women to be able to masturbate.
Paul: Angelina Jolie.
Ace: Yeah, yeah. The lips on that one!
Paul: Buffy The Vampire Slayer.
Ace: No, man, that’s too clean! Buffy...! No, no, no, some bluey that you saw. Two’s up in some French villa. 34 double E over the antique dining table. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I think I’ll join you.

(14:43 – 15:11)

When Paul brings Emily into the conversation, Ace does not wonder how she feels, like Paul does, but only wants to know if he wants her ‘to be in the film’. Paul immediately turns it down. When they are talking about their mutual feelings for Emily, Paul confirms again, that Ace is usually not a man about feelings. He argues: “Where you looking? Up her skirt and down her blouse? You’re just looking at pussy” (26:14 – 26:20). He knows Ace has never been in love and he cannot believe this time would be different. In addition, Ace is also more aggressive than Paul, he immediately goes into defence when he learns about Paul’s letter (“Get this letter away from me,” 25:34 – 25:36), and threatens to kill him (“Stop talking like this, or, I swear to God, you’re a dead man, I will kill you,” 27:13 – 27:15). This corresponds with the character traits assigned to Arcite previously in this chapter, which one could see in his prayer to Mars, the fact that he prefers to win the battle, to excel in aggressive, physical contact, than to express his feelings.

Another difference I can find between the two main characters, according to Elbow, is the fact that “Arcite has the gift of often seeing events with perspective or detachment while Palamon always seems immersed and without perspective – almost overwhelmed by what is going on” (Elbow 99). I can definitely see this feature in the adaptation as well, as Paul is also the one to listen to and speak out his feelings about Emily. “Palamon is a bit more open, impulsive, and naïve that his cousin. This is seen in the tone of his initial declaration of love for Emelye” (Elbow 98). When he sees her, he is immediately caught off guard and Arcite asks “Cosyn myn, what eyleth thee, That art so pale and deedle on to see?” (Chaucer 40). (“Why do you look so deathly pale?” (Wright 30)). Palamon answers overwhelmed by the appearance of Emelye, he cannot think clearly anymore and even doubts her to not be human, but divine: “[...] I was hurt right now thurghout myn ye Into myn herte, that wol my bane be. […]. I noot wher she be womman or goddesse, But Venus is it smoothly, as I gesse” (Chaucer 40). (“[...] I was hurt just now, pierced through the eye Right to the heart; the wound is killing me. [...] I don’t know if she’s woman or goddess, But it is really Venus, I would guess” (Wright 30-31)). This ‘openness’, ‘impulsiveness’ and ‘naivety’ can also be seen in Palamon’s modern character and in his first declaration of love as well. “Listen, she came here exactly the same time as me. We both walked
into that classroom brand new. So we could have been sent here! You know?” (25:53 – 26:03). When Ace cynically asks if he thinks this is ‘fate’ he answers: “I can believe in anything now” (26:07 - 26:08), which again confirms how impulsive Paul is. Only after this short encounter with Emily, he has completely devoted all his attention to her and can only believe fate brought them together, he does not think rationally and changed his whole belief system at once, just like Palamon in the original tale. Arcite on the other hand is “discernibly more toughminded and less open. […] His speeches are notable for containing confident explanations […]” (Elbow 99). One can conclude this from his initial love declaration as well:

“The fresshe beautee sleeeth me sodeynly
Of hire that rometh in the yonder place;
And but I have hir mercy and hir grace,
That I may seen hire atte leeste weye,
I nam but deed; ther nis namoore to seye” (Chaucer 40).

‘Beauty so fresh destroys me, as I look
On her who wanders yonder in that place.
Unless I win her mercy and her grace
That I at least may see her every day,
I’m better dead; what more is there to say?’ (Wright translation 31).

Arcite does not compare Emelye with a goddess, he sees her as a human being whose mercy he must win. Again, one can also find this in the modern version of this love declaration. Ace does not only give more solid arguments for his love, he also affirms Paul is overwhelmed and sees it much bigger than it actually is. “Too much draw over the years is why it’s in the stars. […] You don’t know me now. I know it can be real, you know? Not your synchronicity bullshit. It happens, you know? Women prison visitors, probation officers, solicitors. Sometimes they see prisoners and they really see them. They can love them” (26:10 – 26:49). Ace looks at this in a rational way, explains it is one of the possibilities and does not believe at all in the “synchronicity bullshit” of Paul.

The last element of difference between the two main characters is mainly important in the original tale. It concerns the way in which they treat the sacred bond of knightly brotherhood they share. In the previous chapter, I have already explained the importance of this oath and now I am going to examine how the two knights take this oath into account. In her article “Forsworn and fordoned: Arcite as oath-breaker in the Knight’s Tale”, Catherine A. Rock lists several arguments and examples to show that Arcite acts as the ‘oath-breaker’ in the tale, in contrast with, Palamon, who considers the oath during his actions. It starts at the beginning of the tale, “when the knights first see
(and fall in love with) Emelye, Palamon upholds the brotherhood oath, while Arcite promptly breaks it” (Rock 417). When Palamon prays to Venus, he each time involves Arcite as well. He asks her “either to help both the knights to escape from prison, or, at least, to have pity on both of them”, whilst Arcite does the opposite and puts his feelings above his obligation towards Palamon: “his first thought is for himself: he desires her and has no thought for his friend” (Rock 417). This happens again, when Arcite is released by Theseus and Perotheus: he “apparently fails to ask his old friend Perotheus to plead with Theseus on behalf of Palamon” (Rock 421). Arcite, however, does not only break his oath with Palamon, but also his oath with Theseus. In spite of being banished from Theseus’ country, Arcite returns and pretends to be the totally unknown Philostrate; he changes allegiances. Once again, it is important to know the significance of such oaths. “The full wrong that [Arcite] is doing to Palamon is not understood unless one recalls that in the Middle Ages promises were really supposed to be kept, and that in any case, the value of love was inferior to that of friendship” (Rock 419). Arcite tries to argue “that the pledge is superseded by a higher law, that of love”, when he knows that his oath has a much higher value (Rock 419). He is thus, consciously breaking his oath. During his praying in the temple of Mars, I can again see that he knows what he is risking. He “tactlessly reminds Mars of the god’s humiliating capture by Vulcan while in the arms of Vulcan’s wife Venus. He mentions this episode to show that Mars, too, has had powerful feelings for a woman, aiming to convince the god to help him” (Rock 426). There may be, however, another reason why Arcite mentions this episode. As he himself is falling for a woman who technically belongs to someone else, as Palamon saw her first and first declared his love for her, he is describing his own situation. He seems to know that Emelye is not his woman to have, just like Venus was not Mars’s woman to have. The fact that he subconsciously knows that he is in the wrong, can be strengthened by his last words. At the end of the tale, Arcite “rethinks his quarrel with Palamon, comes to a conclusion and consequently, at the point of death, forgives Palamon and suggests that Emelye and Palamon marry” (Rock 428). Arcite could have still been convinced, that he was the one who deserved Emelye and he could have shown this by addressing his last words to her. Instead, he addresses them at Palamon and gives him his blessing, showing he knew all along, Palamon deserved her. I can thus conclude, that in order to win Emelye, Arcite broke the oath of brotherhood, while Palamon constantly keeps it in mind and respects it. Rock argues, that is why Arcite dies at the end and Palamon gets to marry Emelye: “Arcite’s suffering and death – as well as his ultimate loss of Emelye – are caused by the knight’s faithlessness, as shown by his oath-breaking and his changing of allegiances throughout the tale” (Rock 428).

I can also link this with the modern adaptation. As stated before, Ace and Paul cannot really break an oath, as they do not share one, but in a way, through their actions, they can still ‘break their
friendship’. It is, however, not as black-and-white as in the original tale as there is not really one good and one bad friend. One would expect from Ace to break the friendship, based on the description of his character I have given earlier. He would most likely be the one to let his anger take over and take it out on Paul. When Ace is released on probation, he immediately enrolls at the university where Emily is based at, surprises her on the campus and out of the blue takes a picture of them together. Afterwards, he sends the picture to Paul, who is still in prison, and who naturally freaks out. Ace could have just taken the picture and kept it for himself, but instead, he ‘breaks the friendship’ by sending it to Paul and provoking him by showing he can have free contact with Emily. He knows it will drive Paul crazy and might hope for Paul to do something against the prison rules, which would deteriorate or even lengthen his stay there. Paul, on the other hand, is neither completely faithful to their friendship. Just before Ace is released on probation, Paul is worrying and rambling on to his new cellmate about what could happen with Ace and Emily outside prison. He knows, although Ace still has curfew, he has more freedom and is afraid they might end up together. At the end, he says; “But I’m gonna make him wait” (29:05). After this scene, one can see how Ace is taken out of his cell to get a drugs test, because of “reasonable suspicion” (29:20), but they walk past Paul and the viewer, together with Ace, immediately knows Paul is behind it. Instead of accepting the fact that Ace will be out of prison soon, Paul goes behind his back and tries to let Ace get caught with drugs, to make him stay longer. This could, nevertheless, fit in with Paul’s character, as one could see this as Paul being overwhelmed by his feelings for Emily and not being able to think straight anymore, which made him try everything to get Ace away from her.

In summary, in this chapter I have talked about how the knights handle their status as sworn brothers individually, how it affects their character and how this results in their love for Emily. First, I discussed how sworn knights are supposed to act, considering fighting skills and accompanying the lady. I also talked about what their character is like in general and how they deal with their sacred bond. Where it was possible, I compared it to the characters of Ace and Paul in the modern adaptation. To conclude, I can say that Chaucer deliberately gave the men equal knightly fighting skills, because the battle would be unnecessary otherwise, but that he included significant differences on other, equally important, levels. This corresponds with the characters of Ace and Paul in the adaptation in some way, as there is no real, sacred oath to break, yet the bond of friendship is somehow broken as well. As stated in the last chapter, the value of such an oath is much more important during the time of the original tale, than during the modern times of the adaptation. That is why Arcite is really seen as a traitor by the whole community, but no one really cares about it with Ace and Paul, since it is a personal matter and society is not at all involved. I can also conclude that the division between good and bad is much less clear in the modern adaptation. In the original tale,
Palamon is seen as the good man, who constantly respects the oath, and by that his friend, while Arcite breaks the oath several times. In the modern adaptation however, Ace and Paul seem pretty similar and they both betray their friendship. This is the more logical choice, because the bond is less important, which makes it less bad if one of them breaks it.
2.3 The role of Emelye/Emily

In this chapter, the role of the main female character will be examined: Emelye/Emily. I intend to examine the differences between her character in the original tale and in the modern adaptation on several levels. On a very general and superficial level, the main role of Emelye/Emily in both versions is breaking the bond between Arcite/Ace and Palamon/Paul, or more precisely, she is the reason for it, but she herself has no say in the matter. However, I am going to broaden this superficial idea, and examine how this rift happens in practice. That is to say, what does Emelye/Emily do or not do, to drive a wedge between Arcite/Ace and Palamon/Paul.

First, the role of Emelye in the original tale will be looked at. In this version, Emelye hardly has a role and hardly has any text either. “The emphasis [of the tale is] on male competition [...]”, and Emelye, whom the competition is about, has no influence at all, which makes her “the incidental victim of the male’s need to outdo each other” (Jensen 324). She is, as stated before, the reason why Arcite and Palamon break their bond and friendship, but that is only because Arcite and Palamon themselves make her, she herself has no say in it. The two knights see her, when they are together in their prison cell; both fall deeply in love with her and despise the other for it. As they never have physical contact with her, until later in the story, they base their love purely on her appearance. When they declare their love for her, as quoted in the previous chapter, they only talk about how beautiful she is. They never even wonder how she might be in person, what her character might be, and therefore they give the impression that they reduce her to an object of desire. Emelye serves as “the eligible object of their ‘stryf’” (Jensen 321). Emily Jensen even takes this further to the linguistic side of the tale. She argues that Chaucer used ‘rhyming words’ to point out the relationship between the three main characters: “‘wyf’ is coupled with ‘lyf’ [...] ‘wyf joins ‘stryf’. The variation captures the triangle perfectly: because men must win the woman as wife or die, they are in strife, and, from their point of view, the woman ultimately is the cause of it all” (Jensen 326). One could argue, that Emelye does have a say in the matter, considering the passage in which they all pray to a different god. Once one is aware that the gods realize the wishes of the characters (Arcite prays for victory and wins the battle, Palamon prays for possession of Emelye and marries her), one could argue that Diana also realizes the wishes of Emelye and that Emelye thus influenced the events by praying to Diana. However, “Emelye’s prayer to Diana is placed in between, more to intensify their conflict, than to suggest that she has any say in this matter” (Jensen 322). Moreover, what Emelye really wishes for in the prayer, is not fulfilled. When she addresses Diana, she says:
Chaste goddess, wel wostow that I
Desire to ben a mayden al my lyf,
Ne nevre wol I be no love ne wyf.
I am, thow woost, yet of thy compaignye,
A mayde, and love huntynge and venerye,
And for to walken in the wodes wilde,
And noght to ben a wyf and be with childe.
Noght wol I knowe compaignye of man.
Now help me, lady, sith ye may and kan,
For tho thre forms that thou hast in thee (Chaucer 56).

O you chaste goddess, you know well that I
 Desire to be a virgin all my life,
 Never to be a mistress or a wife.
 You know I’m still one of your company,
 A virgin, and a lover of the chase,
 Who would far rather roam the forests wild
 Than ever be a wife, or be with child.
 I’ll never be companioned with a man.
 Now help me, Lady, since you may and can
 By virtue of your threefold deity (Wright translation 61).

Emelye wishes to be a virgin for the rest of her life, she wants to devote her life to chastity and the worship of Diana. Only when that is not possible, she says, she asks to make Arcite and Palamon fall out of love with her or to let the knight win who most desires her, but these are only outcomes when it is not possible for her to remain a virgin. Apart from the end, that is the only part of the story in which Emelye does something of her own volition. Elsewhere in the tale “Emelye is distinctly out of the action [...] and, when a response to events is permitted her [...] it is qualified as being typical for women” (Jensen 324). When Emelye looks at Arcite right after he won the tournament, it is seen as something women are supposed to do. It does not reflect her own feelings:

Lokynge upward upon this Emelye;
And she agayn hym caste a freendlich ye
(For wommen, as to speken in comune,
Thei folwen alle the favour of Fortune) (Chaucer 61).
All the while looking up at Emily,
Who casts on him, in turn, a friendly eye,
(For, generally speaking, all women
Follow whoever’s favoured by Fortune) (Wright translation 70).

She does not want to smile at Arcite, she just knows she has to because he is the winner of the battle.

Another way to look at the role of Emelye is by looking at the kind of love the tale portrays. When one looks superficially at the story, one could argue that this is an example of courtly love. There is the right medieval setting. There are also the right actors, two knights who fall in love, and a princess. Jerome Mandel argues otherwise, because he says that the tale “focusses exclusively upon the two male rivals and excludes Emily’s response to love almost entirely” (Mandel 285). Normally, in a situation of courtly love, the man and the woman desire each other; they both are in love with the other person. Since Emelye is reduced to an object of desire, this tale certainly cannot be an example of courtly love. Mandel takes this further: “This is the very antithesis of courtly love: the woman’s desire is never considered; [...] and the final coming together of lover and lady satisfies a political expedient determined by Duke and parliament” (Mandel 286). Especially the end of his argument is important. When at the end Palamon and Emelye marry, it is not completely voluntarily. However, it is Palamon’s greatest desire ‘to possess Emelye’, it is mostly a “marriage-for-peace contract” (Jensen 325). The narrator first explains how the parliament decided they should get married to make foreign alliances:

Thanne semed me ther was a parlement
At Atthenes, upon certain pointz and caas;
Among the whiche pointz yspoken was,
To have with certein contrees alliaunce,
And have fully of Thebans obeisaunce.
For which this noble Theseus anon
Leet senden after gentil Palamon,
[...]
Tho sente Theseus for Emelye (Chaucer 64-5).

Then it appears they held a parlement
At Athens, to talk over various
Affairs and issues; among which there was
Some talk of making foreign alliances,
And of compelling Theban allegiance.

And therefore the good Theseus lost no time

In sending for the noble Palamon.

[...]

Thereupon Theseus sent for Emily (Wright translation 77).

After a lengthy speech of Theseus about life and death, the marriage is performed and one can see again, that getting married is not entirely, or even not primarily, their own decision. Theseus explains to Emelye: “Lene me youre hond, for this isoure accord.” (“We have agreed on this; give me your hand”) and to Palamon he says: “I trowe ther nedeth litel sermonyng To make yow assente to this thyng” (Chaucer 66). Theseus, thus, assumes both parties will accept this and gives them no chance to protest or even say anything. Cooper confirms that the marriage is not at all an event of love: “Unlike the mischances of the story, the happy ending is brought about not by the planets, but through human decision and action” (Cooper 79). It thus appears that the role of Emelye in the original tale is extremely small, not to say non-existent. She is reduced to an object of desire of Arcite and Palamon, she has no say in the matter, her prayer to Diana only serves to intensify the conflict and at the end she is married to Palamon, against al her prayers to remain a virgin, and the marriage only counts as an allegiance.

The next point to be considered is the role of Emily in the modern adaptation and as one could guess, it is a lot more significant than in the original tale. Obviously, in the setting of the modern adaptation it is impossible to have the same kind of situation. In the 21st century, there could be no such thing as a ‘tournament to win a woman’ and prisoners would never be able to gaze into the garden when in their cell. I am going to argue that the character of Emily has two major roles, or that her role has two major parts. First, I am examining how, throughout the episode, Emily improves her own situation, and how this relates to the situation of Emelye in the original tale. Afterwards, I am looking into how Emily influences the lives of Ace and Paul. As stated before, Emily is the reason why Ace and Paul are competing against each other, but just like in the previous paragraph, I am looking into how this happens specifically.

As stated above, the first thing to be examined here is the situation of Emily herself, more importantly, how her situation improves throughout the story. The major difference with the original tale is that one really gets to know her situation; one gets to know her character outside of the competition between the two men. The first scene in which she appears is when she applies for the job of prison teacher, but this will be discussed in more detail later on in this dissertation. Her life and her position are revealed when she appears in her apartment with her boyfriend Gareth. The
fact alone that the viewer gets to see her home and that she has a boyfriend already shows how Emily has her own story in the adaptation; she is more than just an element of the competition. Her more individual characterization makes it possible to find out how she moves away from this position, or how she ‘grows out’ of this initial situation. The scene shows how her boyfriend attacks her with a razor blade as a joke, to ‘prepare’ her for her new job in prison. One can clearly see Emily does not find it funny at all, but the boyfriend does not seem to mind and does not apologize sincerely. Another scene of Emily and her boyfriend at their apartment shows us the same thing. When her boyfriend is in the shower and she hears that he receives a text from someone, she tries to take his cell phone and read the text. Her boyfriend, however, does everything he can to prevent that. They fight for a bit and when Emily falls on the ground, he is not worried at all and only makes sure the text is deleted. These scenes with her boyfriend show us Emily is in a bad relationship, which opens up the possibility that she could benefit from having a relationship with one of the prisoners, as she is currently in a bad living situation, which she could improve. This is one of the significant differences with Emelye in the original tale. In Chaucer’s tale one does not know her home situation or even get some information about her personal life. As mentioned earlier, the only aspect of her life that is revealed is that she is very attractive. There is one moment, however, in which Chaucer’s public gets to know a little bit more about her, viz. the scene in which she prays to the goddess Diana. In this scene, quoted in the previous paragraph, she prays to retain her chastity and stay a virgin for the rest of her life. Emelye’s situation seemingly improves, when at the end, she gets to marry Palamon, but as this is the opposite of what she prayed for, and she might actually end up worse than she was before. In addition, in the adaptation another example of Emily’s improvement can be found, when she is at home with her boyfriend again; there is a report on the television, after Paul escaped from prison and they discuss it: Emily wants to go after him, while her boyfriend wants her to stay.

Gareth: D’you know this guy?
Emily: Yeah.
Gareth: One of the guys you taught?
Emily: Yeah.
Gareth: I didn’t know escaping was on the curriculum!
Emily: That’s meant to be the idea. How to escape.
Gareth: Yeah, but he’s done a runner, hasn’t he? So he’s back to square one now.
Emily: He was being transferred because of me.
[...]

*Emily stands up and takes her coat*
Gareth: And now you’re going to do what, exactly?
Emily: I don’t know. Something. Anything, so he doesn’t get in anymore trouble.
Gareth: You and your social conscience, eh?
Emily: Yeah.
Gareth: This is about work, isn’t it? Look, just how involved are you?
Emily: This isn’t some repressed fantasy!
Gareth: No, it’s obliviously bloody real! Stay OK? Don’t... don’t go anywhere. Don’t go to him.
Emily: I have to.
Gareth: Making your escape, too?
Emily: Yeah!

(42:39 – 44:21)

First, this scene confirms the statement about how bad Emily’s relationship with her boyfriend is. He does not take her work as a teacher in prison seriously and laughs about a serious thing: ‘I didn’t know escaping was on the curriculum?’ Second, they literally say she is ‘making her escape’; she is escaping from her current situation, she is escaping from her bad relationship. By going after Paul, she deliberately chooses to leave her boyfriend and to better her life. This scene again shows the significance of her role in the adaptation, she really has a say in things and is not just an object.

One can now look at how Emily influences the lives of Ace and Paul. In contrast with her role in the original tale she really is an active participant of the breaking and not just the person the competition is based on. This appears in several scenes in which she encounters the two men and when she talks to the prison governor. First, the physical position of Emily is very different. She is actually in the prison with Ace and Paul; she is in the classroom with them, which makes her a lot more accessible. She is not just someone they can look at from a distance, but they can actually have contact with her, they can talk to her. As stated in the previous chapter, this is the reason why the love of Ace and Paul for Emily is based upon a lot more than just looks, they ‘have access’ to a lot more information and can really get to know her. This closer position of Emily naturally affects the rest of her role too. Subsequent scenes show that Emily in fact changes the lives of Ace and Paul. The first one is the scene I mentioned above, the first time one gets to see Emily when she applies for the job as prison teacher. This scene again confirms the active role of Emily. She herself decided to apply for a teaching job in prison; she is the one who undertakes action. As the interview progresses, the prison governor asks her if she wants to make a change in the prisoners’ lives. When she is hesitant, he says, “No, I want you to go in there thinking you can help change their lives.” She agrees and says,
“Well, I’d do my best” (6:19 – 6:26). From this scene, the viewer can deduce that she is literally going to affect their lives. The underlying irony is that she starts this job thinking she is going to change their literacy skills, but she actually ends up changing their lives in a completely different way. Another example is the scene in which Emily teaches a regular class at her university. When a friend asks her how it is going, she expresses considerable disappointment.

Friend: How are you doing?
Emily: Pissed off, actually, that they’re so bloody apathetic! It’s like there’s nothing at stake. It’s just something they do.
Friend: Unlike your prison students.
Emily: It matters to them. There’s excitement. It feels like... a chemical reaction sometimes. It’s like, bang!

(18:35 – 18:57)

Emily is frustrated about her regular students because they are not engaged at all; they seem hardly interested. She favours the prison students, because ‘it really matters to them’, because she notices that she can actually influence, and maybe even change their lives.

A third factor of how Emily changes the lives of the two main characters is the fact that she herself has the power to decide. When during a lesson Paul asks her if everything is all right, she answers: “I’m not allowed to answer personal questions. Remember?” (19:57 – 19:59). She has the power to decide how far the contact between them goes, and is the one who decides whether to answer or not. She is also the one who is in the position to seek contact with them, for example, when she gives a flower to Ace during class, because of his project. Another scene shows us she is able to let them in about her feelings. When Ace is taking an exam in a separate room with her, she allows him to talk about it with her.

Emily: You are a bloody pain.
Ace: I make you laugh, though, don’t I?
Emily: Thank God somebody does.
Ace: I make you feel good.
Emily: Yeah.

(23:18 – 23:38)

In the original tale, Emelye’s feelings are laid bare when she prays to Diana. She only reveals her thoughts and wishes to a higher power, but not to Arcite and Palamon. In the modern adaptation, as this dialogue shows, a lot more of information is given about how Emily feels about it
all and one can see that she actually shares it with the men. Another aspect in which Emily has the power is in the physical fights between Ace and Paul. Twice in the story, she is the one who separates them, once when they are in the classroom: “For Christ’s sake, stop it, or I’ll report both of you. All right?” (29:43 – 29:47), and once when they are at Ace’s apartment: “Stop it! Just stop it! Stop it! (Screams) Stop it! If that’s what you two want to do to each other, I don’t want anything to do with either of you” (47:12 – 47:24). She has the power to make them stop fighting, while in the original tale, she does not even have physical contact with either of them. A last example to show that Emily has the power is a scene at the end of the episode. Ace died, Paul is back in prison and he is talking to Emily in the visitors’ room of the prison.

Paul: It’s a 60-hour course split into three themes – history, biography, resistance and change in working-class lives. They’re getting me to do this autobiography – how we ended up here. I’ve got to be honest, otherwise Ace died for nothing. [...] This autobiography thing they’re getting us to do – you’re in it.

Emily: Am I?
Paul: Don’t know how much yet, though.
Emily: You mean you think this could be the last you’ll be seeing of me?
Paul: Is it?
Emily: No.
Paul: But when you come again... how often... that will always be up to you, won’t it?
Emily: You mean I’ll be in control?
Paul: Yeah.
Emily: But the test of this relationship will be what happens at the end of your sentence, when you get out?
Paul: Might be scary.
Emily: Let’s wait and see. (Whispers) Listen! That... that autobiography – you tell them it’s not finished yet, yeah?

(55:56 – 57:36)

Emily has complete control over their relationship, as Paul said; she is the one who can decide when to visit. She gives him hope, however, by saying he has to wait with his autobiography. She is the one able to decide if and how this relationship goes further and she gives him hope by saying not everything about it can be said yet, they still have a future. This ending is the complete opposite of the ending of the original tale, in which Emelye and Palamon have an arranged marriage to make an alliance between Thebes and another town. In the original tale, everything is decided for
Emelye, she does not have a say in her marriage and her whole future is secured, while in the adaptation Emily is in complete control over the future of her relationship with Paul. All these examples show how Emily has the power to decide how everything evolves. She can decide how much she tells Ace and Paul, she can decide if she wants contact or not, she has the power to separate them and maybe most importantly, she has the power to decide what her own future is going to look like.

To complete this chapter about the role of Emelye/Emily, I am going to examine some examples of an aspect of the modern adaptation I mentioned in the previous chapter, viz. the fact that Emily seems to favour Paul over Ace. In the original tale, Emelye does not prefer either of the knights, but in the modern adaptation, there are several moments, in which she seems to do so. Several times during the episode, she explains the situation and she justifies her actions towards Paul. The first time is right after she bumped into Ace at her university and he took a picture of them together. As said before, he sends the picture to Paul, who is still in prison. Naturally, Paul is angry about the picture and storms into the classroom.

Paul: Is that real life?
Emily: He sent that to you?
Paul: Is that real life?
Emily: He’s enrolled at the college I’m based at to do a course, that’s all.
Paul: That’s all?
Emily: Yeah.

Paul closes the door of the classroom
Emily: He’s got his arm around me, yeah, and I’m letting him, but that means nothing!

(37:58 – 38:20)

Although Emily and Paul do not have a relationship and she is not at all accountable towards him, she justifies her actions. This happens again when Paul runs into her at Ace’s apartment. He accuses her of having chosen Ace: “You’ve been seeing him.”, but she refutes that and justifies why she is there: “I came here cos I thought it would be the quickest way of finding you” (46:50 – 46:58). This argument is strengthened by the fact that she only does this towards Paul; she never justifies herself or her actions towards Ace. In addition, she has several chances to choose Ace, but she does not. When she is looking for Paul after his escape, for example, she goes to Ace’s apartment, described in the previous scene. Ace invites her in and proposes to make her a meal, but she declines. At that moment, Emily could have decided to stay with Ace and forget about Paul, but she
does not and explains she has to go and find Paul. The fact that she only goes to Ace’s place to look for Paul also shows that she favours him over Ace.

To summarize this chapter, the role of Emily appears to be significantly bigger and her character is much more important in the modern adaptation. In the section about the original tale, I demonstrated that the character of Emelye is reduced to an object. She does not have anything to say for most of the tale and one only gets to know her when other characters talk about her. Emelye is the centre of the competition between Arcite and Palamon, but only because they make her. They make her the object of desire, she herself has no say in the matter, and she also does not meet them until later in the tale, while in the modern adaptation, Emily is a lot closer and much more accessible and she has an actual, physical role in the competition. This develops into more genuine and realistic feelings of Ace and Paul towards her. In addition to that, in the modern adaptation, Emily’s personal situation improves, while the situation of Emelye in the original tale becomes worse. Emily is able to ‘escape’ from her bad relationship with her boyfriend Gareth and move on with Paul, while Emelye’s future is completely decided for her and she ends up in an arranged marriage. This influences the concept and development of the stories. Emily is able to decide how her contacts with both men develop, while Emelye cannot change anything about it and has to accept what others decide for her. Although the medieval story is told by a knight, and although one might have expected a chivalric romance, *The Knight’s Tale* ultimately develops into an epic reflection on the role of fate. In the end, it is the television adaptation and not the original tale that pursues the tradition of romances, in which the hero, and in this case even more the heroine, is given a chance to shape his or her own destiny.
3. Genre: Epic vs Romance

In the previous chapters I have examined several main characters and their relationships with each other. This examination has shown that the two main male characters, Arcite/Ace and Palamon/Paul, share a special bond of brotherhood and that the main female character, Emelye/Emily, is the reason why they end their bond and their friendship. In the following chapter, I will look more closely into what these conclusions about the main characters and their relationships say about the story itself. The genre of the tale is namely largely determined by the characters and their actions. First, I will examine several theoretic elements of both the romantic and the epic genre and I will examine which ones are valid for the original tale. Afterwards I am going to do the same for the modern adaptation.

3.1 The original tale as an epic

Several critics argue that The Knight’s Tale is an example of a romance, and I agree with this partly, because one can indeed find some elements of the romantic genre. Cooper argues, for instance, “the main plot is not of war, heroism, and the fate of nations, but a love-story” (Cooper 64). The focus of the tale indeed is on the love both Arcite and Palamon are feeling for Emelye and on the fact that they both try to win her over by battling each other in the tournament. In the build-up to this tournament, their prayers to the different gods, and during the tournament itself, the focus stays on these two knights and their feelings for Emelye. There is only mention of a war at the very beginning of the tale, and this is only to give the audience a full introduction to the two knights and explain how they ended up in the Theseus’s prison.

After the bataille and discomfiture.
And so bifel that in the taas they founde,
Thurgh-girt with many a grevous blody wounde,
Two yonge knyghtes liggynge by and by (Chaucer 39).

After the battle and the Theban rout,
[...]
Among the heap of corpses there they found
Pierced through and through with many a deep wound,
Two young knights lying bleeding side by side (Wright translation 28).
The element of heroism is focussed upon, since the two knights have to prove their knightly skills, but they only need these to prove their love for Emelye. They do not have to ride out in the woods and conquer the great evil, as other knights in heroic tales. Derek Brewer agrees to this in his article about the nature of romance in which he lists several elements of this genre. He argues that “the actual subject-matter of romance is intrinsically interesting in a personal way, for it is love and adventure, more specifically, love and fighting” (Brewer 24). As mentioned before, the *Knight’s Tale* is mostly about Arcite and Palamon’s love for Emelye and how they fight against each other for this love. Brewer adds on that “it is struggle, self-assertion, seeking and practising personal love (not simply sex), and consequently makes a large place for women” (Brewer 24). One can also easily find these elements in Chaucer’s tale. Arcite and Palamon struggle to prove their love, because they have to battle against each other, they both undertake action to change their situation for the better and they always keep Emelye, the woman in the tale, in mind.

When we look at the role of Emelye, we can confirm another romantic element Brewer mentions in his article. The creation of the heroine, either as focus of the striving of the action, or as the active principle herself [...] generates much of the sweetness and joy of romance. The traditional heroine confers a womanly warmth and intimacy of feeling on the story very different from the aggressive masculine spirit of the public world more usually inhabited by tragedy (Brewer 25).

In chapter I explained the minimal role of Emelye in the original tale, so it is clear she functions as the focus of the striving. Through her description one knows that she indeed portrays sweetness and joy of romance and is the opposite of the aggressive masculine spirit. The only thing she does is wander through the gardens and devotedly pray to the goddess of chastity, Diana. Emelye also represents another aspect of the romance heroine. Brewer also argues that “Objects and events are often idealised by being presented as the most extreme of their kind” (Brewer 44). This is certainly the case with Emelye as the knight who narrates the tale describes her as the most beautiful of women.

That Emelye, that fairer was to sene
Than is the lylie upon his stalke grene,
And fressher than the May with floures newe –
For with the rose colour stroof hire hewe,
I noot which was the fyner of hem two – (Chaucer 39).

*That Emily, lovelier to look upon
Than is the lily on its stalk of green,
And fresher than the May with flowers new –*
For with the rose’s colour strove her hue,
Nor can I tell the lovelier of the two – (Wright translation 29).

Palamon even wonders “wher she be womman or goddesse” (Chaucer 40). A last argument in favour of the romance genre, considers the ending of the tale. “The predominance of happy over unhappy endings in romances is so great as to be in itself the principal broad definition characteristic of romance […]”, and Brewer adds: “A happy ending is only truly significant when it concludes unhappy events” (Brewer 27). One could argue that this indeed is the case for The Knight’s Tale as the tale ends with Palamon and Emelye getting married, which was Palamon’s wish all along, and he had to conquer several obstacles to get there. One has to remember, however, that Palamon is the only one getting his wish here, but I will come back to this later.

Considering all these arguments in favour of the genre of romance, I will now argue why The Knight’s Tale should actually rather be considered as an example of an epic. One could see the previous arguments convincing enough to attribute to the Knight’s Tale the label of romance, but whilst taking those arguments on board and completing them, the following analysis also steers the generic interpretation into another direction. In the previous section, for example, I mentioned how Cooper considers The Knight’s Tale a medieval romance, because the focus is on love and not war. Cooper, however, expands on this claim and argues:

Two features, however, make it distinctly atypical of romance. One is the philosophical reach, the concern with issues of fate, fortune, and the conditions of mortal life. The second is that the characteristic happy ending of romance in marriage happens to only one of the two protagonists (Cooper 64).

While this argument covers two major elements of the tale, I will substantiate this with other arguments from other critics and demonstrate them through several textual examples. To explain the first part, ‘the philosophical reach, the concern with issues of fate, fortune, and the conditions of mortal life’, I refer to another element Brewer listed in his article. Brewer argues: “romances normally are explicit quests or conflicts seeking personal fulfilment based on virtue” (Brewer 26). This means that a knight, or another medieval character, has to go out on an adventure, overcome tests and temptations, and has to do this all out of personal conviction. This is of course not possible when everything is decided by fate and fortune, when everything is predestined, as Cooper argues. This concern with fate and fortune is shown in several scenes. For example, when Arcite is released from prison and banned from Theseus’ land he is completely devastated. He wanders through the woods for two years and because of his grief, he changed unrecognisably. Suddenly the god Mercury appears and tells him the following:
“To Athenes shaltou wende,
Ther is thee shapen of thy wo an ende” (Chaucer 44).

‘To Athens you must go,
There waits the destined ending of you woe’ (Wright translation 38).

It is not Arcite’s own decision to go to Athens, he only goes there because Mercury told him he is destined to go there. This therefore clearly shows that Arcite is not going on a quest motivated by his own intentions, and he is not seeking personal fulfilment based on virtue. Another example is the passage where Theseus is hunting in the woods with his entourage, including Hypolyta and Emelye, and he stumbles upon Arcite and Palamon fighting. He separates them and explains how they are going to solve this quarrel. More than once he mentions how ‘fate’ will decide who wins Emelye.

And forthy I yow putte in this degree,
That ech of yow shal have his destynee
As hym is shape, and herkneth in what wyse (Chaucer 50).

And therefore I will order matters so
That each of you shall win what destiny
May have decreed for him (Wright translation 49).

Theseus explains that the knights will win what destiny has decided for them to win, it does not really matter what they do, destiny has already decided upon their outcome. Theseus also explains the winner will get to marry Emelye, but this is also not their decision, it is already definite. “Thanne shal I yeve Emelya to wyve/ To whom that Fortyne yeveth so fair a grace” (Chaucer 50).

Another critic, Robert S. Haller, agrees with this. He argues Chaucer has made “love the means whereby the cosmic and political implications of the epic are conveyed,” and adds that “Palamon and Arcite are made to show, in their speeches, some awareness that their love is connected with both the fate of their city and the operation of the universe” (Haller 68). Besides praying for their favoured outcome in the tournament, they also acknowledge partly that their love is already decided upon. It concerns the passage at the beginning of the tale in which Palamon sees Emelye for the first time.

“I have previously quoted both knights’ prayers, but this does not concern their prayers in the temples. It concerns the passage at the beginning of the tale in which Palamon sees Emelye for the first time.

“Venus, if it be thy wil
Yow in this gardyn thus to transfigure
Bifore me, sorweful, wrecched creature,
Out of this prisoun help that we may scapen.
And if so be my destynee be shapen
By eterne word to dyen in prisoun,
Of oure lynage have som compassioun,
That is so lowe ybroght by tirannye” (Chaucer 40).

‘Venus, if it be your wish
Thus to transform yourself in this garden
For me, a sorrowful and wretched man,
Will you not help us to escape from prison?
And if it be my destiny to die
As foreordained by eternal decree
In prison, then at least bestow compassion
Upon our house, brought low by tyranny!’ (Wright translation 31).

Palamon addresses Venus and asks her to help them escape from prison, however, simultaneously he knows it might be his destiny, his long decided fate to stay and die in prison. Finlayson agrees with this and argues that Chaucer “changed the deities from decorative and, accidentally, appropriate participants into personifications of the powerful forces which operate in chivalric society and within the individual” (Finlayson 138). The gods are no longer just distant instances they can tell their concerns to and ask for support, without anything happening. These gods actually have a say in what happens and decide which citizen of the chivalric society gets which outcome.

In the previous section I have countered several of the arguments in favour of the romantic genre by showing the presence of fate, and how it determines the lives of the characters. I will now take this further with the second part of Cooper’s counter-argument: ‘the characteristic happy ending of romance in marriage happens to only one of the two protagonists.’ At first sight Chaucer’s The Knight’s Tale is an example of a romance, because the tale is concluded with a marriage between two main characters, and as stated before, Brewer argues that one characteristic of the romantic genre is the predominance of the happy over the unhappy ending and that this happy ending concludes unhappy events. One could thus first argue that the tale indeed ends happily, as Palamon is able to get out of his horrible imprisoned situation and marry the love of his life Emelye at the end. However, one cannot forget the third protagonist Arcite. If the tale were really a romance, Arcite would have been given a happy ending too. This is, however, completely not the case. Arcite does win the battle against Palamon and is the victor of Emelye, but eventually he is not the one who gets
to marry her. After the tournament when Arcite is doing his victory round across the arena, his joy is interrupted.

Out of the ground a furie infernal sterre,
From Pluto sent at requeste of Saturne,
For which his hors for fere gan to turne,
And leep aside, and foundred as he leep;
And er that Arcite may taken keep,
He pighte hym on the pomel of his heed,
That in the place he lay as he were deed,
His brest tobrosten with his sadel-bowe.
As blak he lay as any cole or crowe,
So was the blood yronnen in his face (Chaucer 61).

Out of the ground there bursts a hellborn Fury,
From Pluto sent at request by Saturn,
At which his frightened horse begins to shy,
And leap aside, and stumble in leaping;
And before Arcita can react, he
Has been thrown off and pitched upon his head,
And lies in the arena as if dead,
With his chest smashed in by his saddle-bow.
Turning as black as coal, black as a crow,
He lay there, the blood rushing to his face (Wright translation 70).

Right after his victory Arcite makes a terrible fall from his horse, and the narrator explains that this fall eventually causes his death. While Arcite is dying, he knows he cannot marry Emelye anymore and he decides to grant Palamon the right to marry her. His outcome is thus the exact opposite of a happy ending, he does not get to marry Emelye and he dies. Admittedly, one could argue that there are several romances in which main characters die. However, this almost always happens in a heroic manner. As one could see in the previous quoted scene, the way Arcite dies is everything except heroic. There is therefore no way in which one could say that even though Arcite does not marry Emelye, he gets a happy ending, because even his death is not chivalrous. In addition to making the tale less fitting in the romantic genre, the unheroic death of Arcite also makes it more fitting in the epic genre. “Arcite’s death is, in fact, ample proof of the unpredictability of fate” (Finlayson 141). The way his horse is suddenly scared and jumps up was not foreseen by anyone,
especially not by Arcite himself, who was convinced he was the ultimate winner. When Saturn decides to send the fury and scare the horse, Fate strikes as it often does, in a cynical manner at exactly the moment of victory. Fate is as much out of control for the protagonist as is his horse. This again shows that the gods had already decided upon Arcite’s death, and his fate was already predestined. This development is a strong argument against classifying the tale under the genre of romance, and in favour of the epic genre. However, in generic terms, the ending remains ambiguous. Cooper argues that Palamon does get a happy ending because he marries Emelye. But does this swing the pendulum definitely towards romance rather than the epic? As mentioned before, in the chapter about the role of Emelye/Emily, the marriage of Palamon and Emelye at the end functions as a political statement, and serves as a foreign alliance for Thebes. Haller argues that “the marriage which ends the tale is the most obvious example of a matter of public policy which also has its private satisfactions” (Haller 83). Although Palamon is indeed privately satisfied, he has fulfilled his ultimate goal. The satisfaction of his personal ambition could only take place because Theseus approved it, and because Theseus thought it would be good for the kingdom. Haller adds: “The marriage of Palamon and Emelye which ends the Knight’s Tale is therefore to be taken as putting in order both the private and the political life of the Theban ruler, as restoring the “fellowship” which rivalry in love, like rivalry for power, destroys” (Haller 78). This again confirms the argument that the main reason of the marriage is to secure the political future and not to celebrate the love between Palamon and Emelye. If romance is about personal longing and fulfilment, and epic about setting the affairs of the state, The Knight’s Tale belongs to both categories. Moreover, “Chaucer superimposes the two movements: Palamon’s happy ending, his recovery from despair, is only possible because of Arcite’s death” (Cooper 64). Palamon is only able to marry Emelye because Arcite, the real winner of the tournament, is not there anymore to do it, otherwise Arcite would have married her. In romances, happy endings are a reward for personal ambition and achievement. As winner of the contest, Arcite is the only hero who could have led the story to a romance ending. It is, however, the loser in this case who gets the happy ending. In the end this story veers more strongly towards the epic genre than towards romance.

To conclude this section about the genre of The Knight’s tale, a final argument can be added that casts doubt on the classification of the story under the heading of romance. The tale “has very little to do with the classic form, of the single knight riding out to seek adventure” (Finlayson 128). Neither of the knights ride their horses in to the woods to search for an adventure in which they can prove their chivalrous talents. They do not win against any opponents, they do not protect any women from evil men or monsters, and they do not conquer any land. One of the main characteristics of the romantic genre is thus not fulfilled. This last argument confirms that The
*Knight’s Tale* is in fact an example of the epic genre. Although in this tale one finds arguments in favour of the romantic genre, they were almost all countered and completed with arguments in favour of the epic genre. The main plot is about love and not war, the characters seek personal love, a heroine is created and idealised and there is a predominance of a happy ending. Nevertheless, with its reflection on fate and doubts about free will the tale has a different philosophical reach. The happy ending only happens for one of the main characters and rewards the loser rather than the winner. It strikes down the man who thought he had just shaped his own destiny in a decisive victory. The happy ending is not completely happy, most of their actions seem predestined, and the private matter of love is connected with the fate of their city and the operation of the universe. It is thus clear that the arguments in favour of the romance genre are not equal to the arguments in favour of the epic.
3.2 The modern adaptation as a romance

Now that I have established that the original *Knight’s Tale* predominantly belongs to the epic genre, I will examine whether the same is true for the modern adaptation, or whether it mainly belongs to the genre of romance. I will again go through several arguments and provide these with textual evidence. Some of the arguments of the previous section will be repeated, although this time, there may be fewer in favour of either epic or romance.

At this stage, one can take up the first argument of the previous section again. Cooper argues *The Knight’s Tale* could be considered a romance because the focus of the tale is on love and not on war, heroism or the fate of the nations. One can certainly apply this to the modern adaptation. As stated before, the story is situated in the 21st century, which completely changes the society in which the characters live. There is no such thing as an all-time ruler like Theseus, the duke who conquers other kingdoms and takes the queen as his wife. Consequently, there are no wars between neighbouring villages and the male citizens cannot show their heroism by fighting for their city. This already narrows down the focus of the tale which makes love one of the central themes. As extensively examined in the second section about the themes, both the main male characters Ace and Paul are deeply in love with the main female character Emily. The troubles begin when they confess this love to one another. The argument of Brewer about how the happy ending usually contains a successful mutuality in marriage is also applicable here. Although Paul and Emily do not get married at the end, they do decide to give their relationship a chance in the future, and they have a happy ending. This ending confirms Brewer’s argument that romances have a predominance of happy over unhappy endings. Although the ending still has a tragic part because Ace also dies at the end, there is a substantial difference with the original tale, and that is the reason behind Paul and Emily’s relationship. In the original tale, the marriage functions as a political alliance to safeguard the future of Thebes. In the modern adaptation, however, Paul and Emily are together because they love each other. Their relationship is wanted by both parties and has nothing to do with society. As stated in the section about the role of Emily, she is in the control position over this relationship, and she can decide how many times to visit Paul. In the end that would mean she has the complete power in the relationship, however, they both agree to go through with it, they arrive at a mutual consent, which indeed makes this ending a perfect example of Brewer’s argument. When one looks at the role of Emily, another argument of Brewer that I previously mentioned comes to mind: ‘the creation of the heroine’. Brewer mentions two roles of the heroine: she was either the focus of the striving of the action, or the active principle herself. It is clear that, in contrast with the original tale, the modern adaptation Emily is an example of the second option. As stated before in the section about the role
of Emily her active role is twofold. First, she improves her situation through escaping her own bad relationship with her boyfriend Gareth who does not respect her, and second she influences the lives of Paul and Ace. One could argue that in the original tale, Emelye also influences the lives of Arcite and Palamon, but that is just by her presence, whereas in the modern adaptation Emily actually does something, she influences them through her actions. The prison director mentions it in the interview I have quoted before – she is supposed to change their lives, and she does. She is the one who has the power over her relationships with them, she is the one who decides how far the contact goes, and she is the one who is able to favour one over the other. She is not just the focus of the action anymore, she is also the cause of the action. One could also say that Emily is again idealised like in the original tale. Ace and Paul do not compare her to a goddess, but they do both see her as an extraordinary woman, and as the ideal woman for them.

In the previous section I mentioned the argument of Brewer that ‘romances normally are explicit quests or conflicts seeking personal fulfilment based on virtue’, and now should be possible to connect this with another argument from his article, an argument which considers the journey of the main characters. Brewer argues that the characters in a romance go through a “pattern of withdrawal from and return to society, by which the individual is tested and found worthy” (Brewer 37). I will argue that this is the case for all of the three main characters since they are all withdrawn from society into prison. However, it happens in a different way. First, I will discuss Paul. Paul is the new boy in prison, he does not yet know how the system there works, he is sentenced for a minor crime, and he is the softer one. On one of the first days of his stay in prison, Ace tries to convince him to try to access classes. I will quote this conversation between Ace and Paul in the next section about Ace’s journey, because it also gives a lot of information about Ace. After that conversation Paul visits the prison director and tries to convince him he wants to make his time in prison as useful as possible, he wants to learn something out of it, and he really wants it to make a difference in his life. This is his quest for personal fulfilment. However, such a quest involves difficulties: “the interest of quest-with-conflict lies in the overcoming of various tests and temptations” (Brewer 26). Paul is then confronted with a first real test, as the prison director does not believe his intentions and wants to take him back to his cell. One could also see the attempt of Ace to convince Paul as a test for Paul, because he has to believe that Ace has his best interests at heart and only wants to make sure Paul’s stay is as comfortable as possible, but this would then be a minor one. In the conversation with the prison director Paul really has to show he sincerely wants to learn something from his time and prison, and he really wants to get something out of it.

Paul: I want to come out of here feeling like I’ve grown, you know? Er...a-as a person. I want prison to be a... complete learning experience. Completely.
Prison director: Literally?
Paul: Definitely. I want to... erm... you know, fulfil my potential. You know what I’m sayin?
Prison director: Mmm. Bollocks.
Paul: What?
Prison director: Somebody got you to say this because of the waiting list?
Paul: No, no.
Prison director: If you’re here just to get off bang-up, you’re wasting your time and mine. I’ll take you back to the wing.
[...]
Paul: I can’t stay in that cell all day.
Prison director: That is not a good enough reason.
Paul: Lately I’ve been living in a life like limbo (Raps) Looking out of a smudged-up window
We’re not sure where our lives are going Friends, it’s summer outside but yet we’re snowed in
Prison director: What was that?
Paul: Arrested Development. Give a man a fish and he’ll eat for a day Teach him how to fish, he’ll eat for ever
Prison director: Why are you quoting them at me?
Paul: Because I wish I’d written them.
The prison director takes out a sheet
Paul: What’s this?
Prison director: Need to make an assessment.
Paul: Assessment of what?
Prison director: Where you are. Your ability level.
Paul: No way.
Prison director: I have to.
Paul: I’ll take my chances in the cell.
Prison director: What’s the matter with you, Paul?
Paul: I ain’t got no ability level.
Prison director: Then I’ll take you back to the wing.
Paul sees Ace writing something funny
Paul: No, no, no. Let’s do that test.

(08:59 – 11:10)
At first, it is clear that Paul only wants to access the classes because Ace told him he would go mad otherwise, but during the conversation, his mentality shifts. When he starts to quote the rap music one can sense his admiration for the person who wrote the lyrics and how he wishes he had the same talent. During these scenes one can also clearly see that both Ace and Paul are trying to convince the other party out of their own free will. They are not guided by or forced by any gods, it is completely their own decision, and it is absolutely no matter of fate or destiny. This is a clear sign that the modern adaptation moves further and further into the direction of romance. Another scene in which one can see Paul’s quest and how his withdrawal from society is making him a better person is the scene in which his mother visits him. He talks very enthusiastically and is very eager to find out how his assignment on Egypt is going, which shows us he is going through his process of becoming a worthy member of society. Instead of sitting out his prison time, he is trying to deal with his problem of illiteracy, and he is improving himself.

Paul: The temples, like the ones at Luxor and Karnak, are absolutely huge, right? These massive statues guarding the gateways and courtyards... Unbelievable, Mum! The Pharaohs gave the temples the booty from the war. That’s why they was so rich...

Mother: Paul?

Paul: You asked how I was doing.

Mother: Coping, I meant.

Paul: I never thought I’d feel good about being in this place.

(18:59 – 19:22)

Especially this last sentence is important. It shows that Paul is making progress in his quest, in his withdrawal from society. While his mother is just asking how he is doing in general, he stresses that he has changed, that he has learned a lot, and that he feels happy about it.

Other tests and temptations during his journey are, for example, controlling his feelings when Emily gives Ace personal attention during class, and not escaping while being transferred to another prison, in which he fails. All these examples show that Paul is going through this withdrawal, and, more importantly, that he is doing all of this out of his own will. As stated before, there is no god influencing him, and nothing in his quest is predestined. At the end of the modern adaptation, when there is a confrontation between Paul, Emily and Ace, Paul confirms how his journey has made him improve himself. When Ace throws petrol all over him and lights his cigarette lighter Paul says: “We should be better people now. She made us better people” (52:24 – 52:31). He acknowledges that his time in prison has changed him for the better. He confirms that he has conquered the
different tests and temptations and tries to convince Ace that ‘they are better people now’, that they can let the problems from the past behind.

Now Paul’s journey has been dealt with, Ace’s can now be examined. He is also withdrawn from society, but he has already done some of his time in prison before Paul joins him. One can see Ace developing from the witty, clever, and somewhat aggressive con man to a calmer, more understanding grown-up man. As said before, Ace has already done some of his time in prison, so he has already undergone a part of his journey, and is already a little bit further than Paul. One can clearly see this in the above-mentioned scene in which Ace tries to convince Paul to take some classes. Their exchange about this deserves quoting in full in order to understand Ace’s reactions better:

Ace: That’s why you have to get your head together, Paul. Plan how you spend your time in here, or you’ll end up in bits.
Paul: Workshops?
Ace: No, bollocks to that if you can. It’s slave labour.
Paul: I ain’t doing no education classes. I hated school. I ain’t doing it again.

Ace gives Paul the paper and it turns out Paul cannot read […]

Ace: I know, man. I know. I was the same as you when I came in here. Your mum used to have to fill out application forms for me. Remember?
Paul: She even had to read my summons to appear out to me.
Ace: Look, when I say you’ve got a lot to learn, I mean it’s an opportunity. For me, it’s to be able to stay of the gear. For you, it’s never to come back in here again. It’s a good thing man. I wouldn’t lie to you.
Paul: I know that.
Ace: We’ll do it together, you know?

(7:21 – 8:47)

Ace wants to make sure his friend will be able to cope with his time in prison, and wants to make sure that Paul will not collapse under the load in prison. His concern about his friend shows that he has grown as a person and not only cares about himself. Another aspect of his journey is his development considering his feelings towards women. As quoted in a previous section when they argue about their love for Emily Paul shouts: ‘You ain’t never been in love, man!’, and he adds ‘Where you looking? Up her skirt and down her blouse? You’re just looking at pussy.’ Ace is clearly seen as the ladies’ man who has never had a serious relationship before or even serious feelings for a
woman. However, this has changed during his stay in prison. He admits real feelings for a woman and not just feelings based on sexual attraction as it always was before. Just like Paul, at the end of the episode Ace confirms the change he has made through his journey, from his withdrawal from society to a strong commitment. When Paul, Emily and Ace are all together in the classroom, Ace initially wants to put them both on fire as he throws a whole jerrycan of petrol over Paul. Paul and Emily, however, are capable of talking into him and convincing him that it is not the right thing to do.

Emily: You’re gonna ruin yourself, Ace.
Ace: I’ve lost my best friend and the woman that I fell in love with but they’ve got each other, so I feel pretty ruined already, OK?
Emily: Look... If you let us go, we can’t exactly walk off into the sunset together, can we? You talk about stopping us having a future – that won’t happen anyway. He’s a prisoner that’s absconded and I’m a teacher that’s not fit for a bloody job in the country! There’s no winners. No-one.
Paul: One love shoved the other out the way, blood. Could still be room for us two. You know?
Ace: You’re only saying that cos you’re covered in petrol.
Paul: No. You could still choose me, man. We should be better people now. She made us better people. And you know it.
Ace: So you’re telling me to be a good loser? Are you telling me to be a good sport and call that an improvement?
Paul: I just don’t want you to end up with nothing. That’s what I’m saying.
Ace: You better... You better go face the music, man. Do your time. I’m sure your time will come.
Paul: What about you?
Ace: I’ve got to get out of detention.
Emily: Good luck, Ace.

At the beginning of this confrontation Ace feels like he is the victim of it all. He is the one that has been left out and because he cannot cope with the idea of Paul and Emily being together, he wants to put them on fire. Emily, however, convinces him her possible future with Paul is actually non-existent, so it will not matter if they stay alive, and Paul tries to convince him that he still thinks of him as his best friend, and that he does not want to see him get hurt. Ace recognizes his plan is not the right thing to do and accepts the fact that Emily has chosen Paul. He tells Paul to turn himself in.
because that is the right thing to do and assures them he will try to do the right thing for himself as well. He has come to terms with the situation, and he agrees to make the best out of it. This last scene is the ultimate confirmation of Ace’s journey, he has been tested several times, and has been found worthy. The fact that right after the highlight of his journey his cigarette rolls in the petrol and he dies in the fire, is an accident, and it has nothing to do with Ace or his journey. It happens by mere chance. Fate strikes again in a cynical manner at exactly the moment of acceptance.

To conclude this section, I will now examine the journey of the third main character, Emily. She is the heroine of the story, which means she is also withdrawn from society, she is also tested, and found worthy. Contrary to Ace and Paul, Emily is not sentenced for a crime, she is in the prison because she has been hired as a teacher there. However, her stay in prison has a similar effect, she also has to overcome several tests and temptations to be found worthy at the end. Before Emily was accepted as a prison teacher, she already had a teaching job in a regular school, as I mentioned in the chapter about her role in the story. In that section I quoted a conversation between Emily and a friend of hers at the end of one of her classes. She explains to her friend that she enjoys teaching in prison a lot more, because she gets the feeling it really means something to them, while her regular students seem not to care really much. This new job, therefore, has two consequences. On the one hand, as mentioned before, Emily is changing the lives of the prisoners, but on the other hand they are influencing her life too, and this forms a large part of her journey. At the beginning of the episode one can see that Emily is in a bad relationship with her boyfriend Gareth. He does not treat her correctly, and does not take her work seriously. When she is teaching in prison both Ace and Paul fall for her, and Emily gets to experience a different kind of love. She meets two men who have sincere feelings for her, who respect her, and who want to make her happy in a possible future relationship. When she engages with both Paul and Ace during classes or personal appointments, she discovers these sincere feelings. I mentioned these scenes in the chapter about the knight’s feelings for Emelye. During a lesson Paul addresses Emily about his project and when she replies quite distracted, he wonders ‘if everything is all right’, she then answers that she cannot answers personal questions, and instead of leaving it there, he goes into it and says that by averting the question she has actually answered it. When next Paul says he hopes she has someone she can tell, Emily looks down, she looks away from him, and one can clearly see that Emily is thinking about how her current boyfriend is not that person. In this conversation Emily experiences Paul’s sincere feelings and she discovers a new kind of relationship. One can see this conversation as a test for Emily to re-evaluate her current relationship. Shortly after this scene, Emily has a similar experience with Ace when he is taking a private exam. During his exam, Ace pretends to cheat to get Emily’s attention and when she points this out he says: ‘I make you laugh though don’t I?’ and she replies: ‘Thank god somebody does.’ Ace
really wants to make her feel good, and when Emily smiles one can again see that this is a new
feeling for her; she has not experienced this with her current boyfriend, which means one could see
this scene again as a test for her. When one sees the scenes with her boyfriend this is indeed
confirmed, as the only thing they do is fight or argue. Since she has a better relationship at the end,
she succeeds in finding her personal fulfilment.

Emily is not only tested in terms of her relationship, but also professionally. After Paul tries to
get Ace caught with drugs, it comes to an argument in the classroom. Emily separates them and
afterwards the scene switches to the office of the prison director.

Prison director: Do you want to be withdrawn? Apply to another prison?
Emily: Well, Ace is gone now. I think it’ll be fine.
Prison director: That still leaves Paul and how he feels about you.
Emily: Well, I like teaching him, and the way he responds. I get a real buzz out of that, but
that’s professional, isn’t it? That’s me engaging with my work.
Prison director: You know there’s a difference?
Emily: I haven’t been doing this very long.
Prison director: You should still know the difference.

(30:29 – 30:58)

The prison director knows about the triangular relationship Emily is engaged in and warns her that it
might be going too far. Emily has to convince him that her relationship with both Ace and Paul is
purely professional, and that her teaching job will not be affected by it. In this test she has to
convince the prison director that she is the right person for the job, and that she can handle the
situation professionally. In her journey, she takes matters in her own hands, she decides what her
actions are going to be, and her fate is not predestined by any gods. Although she does not get
married at the end, she does get a happy ending as the heroine of the story. She has survived the
ultimate test and succeeded in breaking out of her old, bad relationship and ending with a new, more
respectful one. At the beginning she was not equal to her boyfriend, which is the case at the end. She
may have the power over the relationship, and over when to visit Paul, but they both agree how they
are going to approach it, and they are equal. When she ‘returns to society’ she is in control, she has
successfully came through her tests, and she has reached personal fulfilment.

In short, one can conclude that the large majority of the arguments allow one to attribute the
modern adaptation of *The Knight’s Tale* to the genre of romance. Just as in the original version, the
theme of love is the focus of the tale, and a heroine appears who unintentionally sparks bitter rivalry
between two men, but this time as the active principle herself, and there is a happy ending. In the
modern adaptation the characters are able to act out of free will, they make their own decisions and no gods seem to have predestined their fate. Love becomes a private matter that is not connected with the fate of their city or the operation of the universe. Nevertheless, in spite of this shift towards romance, there is in the TV adaptation of the tale also an undercurrent of references to strange coincidences that keep it away from that genre. Some of these are happy, like the chance meeting of Emily and the two men. Paul sees some kind of benevolent Providence in this, but Ace categorically rejects what he calls Paul’s ‘synchronicity nonsense’. He is a typical romance hero who takes initiatives, neither counting on benign coincidences, nor fearing the workings of Fate. His wit and sense of humour give him a grip on his own life and that of others (he is obviously a natural ‘leader’ in the prison). Ironically, a glowing cigarette rolling towards a pool of petrol will end his life just at the moment when he has decided he wants to go on living and to ‘give a life’ also to Paul and Emily (even allowing his two friends to share their lives together). The defender of free initiative becomes a victim of a dark kind of synchronicity. That the cigarette rolls towards the petrol just at that fatal moment is a cynical coincidence. The viewers of the TV adaptation have every reason to hope that Emily and Paul will live happily ever after by shaping their own destiny in what is decidedly a romance. However, the ending does not allow them to forget that the blind force of Fate can at any moment spark a raging fire that appears to be of epic magnitude, and that seems hell-bent on destroying all human beings that happened to be on its path.
3.3 Authoritative figures and the social order

At the beginning of the previous section I mentioned that the different main characters and their actions are an important aspect to consider when attributing the tale to a specific genre. The actions of these main characters are influenced by the societies in which they live, and a large part of these societies are shaped by the authoritative figures, who rule them. In this section I will thus examine the different figures of authority in the original tale and in the modern adaptation. I will first examine the characters of these authoritative figures, and how they rule, and afterwards I will go further into this by examining the relation between social order and the contrast determinism and free initiative, the two forces I explored at some length in the previous pages. I will again support this with examples from both the original tale and the modern adaptation.

3.3.1 Authoritative figures

The most important figure of authority in the original tale is duke Theseus. When the narrator begins the Knight’s Tale, the duke Theseus is the first person he mentions, and the knight immediately explains how important and powerful, and what a great leader Theseus is.

Yelde god us telle this tale true,
Ther was a duc that nolde Theseus;
Of Atthenes he was lord and governour,
And in his tyme swich a conquerour
That gretter was ther noon under the sonne.
Ful many a riche contree hadde he wonne;
What with his wysdom and his chivalrie,
He conquered al the regne of Femenye,
That whilom wa ycleped Scithia,
And weddede the quen Ypolita,
And broghte hire hoom with hym in his contree
With muchel glorie and greet solempnytee,
And eek hir yonge suster Emelye.
And thus with victorie and with melodye
Lete I this noble duc to Atthenes ryde,
And al his hoost in armes hym bisyde (Chaucer 37).
Once on a time, as old histories tell us,
There was a duke whose name was Theseus,
Who was of Athens lord and governor,
And in his day so great a conqueror
There was none mightier beneath the sun.
Many a wealthy kingdom he had won;
What with his generalship and bravery
He'd conquered all the land of Femeny,
Realm of the Amazons, once called Scythia,
And married there its Queen Hippolyta,
And brought her home with him to his country
With splendour, pomp, and solemn pageantry,
And also her young sister Emily.
And thus with music and in victory
I'll leave this noble duke, and let him ride
To Athens with his armed host at his side (Wright translation 25).

With this description the knight portrays Theseus as the all-time ruler, who is courageous, knightly and fair. He portrays him as the ideal duke and knight. Elbow argues that “every reader feels that Theseus is the richest character in the poem. He is older and more experienced”, he is seen as one of the older men who have “been through it all” (Elbow 101). Theseus is portrayed as the perfect example of what men should strive to be like. In the tale, Theseus tries to establish an order in his state, he believes that social order can be shaped by the members of the community and by their ruler. Theseus does not only occupy himself with political matters of a communal nature, but to keep the order in his state, he also tries to, and manages to, control the private lives of his citizens. For example, duke Theseus plays a large role in the competition between Arcite and Palamon, he meddles in this private argument, which leads to a fight, and wants to be sure that everything follows the correct ruling. He will not tolerate private feelings of love or hatred, however powerful, to disturb the social order. When he is hunting in the woods with his entourage he stumbles upon Arcite and Palamon fighting, and he immediately has to come in between them, and reprimand both the knights because they are fighting without any ruler or even without the context of a tournament.

This duc his courser with his spores smoot,
And at a stert he was bitwix hem two,
And pulled out a swerd and cride, “Hoo!
Namoore, up payne of lesynge of youre heed!
By myghty Mars, he shal anon be deed
That smyteth any strook that I may seen.
But telleth me what myster men ye been,
That been so hardy for to fighten heere
Withouten juge or oother officere,
As it were in a lystes roially” (Chaucer 48).

The duke clapped spurs that instant to his courser,
And at a bound he was between the pair
With sword pulled out, and crying, ‘Stop! No more!
Who strikes another blow must lose his head!
By Mars, the next man I see move is dead!
But tell me now what manner of men you are
Who’ve the audacity to duel here
With no umpire or other officer,
As if it were a royal tournament?’ (Wright translation 46).

From the moment Theseus sees the two knights fighting he comes in between and recounts the customary rules: for example, one has to have a “juge or oother officere”. He then decides, because they have seriously broken these rules, Arcite and Palamon are both condemned to death, and immediately after he has spoken out this sentence all the women of his entourage begin to scream and cry together, asking for pity, praying not to kill them. He then changes his mind and decides that there will be a tournament between them, and that the winner will get to marry Emelye. This change of mind forms an important aspect of the character of Theseus as he says the following words to himself, when he is deciding what to do.

And softe unto himself he seyde, “Fy
Upon a lord that wol have no mercy,
But been a leon, bothe in word and dede,
To hem that been in repentaunce and drede,
As wel as to a proud despitous man
That wol mayntene th at he first bigan.
That lord hath litel of descrecioun,
That in swich cas kan no divisioun
But weyet pride and humblesse after oon” (Chaucer 49).
And to himself, under his breath, he said,
‘Shame on the ruler who has no compunction
But acts the lion, both in word and deed,
With those who are repentant and afraid,
As well as with the proud and scornful, those
Who persist in the error of their ways.
He’s got not much discernment if he is
Unable to discriminate in such cases,
But treats alike humility and pride’ (Wright translation 47).

Theseus does not only want to be a fair ruler, he also wants to be a considerate one. He does not simply want to judge the event on its own, but he wants to include the whole context, and also consider the prayers of the women. One could see this as part of his political strategy. He is trying to keep the citizens happy and expects cooperation in return. In his wisdom he tries to take into account different views in his judgements. As Helen Cooper points out, “His decrees appear to have absolute power as in his condemnation of the cousins to perpetual imprisonment, but he can be moved to mercy by prayer: by the prayers of the widows for assistance, of Perotheus for the release of Arcite, of the ladies to spare the lovers” (Cooper 81). There is another scene in the tale in which this happens, another moment in which Theseus also changes his mind, and modifies his initial decision. As mentioned before, Theseus decided there should be a tournament between Arcite and Palamon to decide who gets to marry Emelye. At first he decides that both knights have a year to find a hundred knights, come back, and fight the other to death or to captivity. And he confirms again: “Ye shul noon oother ende with me maken,/ That oon of yow ne shal be dee or taken” (Chaucer 50). (“This is the only outcome I’ll permit:/ One of you must be killed or made captive” (Wright 50)). However, at the start of the tournament, Theseus changes his mind about these rules, which are declared by a herald.

Tho shewed he the myghty dukes wille:
“The lord hath of his heigh descrecioun
Considered that it were destroccioun
To gentil blood to fighten in the gyse
Of mortal bataille now in this emprise.
Wherfore, to shapen that they shal nat dye,
He wol his firste purpose modifye (Chaucer 59).
He then announced the great Duke Theseus’ will;
‘The prince had, in his prudence and wisdom,
Concluded that it would be mere destruction
Of noble blood, if this affair were fought
In terms of mortal combat, to the death.
And therefore he desires to modify
His first proposal, so that none shall die (Wright translation 66).

It appears that “when he has the power over life and death, he chooses life [...]” (Cooper 81). Theseus changes his mind every time, so that the outcome of the events eventually does not contain death. At the end of the tale, Theseus again shows in the last scene that he wants to be the considerate duke. As mentioned before, he decided at first that the winner of the tournament would get to marry Emelye. When at the end, however, Arcite wins the tournament, but dies immediately afterwards, Theseus again changes his mind. When Arcite is dying, he gives Palamon the permission to marry Emelye, but this does not happen right after Arcite’s death. It is only after a few years that Theseus decides Palamon and Emelye can get married and that he grants them the official permission. As mentioned before, this marriage is a means of striking foreign alliances, but there is more to it. “The restoration of felaweship between the loves is marked in the tale”, not only, “by Arcite’s dying words commending Palamon to Emelye,” and “by Palamon’s mourning the man he had hoped to kill,” but also “by Theseus’ insistence that the wedding is no betrayal of the cousin’s friendship” (Cooper 80). Even when, at the end, Theseus makes it very clear that this marriage is to secure the foreign relationships of Thebes and Athens, he also reassures Palamon and Emelye that they are not doing anything wrong, and that they are not disloyal towards Arcite. In this manner, Theseus reconciles the public interest with the private ambitions of two of his subjects.

I have established that Theseus is a great leader who believes that social order can be shaped by the members of the community and by their ruler. He is a leader who makes sure this social order remains, by meddling in personal matters, but remains considerate when doing so, and to end this section about the character of duke Theseus, I will examine some less concrete aspects of his character. Cooper argues that “Theseus can reflect in ideal form traits that are found only imperfectly in the other characters […]. He represents the prime of maturity between the cousins’ emotional youth and Egeus’ wise but inactive old age” (Cooper 80 – Egeus is Theseus’ father). The narrator explains that Theseus himself was once a young knight, but that he is now an older, and wise ruler. Besides resembling the characters Theseus is also “associated with each of the lovers’ gods in turn. Mars is portrayed on his banner when he rides against Thebes; when he goes hunting, ‘after Mars he serveth now Dyane’; in his time he has himself been a servant of love” (Cooper 80). He
carries thus the important character traits from all the other characters, and even the gods. This shows that he really is just like how the narrator described him at the beginning of the tale: the great, wise, and skilled ruler, who judges fairly. Cooper argues that “he can, moreover, act like destiny itself in executing the Providence of God, and he appears at the tournament ‘as he were a god in trone’” (Cooper 80). This is clear when, before the scene in the woods, the narrator again describes the greatness of Theseus as a leader.

The destinee, ministre general,
That executeth in the world over al
The purveiaunce that God hath seyn biforn,
So strong it is that, though the world had sworn
The contrarie of a thyng by ye or nay,
Yet somtyme it shal fallen on a day
That falleth nat eft withinne a thousand yeer.
For certeiny, oure appetites heer,
Be it of were, or pees, or hate, or love,
Al is this reuled by the sighte above.
This mene I now by myghty Theseus (Chaucer 47-8).

‘Destiny, paramount minister
That in this world executes everywhere
God’s predetermined providence, is so strong
Things thought impossible by everyone,
Things which you’d swear could never ever be,
Shall yet be brought to pass, though on a day
That happens once a thousand years or so.
For certainly our passions here below,
Whether of war or peace, or hate or love,
Are governed by the providence above.
All this bears on the great Duke Theseus (Wright translation 45).

Theseus is thus able to do things from which people thought they could never be done, he bears the providence from above. He is the great, wise, fair leader, who chooses life over death. He is the considerate ruler who interrupts the fight, because it is not fought along the rules he established in his state. He believes order can be shaped in his state by members of the community and by himself, and he, therefore, makes decisions with regard to keeping this order.
Now that it has been possible to establish how, in the original tale, the duke Theseus tries to keep the order in his state, I can move on to the modern adaptation. As mentioned before there is no such great ruler as Theseus in the modern adaptation, and there is no one character that rules over all the other characters. There are, nonetheless, several figures of authority present in the BBC version of the tale. The most obvious, and most important, one is the prison director. If one regards the prison community as a closed off society, one could also consider the prison director as the ruler of this society. In a previous section, I quoted a conversation between this prison director and Emily, considering her application for the job of prison teacher. During that conversation the prison director asks Emily if she wants to change the lives of the prisoners, and when she hesitates he replies: “No, I want you to go in there thinking you can help change their lives” (6:19 – 6:23). The important thing to notice here is the fact that he uses the word ‘help’. He does not simply say ‘you can change their lives’, he wants her to ‘help to change their lives’, he wants her to do it together with him, offering them a chance to take their lives into their own hands. This scene, and specifically this sentence, thus provides a link with the original tale, more precisely with the character of Theseus. Theseus believes the community and their ruler shape the social order together. The duke cannot rule his state on his own, he needs the citizens to cooperate. In the modern adaptation the prison director plays the same role as this ruler. Emily is a part of the community, and just like in the original tale, the prison director needs the help of the teacher Emily to keep the order, to teach the prisoners, and to enable them in their turn to assume the role of responsible citizens in the community after their release. When one wants to take this further, one could also say that the character of Emily acts the part of ruler within the smaller community of the prisoners.

As the prison director does not appear many times in the modern adaptation, there is not as much to say about his character as there was about that of Theseus. There is no narrator, who tells the viewers about the prison director, or about the ‘adventures’ he might have experienced previously. There are, however, several other scenes in which one gets to know the way the prison director ‘rules’ the prison. I have previously quoted the scene in the beginning where Paul visits the prison director because he wants to attend classes. I explained that this was a first test for Paul, because he had to convince the prison director that his intentions were honest, and that he really wanted to learn something, and develop his abilities. As the prison director does not believe Paul at first, he could have easily sent Paul back to his cell. However, he decides to give him another chance when Paul starts to quote the rap music. The prison director is intrigued with the fact that Paul quotes these specific lyrics and takes out an assessment form. He wants to know what Paul’s talents and abilities are, so he can put him in the appropriate class. This is another moment when the prison director could have chosen the easy option, and could have just sent Paul to the first class available.
Nevertheless, he decides to help Paul properly, and determine his ability level. This scene shows that the prison director is, just like Theseus, a considerate ‘ruler’. He does not just do what he wants to, and what he thinks is right, but he also listens to his ‘citizens’, the prisoners, and takes them into account. Instead of simply turning away Paul’s request, he really listens to him and tries to find the best solution for him.

Another scene in which we learn about the prison director, is the one in which he calls Emily to his office after Paul and Ace had a fight. He wonders if Emily’s relationship with both the prisoners is purely professional or if it goes further than that. When Emily admits that she is excited to teach them, and that she likes the way Paul responds, she wonders herself if it is professional. The prison director replies by emphasizing several times that Emily should know the difference between a professional and a personal relationship. This scene shows us that the prison director wants to keep control over the prisoners. He again acts as the righteous ruler, who does not want the situation to get out of control, who does not want Emily to influence the balance too much, and who does not want the social order in the ‘community’ to be disturbed. He does not immediately withdraw Emily from her task, which shows that he is not the despotic ruler who takes decisions on his own, but he gives her a sort of gentle warning. He wants her to think about it herself and to decide for herself what she should do. He grants her the responsibility to assess the situation herself, which again shows he believes the social order is maintained by him, but also by the members of the community, and among them Emily. It also shows that he has faith in Emily’s private judgement and initiative.

There is, however, one big difference between the prison director and Theseus. As mentioned in the previous section about Theseus, he is the one who grants Emelye and Palamon the permission to marry each other at the end of the tale. This is certainly not the case in the modern adaptation. After Ace’s unfortunate death, Paul and Emily decide to give their relationship a chance, but the prison director has absolutely no say in this matter. This shows that the prison director can only exert his power within the context of the prison, outside of prison he has nothing to say. This, therefore, confirms my argument at the beginning of this section, that if one regards the prison community as a closed off society, the prison director can be seen as the ruler of this society, but not elsewhere. Another difference between the original tale and the modern adaptation considering this matter is the presence of several prison guards. These prison guards hardly have any lines in the episode, they merely function as a continuation of the prison director, and they are there to secure the social order in the community. Several scenes throughout the episode show this, for example, the scene in which Ace is accused of possession of drugs. The prison guards are the ones who have to take Ace out of his cell and check this. Another example is the scene in which Ace is released from prison, but he has to wear an ankle tag at home. The prison guards are again the ones who have to
put on this ankle tag, and who have to check if Ace respects his restrictions. One could argue that Ace’s situation with his ankle tag takes place outside the prison community, which would contradict my earlier claim that the community is limited to the prison. However, since Ace’s ankle tag still connects him with prison, it is the prison staff who are supervising his behaviour, I argue that this situation is still in context of the prison community, and thus does not contradict my earlier claim.

One can conclude that the original tale and the modern adaptation contain a character or several characters that govern in a similar way. However, the context is very different in the two versions. Both Theseus and the prison director believe the social order can be shaped by the members of the community and by their rulers. In the original tale the narrator describes Theseus as the ultimate great leader with a lot of experience: a leader who respects the rules and checks if his citizens do the same, and a leader who is also considerate towards these citizens. An example of this was the scene in which Theseus hears the prayers of the women of his entourage and decides that the tournament must not lead to any deaths. In the modern adaptation there is no narrator, and there is, therefore, no grand description of the main ruler, the prison director. He is, however, also a leader who respects the rules, checks if the prisoners and the prison staff do the same, but is also considerate towards them. One could see this in the scene in which he calls Emily to his office to warn her about her closeness with Paul and Ace, but decides to give her another chance, a chance to take care of it herself. Both Theseus and the prison director understand the delicate balance that needs to be struck between individual desires and social restraints, and show magnanimity in the execution of their tasks. It looks as if in both the tale and its adaptation, such wise figures of authority are needed to help the individuals of the realm reconcile their private ambitions with the requirements of social harmony.
3.3.2 Social order: determinism versus free initiative

The discussion of the most important authoritative figures, and the way they rule their society, can now be taken a step further. A link can be established between the social order and the theme of determinism and free initiative. As explained in the first section of this chapter, the original tale predominantly belongs to the epic genre, and considering the modern adaptation, the majority of the arguments allow one to attribute it to the romance genre. I explained that this means, among others, that there is a philosophical reach, and there is a concern with issues of fate, fortune and the conditions of mortal life. I will argue that the characters thus deal with a certain determinism, their fate is already predestined, and I will support this with examples. In the modern adaptation there is a lot more free initiative, and the tale leans towards the genre of romance, which enables the characters to partake in an individual quest seeking personal fulfilment based on virtue. They experience a journey of withdrawal and return to society, and are tested individually. I have already explained the impact of the authoritative figures in this society, and how in both versions they believe social order can be shaped by members of community and by their ruler, and how they interrupt the course of events to secure this social order. However, this social order is questioned by several factors: gods and human beings who represent the forces of Fate, and the irresistible power of love and intimate relationships, which often goes against the laws of society. How exactly this happens will be examined in this new section.

First, I will examine how and under the influence of what causes the social order is questioned in the original tale. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the fate of the characters is for a large part predestined by gods, which implies that they strengthen the theme of determinism. The social order of their society is rather strict, which means that the citizens have certain fixed roles, and that they need to fulfil these roles. Theseus, the great leader, wants to keep control and acts against any abnormalities. An example of this is the already mentioned scene in which Arcite and Palamon are fighting in the woods, and Theseus interrupts them to inform them about the rules. He can, however, not control everything, because the social order is questioned most notably by gods who represent forces of Fate. Cooper enumerates the different gods mentioned in the tale, and their respective roles, or the way in which they question the social order. Besides the fact that “each lover puts himself under the protection of a particular god, or, [...] declares his association with a particular set of astrological influences”, there are several other gods who meddle in the lives of the characters (Cooper 77). We already know that Palamon “aligns himself with Venus”, that Arcite “commits himself to Mars”, and that Emelye’s “chosen deity is Diana” (Cooper 77-8). However, also Saturn and Jupiter influence the tale. “Saturn is the most malevolent of all planets, the ‘greater infortune’”
(Cooper 78). This is shown in several scenes, and I have already mentioned one scene before. It concerns the scene in which Arcite’s horse is scared by a fury sent by Saturn, which causes Arcite to fall of his horse, and ultimately dies from his injuries. Another scene is at the very beginning of the tale. Arcite and Palamon are imprisoned by Theseus, and Arcite is convinced it must have been Saturn who made them end up there:

Fortune hath yeven us this adversitee.
Som wikke aspect or disposicioun
Of Saturne, by som constellacioun,
Hath yeven us this, although we hadde it sworn;
So stood the hevene whan that we were born.
We moste endure it; this is the short and playn” (Chaucer 40).

Fortune has dealt us this adversity:
Some malign aspect or disposition
Of Saturn in some adverse position
Has brought it on us; nothing’s to be done:
It stood thus in our stars when we were born;
The long and short of it is this: Endure’ (Wright translation 30).

One could argue that this is merely Arcite’s opinion, but Cooper argues otherwise: “This may at the time appear to the reader as Arcite’s rationalization of events; but the tale endorses his judgement when the planetary gods become participants in the action, not just ideas in the minds of the characters” (Cooper 78). Saturn is thus definitely one of the gods who represents Fate, and one who questions the social order, by interrupting events, and by causing the characters unfortunate outcomes. As mentioned, another god who questions the social order is Jupiter. He, however, does this in a positive way. Cooper argues that: “Jupiter, by contrast, is the most fortunate of the planets, opposed to the workings of Saturn; his sphere of influence is especially concerned with justice and the bringing of peace – attributes both highly appropriate for this association with Theseus” (Cooper 78). In contrast with Saturn, Jupiter does not cause the characters any discomfort or unfortunate outcomes. He rather brings peace and justice. One can see this in the scene in which Arcite is dying and calls both Emelye and Palamon. As mentioned before, Arcite reflects upon his strife with Palamon, comes to a conclusion, and suggests that Emelye and Palamon should marry. In his final speech, it is clear that Jupiter sent his thoughts in that direction.

“I have heer with my cosyn Palamon
Had strif and rancour many a day agon
For love of yow, and for my jalousye.
And Juppiter so wys my soule gye,
To spokene of a servaunt proprely,
With alle circumstance trewely –
That is to seyen, trouthe, honour, knyghthede,
Wysdom, humblesse, estaat, and heigh kynrede,
Fredom, and al that longeth to that art –
So Juppiter have of my soule part,
As in this world right now ne knowe I non
So worthy to ben loved as Palamon,
That serveth yow, and wol doon al his lyf.
And if that evere ye shul ben a wyf,
Foryet nat Palamon, the gentil man” (Chaucer 62).

‘For love of you there’s been contention
Between me and my cousin Palamon,
Rancour and jealousy for many a day.
Now may wise Jupiter direct my heart
Fittingly and faithfully to portray
A lover’s attributes and qualities,
Such as faith, wisdom, honour, chivalry,
Rank, birth, humility, magnanimitiy,
And all that’s needed for the lover’s art.
As I look to Jupiter for salvation,
In the whole world there isn’t anyone
So worthy to be loved as Palamon,
Who serves you, and will serve you all his life.
And if you ever think to be a wife,
Do not forget the noble Palamon’ (Wright translation 72-3).

Twice Arcite mentions Jupiter, and that this god may now direct his heart and his feelings. He refers to Jupiter when he is doing the right thing, granting Palamon and Emelye permission to marry, which confirms the good nature of this god. Jupiter again brings justice and peace. As mentioned before, this is what associates Theseus with Jupiter. As duke of the state, Theseus tries to bring justice and peace, and keep control over the social order. At the end of the tale when Theseus is going to marry Emelye and Palamon, he also refers to Jupiter in his great final speech:
“Of man and womman seen we wel also
That nedes, in oon of thise termes two –
This is to seyn, in youthe or elles age –
He moot be deed, the kyng as shal a page;
Som in his bed, som in the depe see,
Som in the large feeld, as men may see;
Ther helpeth noght; al goth that ilke weye.
Thanne may I seyn that al this thyng moot deye.
“What maketh this but Juppiter, the kyng,
That is prince and cause of alle thyng,
Convertynge al unto his propre welle
From which it is dirryved, sooth to telle?
And heer-agayns no creature on lyve,
Of no degree, availleth for to stryve (Chaucer 65).

‘In the case of men and women, it’s clear also
That at one time or another, they must go;
That is to say, in either youth or age
Die you must, whether you be king or page;
One dies in bed, another in the sea,
Another on dry land, it’s plain to see;
It can’t be helped, for all go the same way.
And so I can affirm all things must die.
‘Who contrives this but Jupiter the King,
Who is the Prince and Cause of everything,
Who converts all back to its proper source
From which, in very truth, it first arose?
And against this it’s useless, in the end,
For any living creature to contend (Wright translation 78-9).

Theseus admits he cannot control everything, and “to the question of why Arcite should die, he can respond only with generalizations – that all things die”, that it is the way how the great Jupiter determined it beforehand, and that it is useless to fight this (Cooper 79). This shows how the gods predestine the fate of the characters. Theseus adds that it is an advantage for Arcite to die at the height of his fame, and that he will therefore always be remembered like the great knight he was.
And certainly a man hath moost honour
To dyen in his excellence and flour,
Whan he is siker of his goode name;
Thanne hath he doon his freend, ne hym, no shame.
And gladder ought his freend been of his deeth,
Whan with honour up yolden is his breeth,
Than when his name appalled is for age,
For al forgotten is his vassellage.
Thanne is it best, as for a worthy fame,
To dyen when that he is best of name (Chaucer 65).

*The man who dies in his life's prime and flower*
*While sure of his good name, wins most honour,*
*For in that case he brings no shame to either*
*Himself or friends. And his friend ought to be*
*Gladder of his death when it's with honour he*
*Yields up his latest breath, than when his name*
*Has faded in the course of age and time,*
*When all his former prowess is forgotten.*
*And so it's best, as regards his good name,*
*To die when he is at the height of fame (Wright translation 79).*

At the end of his speech Theseus explains there is no reason for Emelye and Palamon not to get married, and he again confirms the greatness of Jupiter. This marriage, however, as mentioned before, is not only a celebration of their love, but also a foreign alliance for Thebes. Cooper’s argument that I mentioned before, counts again: “Unlike the mischances of the story, the happy ending is brought about not by the planets, but through human decision and action” (Cooper 79). Not the gods, but Theseus decides Palamon and Emelye should get married. This again shows that, even though the social order is jeopardized by gods who represent the forces of Fate, Theseus still tries to keep control.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the social order is also questioned by the irresistible power of love and intimate relationships that often goes against the laws of society. This is also the case in the original tale, although this is less present than the gods are. Initially there is nothing wrong with the two knights being in love with the same woman as they are not breaking any rules. The problem, as extensively explained in the first chapter, starts when they consider this love
more important than their bond of sworn brotherhood, and one of them even breaks this bond. The love of the two knights for the same woman disturbs the social order because it breaks their bond, which had such a high value. It is thus clear that the social order is predominantly questioned by gods and human beings who represent the forces of Fate and less by the irresistible power of love.

To end this section, I will now examine how the social order in the modern adaptation is questioned. As mentioned before, the adaptation most notably leans towards the genre of romance, which means the characters are able to partake in an individual quest seeking personal fulfilment based on virtue. This also means that there is a lot more free initiative, and the fate of the characters is not predestined by any gods. Obviously this also implies that the social order of the prison, ruled by the prison director, cannot be questioned by gods and human beings who represent forces of Fate. However, this social order can easily be questioned by the irresistible power of love and intimate relationships that often goes against the laws of society. This is clearly in contrast with the original tale. The prison director tries, just like Theseus, to keep control over the society, and he acts against any abnormality. For example, he calls Emily to his office when Ace and Paul fight during a lesson. However, he cannot control everything as the social order is, as mentioned before, questioned by the irresistible power of love. Usually it is not normal for prisoners to fall in love with prison teachers, yet this is exactly what happens. The prison director makes sure that everyone, both prisoners and prison staff, follows the rules, but he cannot prevent the feelings developing between the two prisoners and their teacher. The social order in the prison community is disturbed from the moment Emily starts her teaching job there. Paul is overpowered by his feelings for Emily, and is suddenly convinced that they were destined to meet each other. He believes they ‘could have been sent’ there. Ace on the other hand, does not believe in fate or destiny, although he admits he also has developed real feelings for Emily, of a strength that he has never experienced before. He believes a relationship with Emily is one of the possibilities and not Paul’s ‘synchronicity bullshit’. One could argue that the problem would be smaller if only Ace and Paul were falling for Emily, and not vice versa. The social order would be hardly disturbed if, for example, they were told by the prison director that nothing could happen. What really interferes with the social order is the fact that Emily in her turn, or simultaneously falls for the prisoners. When Ace and Paul start fighting during a lesson, it becomes clear that Emily is really involved, and the prison director calls her to his office. As mentioned before, at that moment he could have immediately transferred Emily to another prison or even fired her. However, he chooses to warn her, and give her the chance to sort it out herself. This again shows that more is left to free initiative in the modern adaptation, and that it is possible for the characters to make their own choices. The irresistible power of love is nonetheless too big, and instead of keeping Ace and Paul at a distance, Emily gives in to her feelings. From the perspective of
the social norms, things are now getting out of hand. The possible intimate relationship with one of the prisoners is so powerful that she decides to jeopardize her career for it, and it destroys the social order in the prison. It shows how irresistible this love is. Moreover, at the beginning of the episode, Emily claims she feels safe in prison, because of the rules which prevent her from becoming intimate with the prisoners. However, she wants to give in to her feelings more and more in order to escape from her relationship with her current horrible boyfriend. Although deep in her heart she is already tending to break the rules and jeopardize the safety of the prison environment, she is still telling herself that she is remaining within the boundaries of the regulated society of the prison, which is better than the unregulated chaos of real life out there. When Paul visits her in a classroom, she tells him he cannot completely trust his feelings, because they are in a safe environment.

Emily: Look... being wanted... in a situation where you’re safe and there are rules, and there are no expectations and you can’t be hurt... well, that...

Paul: Feels good?

Emily: It’s better than real life.

(31:45 – 32:08)

However, at the end of the episode she herself decides to give in to the chaos of an emotional relationship with Paul outside prison. She ignores her own advice to Paul, which again shows the power of the love she feels; it causes her not to live up to her own beliefs.

In conclusion, in both versions of *The Knight’s Tale* the leaders try to control the society in which they rule. However, the order in these societies is challenged by several factors. In the original tale, the fate of the characters is predestined by the gods, which means that the social order is questioned by these gods and by humans who represent the forces of fate. Each lover prays to his or her own chosen god in order to receive what they desire. Palamon prays to Venus for love, Arcite prays to Mars for victory, and Emelye prays to Diana for chastity. There are, however, other gods, who also influence their lives. Saturn, for example, is the representative of the greater infortune. He is the one that causes Arcite and Palamon’s imprisonment, and he is the one that in the end causes Arcite’s death. Next to Saturn, also Jupiter meddles in the lives of the characters. He is the one who brings peace and justice. These gods thus question the social order Theseus so carefully tries to control, and disturb it completely. This social order is also questioned by the irresistible power of love, and this is shown by the two knights breaking their bond of brotherhood. In the modern adaptation the focus lies elsewhere. There are no gods who can predestine the lives of the characters, which means there is much more free initiative. The prison director tries to control the social order in the prison, but he is also challenged. The social order in the prison is questioned by
the irresistible power of love and intimate relationships that often goes against the laws of society. Not only do the two main characters Ace and Paul fall in love, but this love is reciprocated by the woman in question, their teacher Emily.
4. Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have tried to provide an elaborate comparison between Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale* and its 2003 BBC adaptation. Considering the amplitude of my research I have reduced the scope to the themes of the tale, and left out the structural aspects. Within the themes, I have then narrowed down my focus to the personal relationships between the characters. The purpose of this research was to find out how these relationships were approached differently in the original tale and in the modern adaptation.

I started my research by examining the kind of bond the two main male characters shared. This first aspect was immediately very different in the two versions, because it was very dependent on the time period. In the original tale Arcite and Palamon were royal cousins and knights, therefore their bond was not just a bond of friendship, but a sacred bond of sworn brotherhood. This bond had very high status during the Middle Ages, which made the breaking of it all the worse. I argued that Chaucer created this kind of bond between the two knights to highlight how powerful the love is that breaks this bond. In the 21st century setting of the modern adaptation there is no such thing as sworn brotherhood, which means the bond Ace and Paul shared was a mere bond of friendship. This means that this bond is less focussed upon than in the original tale. In that chapter I also examined the kind of love the men feel for Emelye/Emily. This aspect led to opposite outcomes in the two versions. In the original tale the ‘love’ the two knights feel towards Emelye appears, from a modern perspective, as rather futile and superficial, because they only base it on her appearance, and they have never even met Emelye. From Chaucer’s own perspective, it acquires more depth because he can rely on his audience’s knowledge of the conventions of courtly love to fill in the love story, but even in this context, in so far as it is present, it remains rather stereotypical and superficial. In the modern adaptation, Ace and Paul base their love on a lot more than Emily’s appearance. They have actually met her in person, they have had her as their teacher, and they have had, serious private conversations with her. I concluded that the focus has thus shifted from the kind of bond between the two main male characters in the original tale, to the kind of love they have for the main female character in the modern adaptation.

Then I elaborated on this love the knights feel for Emelye/Emily, and I have researched how this love breaks the bond they share. Considering the original tale I argued that Arcite and Palamon’s sacred bond not only included their behaviour towards each other, but that it had an effect on the rest of their lives as well. It consists of several aspects: within the courtly conventions, they have to distinguish themselves in arms and offer the lady agreeable company. Hence, this sacred bond also
affected their love for Emelye. Since the battle between them would be immediately over if one of them proved to have superior battle skills, Chaucer made them equally skilled. This then meant he had to distinguish them in other characteristics, because otherwise there would be no end of the story.

I have therefore examined which knightly obligations Arcite and Palamon individually chose to focus upon, and how this affected their individual love for Emelye. I concluded that Arcite is the more aggressive one of the two, and that he chooses to focus upon the fighting skills, and therefore prays to Mars for victory. Palamon, on the other hand, is considered the softer one, who focusses on his love for Emelye, and therefore prays to Venus to have exclusive access to Emelye as his partner in a love relationship. Considering the modern adaptation I argued that, because there was no sacred bond, there were also no extra rules considering the rest of their lives. There is no official tournament for them to win Emily, so fighting skills are not a part of their characterization. They are, however, equal to each other in that respect: Emily does not know either of them, and one does not have any privileges over the other.

Considering the rest of their character, they fairly correspond with Arcite and Palamon. Like Arcite, Ace is considered the confident conman, who is rather aggressive, talks about women in graphic terms, and has a rational explanation for his feelings. Palamon is the new boy, who believes fate or providence brought him and Emily together, and who wants to make an emotional connection with her. In the last part of that chapter I examined how the two men themselves handle their shared bond. In the original tale it is mainly Arcite who breaks the bond of sworn brotherhood, while Palamon considers his friend in every decision he makes. This contrast is not present in the modern adaptation. Both Ace and Paul ‘break’ their friendship.

The third aspect I examined was the role of Emelye/Emily, and how it was different in both versions of the tale. I argued that there is an emphasis on male competition in the original tale, which causes the role of Emelye to be minor. Her prayer to Diana only functions to intensify the conflict between Arcite and Palamon, and in addition her wishes were not fulfilled. Emelye’s role is mainly that of an object of desire, and her response to love is not included in the tale as her feelings do not matter. I argued that this caused the love relationship not to be of the courtly kind. Since Emelye has absolutely no say in the matter, and has not even met Arcite and Palamon, she has no preference for either of them. In the modern adaptation the complete opposite situation is true. Emily is a very powerful character, and I argued her role consists of two parts. First, she improves her own life situation, and succeeds in getting out of her horrible relationship with an aggressive man. She manages to end up in a much better one. Apart from that, she is the one who has the strongest
In the next chapter, I have gone into this in more detail. I consulted different theoretical approaches of the genre of epic and romance, and I examined which characteristics applied to the two versions of the tale. Considering the original tale, I argued that the arguments in favour of the romance genre were not equal to the ones in favour the epic genre. Although there is a focus on love, and although Emily is the idealised object of the strife, and there is a happy ending, the original tale leans heavily towards the epic genre. This is the case because the tale contains a philosophical reach and there is a happy ending for only one of the knights. Palamon gets to marry Emelye, but Arcite dies in the most unchivalrous way, even though he was actually the winner of the tournament.

In addition to that, the lives of the characters are largely predestined by several gods, and they do not ride out in search for adventures, which is one of the most important features of a romance. In contrast with this, the large majority of the arguments considering the modern adaptation allow one to attribute it to the genre of romance. The focus is on love as well, and two of the three main characters have a happy ending. The difference here is that Paul and Emily are together because they both want to, and not because their wedding would function as a foreign alliance for Thebes, which is the case in the original tale. Emily is again an idealised object of the strife, although now she performs the role of the active principle herself. She is no longer just the object of desire. Most importantly, the three main characters all experience a personal journey, which allows them to seek personal fulfilment. The fate of the characters is no longer predestined, but they can themselves decide to progress, and become better persons. There are, however, elements of the epic genre present. The ending, for example, in which Ace dies, is merely a cynical coincidence, which results in a fatal moment – a burning cigarette rolls into a puddle of petrol. The fire that breaks out seems to be of epic magnitude, and utterly destroys one of the main characters. The modern adaptation thus mostly leans towards the genre of romance, but puts it in perspective by preserving some elements of the dark fate over which human beings have little or no control. In the generic choices made by the adaptation, the medieval genre to which Chaucer’s tale belonged thus appears not be entirely forgotten.

Finally, I examined the figures of authority and the social order in both versions of the tale. I included this last chapter, because the characters are influenced not only by fate or providence, but also by the societies in which they live, and these societies are to a significant extent shaped by their
rulers. The authoritative figures in both versions are presented as great, considerate leaders who try to keep control over their state or society. Theseus is described as the skilled leader, who pays attention to the rules, but who is also considerate towards his citizens, and changes his mind when necessary. One example of this is when Theseus interrupts Arcite and Palamon’s fight, and decides to kill them, but changes his mind, when the women of his entourage ask him not to. The prison director, on the other hand, is also portrayed as a considerate leader, who tries to keep control, but who gives the members of society more freedom to make decisions themselves. This becomes clear when he calls Emily to his office after Ace and Paul had a fight in class. He warns her that she might be getting too involved, but gives her the responsibility to sort it out herself. Nevertheless, the social orders of these rulers are questioned by several factors. In the original tale, Theseus’ social order is mainly questioned by gods and human beings who represent the forces of Fate. The gods Saturn and Jupiter are two major influences, although each in a different way. They predestine the fate of the characters, which means there is determinism, which in its turn implies that Theseus has no full control. The prison director’s social order in the modern adaptation is mainly questioned by the irresistible power of love and intimate relationships, which often goes against the laws of society. There is a lot more scope for free initiative, which means the prison director cannot prevent Emily from falling in love with one of the prisoners, which causes the whole system to break down.

With this comparison I have thus tried to show the differences between the way in which Geoffrey Chaucer initially presented the characters and their personal relationships, and the way the producer did this in his adaptation. I have chosen to focus on the characters, and on how they interact with each other. One could extend this dissertation, by also comparing the structural aspects of the two versions, or by examining other thematic elements. One could for example examine how and why the unique four-part structure of the original tale is not present in the modern adaptation. There are several extensions possible for this dissertation, which would result in a more complete comparison of the two versions, and which would tell us a lot more about how contemporary producers interpret tales from the Middle Ages.
5. Bibliography


