Chaucer’s *The Knight’s Tale* and Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy*, though at first glance two very different works about different ideas, are very much related to each other. A dominant topic in *The Consolation of Philosophy* is the concept of true and perfect happiness and how it is attained. In the *Consolation of Philosophy*, Philosophy takes a very theoretical approach to explain what true happiness is and how one must order his desires correctly in order to acquire it. However, in the Knight’s Tale, Chaucer takes a more practical approach to explain this supposition, using Emily as an allegory for true happiness. The entire story revolves around Arcite’s and Palamon’s very disparate ways in trying to win over Emily, whom they believe is the key to their happiness. Arcite’s way is a demonstration of having a distorted concept of what he believes will lead him to his heart’s desire, which is not prioritized correctly. Palamon, on the other hand, realizes that what he truly wants is Emily, and nothing more, so he resolves to seek her and does not wish for anything else he thinks will lead to her. Both Boethius and Chaucer believe that ordering one’s desires correctly and looking to happiness itself to reach it, rather than being distracted by earthly affairs that look like they will lead to it, are the keys to reaching pure and perfect beatitude. Boethius’s approach could be viewed as *theoria*, a very theoretical approach, while the Knight’s Tale is more synonymous with *phronesis*, for it is Boethius’s idea of realizing true happiness demonstrated in a narrative.

Arcite and Palamon are both good, honorable men who seek Emily. However, the slight contrast in their thinking and their way of attaining her is what makes all the difference between Palamon ending up with Emily and Arcite ending up empty-handed. Rather than aiming to win the duel as Arcite does, Palamon decides to simply do what he can to reach Emily, whether he wins the war or not. On the contrary, Arcite is beguiled by the convincing illusion that by becoming the victor of the duel, he will become Emily’s husband and thus become truly happy. His misconception on how to win Emily is a common mistake made by many men looking to achieve eternal joy, according to Boethius in his *Consolation of Philosophy*.

Boethius, speaking in *The Consolation* as Philosophy, defines true happiness as “that which makes a man self-sufficient, strong, worthy of respect, glorious, and joyful” (Boethius 65). Being self-sufficient is a state not deficient in power, “for if a [self-sufficient] being had some weakness in some respect, it would necessarily need the help of something else” (Boethius 63). Therefore, self-sufficiency and power are equivalent. One who is self-sufficient and powerful is also worthy of respect, for “a being of this kind is supremely worthy of veneration” (Boethius 63). Thus, all these elements are one and the same. They all bring about true happiness, and you cannot have one without the others. Much like a human being cannot function without unity of body and soul, separation of any of the parts of happiness will result in not achieving happiness. Moreover, the very element one has so diligently gone after will not be acquired either. “That which is one and undivided is mistakenly subdivided and removed by men from the state of truth and perfection to a state of falseness and imperfection” (Boethius 63). One must take a holistic approach to seeking happiness, for breaking up and separating the parts that make up true happiness degrade it to a state of deficiency. It becomes a transitory, fleeting happiness, if anything at all.

Philosophy explains how earthly goods such as wealth, fame, or power do not lead to true happiness, since none of them are inclusive of all the elements that Boethius defines as what make up happiness. For example, someone who is wealthy will need more outside help to keep his money safe and protect it from being stolen. This does not make him self-sufficient, and consequently, it does not make him powerful or worthy of respect, since all the characteristics of happiness are equivalent. Not only is he dependent on so much outside help to protect his wealth; he is also in a constant state of anxiety for fear that his possessions
may be stolen or for fear that the very people to whom he has entrusted his wealth may deceive him and take some of it. A wealthy man believes that “the perfect good consists in having no wants, and so [he] toils in order to end up rolling in wealth” (Boethius 48). His possessions end up possessing him; and he is never satisfied, for “nothing satisfies greed” (Boethius 53).

While Boethius explains the acquiring of true happiness in a theoretical way, using Philosophy as an allegory for wisdom, The Knight’s Tale applies Boethius’s explanation to a situation that is not strictly black and white. Upon seeing the young, beautiful Emily, both Arcite and Palamon fall in love with her immediately. They are both imprisoned when they first lay eyes on her, and Palamon states that “The beauty of the lady [he] saw, in that garden below—Walking, so noble and lovely, to and fro—was the sole and entire cause of [his] startled cry” (Chaucer 32). Arcite, likewise, is struck hard by Emily’s beauty. “Arcite was wounded as much as [Palamon], or more” (Chaucer 32).

The solution proposed to the two knights was a duel, the winner of which would receive Emily as his wife. Both Arcite and Palamon are completely and utterly invested in attaining Emily, and they each have their different means of executing their plans. Arcite’s way of thinking is on a more earthly level. He appeals to Mars, the god of war, in hopes that he may be guided and subsequently win the duel. “I understand she’ll make no promise Until I win her in this tournament’s lists...arrange that, tomorrow, victory is mine,” he prays (Chaucer 65). His strategy is based on the assumption that the victory will allow him to be Emily’s husband. The manner in which Arcite planned out how he was to win Emily is equivalent to a man seeking wealth in the hopes that the wealth itself will bring him true happiness. As hoped, Arcite does indeed win the battle. However, an accident, spurred by Pluto at the request of Saturn, brings about Arcite’s death. Although Arcite won the duel, he did not win Emily. Winning a transitory affair does not guarantee the highest good, which is happiness. If one depends on an earthly good in order to ultimately achieve an end, it is still not set in stone that he will achieve what he is truly seeking. He simply asked to win the battle, so in essence, Arcite got exactly what he asked for—he prayed to win the war, and he did. His reliance on his victory, however, is not nearly enough to assure that he will have Emily in the end.

Conversely, Palamon takes a different approach in his pursuit for Emily. Palamon is not headstrong in his attempts to win the battle. He is not out to fight hard and kill shamelessly for the woman he loves unless it is in the will of the gods that he do so. Instead of seeking the aid of Mars, Palamon consults Venus. He asks that if it is concurrent with the gods’ plan, he win Emily in the end, whether he wins the duel or not. He does not care for petty victories whose glory is fleeting; his love for Emily is pure and undeniable, and it surpasses any rash desire for worldly affairs. “Winning this tournament means nothing to me,” he prays, “Nor any kind of fame, or knightly glory, Reputation in worldly stories or songs, But only Emily, for whom I long, Who belongs to me…It makes no difference whether I or Arcite Is victor, so when I lay me down to sleep I have my love in my arms” (Chaucer 61). This is exactly what true happiness is—it so fulfills one that he no longer desires transitory goods such as wealth and fame. Once Palamon realized that he solely desired Emily in the end, he resolved to seek her, and nothing else. As a result, the outcome of The Knight’s Tale was that Palamon married Emily. Palamon’s actions in this situation are analogous to the correct way one should think in aiming to achieve true happiness. One cannot allow himself to be seduced by earthly goods that can so easily and so swiftly be taken away. To attain true happiness, one must aim for that highest good itself.

The issue of Arcite and Palamon in relation to each other is something that may be disputed. Although Arcite had his desires disordered and did not go after Emily in the correct way, he cannot be called a villain. Arcite and Palamon are much alike in many respects; they are not on opposite ends of the spectrum. Both Arcite and Palamon are noble men, and both have intentions far from malicious. It is that slight discrepancy
in their ways of pursuing Emily that distinguishes the two from each other. The Knight’s Tale is not a story of good versus evil; it is a portrayal of how even decent men can have disordered desires and not achieve true happiness, and how seeking the right desires does lead to true happiness. Any man can put himself either in Arcite or Palamon’s places, for these two ways of thinking are both capable of being adopted by anyone. Even Palamon, who appears to be (and is probably) the more virtuous of the two, he cannot be said to have been entirely prudent and virtuous throughout the tale. In fact, much like Boethius, at the beginning of the tale, Palamon is at a low. He is imprisoned, with no good prospects of ever escaping. To add to his despair, he is able to look upon Emily day after day, but he cannot have any more interaction with her, for his sentence requires him to remain imprisoned. Furthermore, it can be said that he is at about the same level as Arcite. When Arcite confesses that he loves Emily as well, Palamon takes offense and suspects that Arcite does not earnestly love her. He becomes scornful and says, “You hear me declare my love, seeing this girl, and now, like a hypocrite, you say you’re burning With love for my love…No, Arcite, you liar, you cannot love her. I loved her first, my primacy is proven, I told you only because of who you are, My trusted friend, and cousin, and counselor, Sworn to aid and assist me…Or else renounce your honor, as a true man would” (Chaucer 33).

Palamon’s move toward becoming more virtuous and having correctly ordered desires is a gradual one. As Palamon makes his way from encountering Arcite in the forest to preparing for the duel that is to be the determining factor in who wins Emily, he comes to realize that what he truly, solely wants is simply Emily. Emily, who represents the highest good in The Knight’s Tale, is Palamon’s source of true happiness. A big step toward Palamon’s change is his prayer to Venus. His appeal to Venus is one that is very heartfelt and sincere, and the part of his soliloquy that stands out the most is how Palamon says that he no longer cares about winning the battle between him and Arcite. “Mars is the chief Of warfare,” he says, “but Lady, it’s ever been my belief that yours, in heaven, is power stronger than his: If you wish it, Emily’s my wife” (Chaucer 65). As long as somehow, in the end, he can have Emily, that is all he needs and all he cares for. While Arcite unfortunately allowed himself to get sidetracked and become so focused on winning the war, Palamon focused on the reward of the war, which was Emily. It was his correctly ordered love and his prayer to Venus that led to the turn of events that made Palamon the virtuous man he was at the end of The Knight’s Tale.

Again, Arcite’s demise is not entirely equated to the mantra of “good guy conquering bad guy.” Arcite is far from pernicious; and a better, virtuous side of him is revealed while he is on his deathbed. His redemption comes when he confesses to Palamon that he did not love Emily the way Palamon did. “My cousin Palamon and I have fought Bitterly and long, all for the thought And love of you, and for my jealousy,” he admits. “May all-wise Jove incline my soul to be What honest, truthful lovers ought to be, to serve in all we do most properly—That is to say, in knighthood, integrity, And honor, in wisdom, nature, and humility, Generous to friends and family” (Chaucer 75). Although Arcite did love Emily, part of the reason he wanted her so badly was because of his jealousy and his competitive nature towards Palamon. His happiness would have come, in part, from the feeling of victory and from attaining something that Palamon wanted as well, while Palamon’s happiness came wholly from being able to marry the woman he loved. To an extent, Arcite has had his own metamorphosis as well. Rather than fruitlessly pushing on to win Emily even though it is clearly not meant to happen, he owns up to his errors and admits that Palamon is the better man for Emily. Because of this change of heart, Arcite dies a virtuous death; and rather than being remembered with resentment, Palamon and Emily remember him fondly, as a brother and as a friend.

The way the events played out was all for the best, and in a way everybody was satisfied at the end. Although Arcite died, he died a noble man and was remembered well by many. Palamon, the man who
truly, deeply loved Emily, is the one who ended up marrying her. Additionally, Palamon and Arcite did not let their competitive nature and their desire for Emily altogether destroy their relationship. At the end of the tale, they finally resolve their differences and make amends. All this was Saturn’s doing, which begs the question of whether Venus really has a say in Saturn’s plans. In his *Consolation of Philosophy*, Boethius states that the true happiness lies in God, and that striving to attain divinity as best we can leads to true happiness. If, in this case, Saturn is the highest power, why did Palamon pray to Venus? One can look at this in a way much like the way Catholics appeal to the saints. They are not actually praying to the saint himself (or herself); rather, they are asking the saint to pray for them. Saints have a much more direct connection with God, so Catholics ask the saint to act as a sort of mediator between them and God. Palamon does exactly this—he asks Venus to appeal to Saturn in helping him attain Emily, should it happen to be consistent with Saturn’s will. Venus acts as a mediator between Palamon and Saturn, while Saturn is more of an ordainer. Venus pleads to Saturn, and Saturn reassures Venus to “weep no more…I’ll take Good care of Palamon, he’ll have his lady exactly as you said he would. Mars must be allowed to help his knight, but quarrels Between you two must somehow be at end…I, your father’s father, will do as you will” (Chaucer 67). Because of Palamon’s prayer to Venus, and Venus’s appeal to Saturn, Saturn is able to grant Palamon his wish of marrying Emily.

The outcome of *The Knight’s Tale*, namely, Palamon’s ultimate marriage to Emily, is an affirmation that to attain true happiness, one must seek happiness itself, rather than worldly goods that appear to bring happiness. Worldly goods are fleeting and transitory, and both Boethius and Chaucer have their own ways of teaching this. Happiness is the highest good that all men seek, and in order for one to successfully attain it, we must understand that earthly goods only keep us further from ever achieving true and perfect happiness. Wealth doesn’t make a man truly happy, and winning the duel did not give Arcite Emily’s hand in marriage. The only thing that can bring us to true happiness is happiness itself. Seeking the highest good is the only action that promises the highest good in the end.