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Chivalry and the Tournament in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*
Nicholas Lauer

Thanks in part to movies such as *First Knight*, *Braveheart* and the recent film adaptation of *The Knight’s Tale*, we 21st century Americans have a popular conception of chivalry. Chivalry means helping those in distress, opening doors for a date, paying for dinner, and possibly even fighting for a loved one. While the way we construct and use the term chivalry today cannot possibly give a complete picture of medieval chivalry, our contemporary notions are not completely askew. Yet chivalry, like many words that attempt to embody an entire schema of thinking, acting, and identifying, is a slippery and elusive term. Because of the totalizing nature and the innumerable variations existent in what the medievals called chivalry, it is beyond the scope of this paper to completely delineate what it was and how it functioned. My purpose, then, is to look at a single example of chivalry—Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*—as a way of exploring this dominant ideology of the Middle Ages and to see how in the ideal physical manifestation of chivalry—the tournament—that ideology breaks down. After this analysis, I will briefly discuss how the presentation of chivalry as inherently problematic is purposeful in the tale but constitutes neither a scathing social critique by the Knight nor by Chaucer himself.

Many critics have pointed out the structural symmetry of the *Knight’s Tale*. Two funerals and two marriages bookend the story. In the opening passage, Theseus marries Ypolita and then encounters the mourning widows of Thebes; at the end of the tale we observe the funeral of Arcite and then the marriage of Palamon and Emelye. This preliminary observation on form serves as an entry point to our discussion of chivalry. Marriage and death, or love and war, are two of its cornerstones. In the middle of this marriage/funeral cycle is a bittersweet story involving two young knights “of the blood roial / of Thebes” (1018-19), one lady “that fairer was to sene / than is the lylie upon his stalke grene” (1035), and a tournament held in lists so grand that “in this world ther nas” (1885). On the surface, the tale seems like a clear-cut romance, but on the level of the tournament, which should solve the lovers’ disputes and celebrate the knightly tradition, we find the undoing of the chivalric system.

The events leading up to the tournament are important in establishing what chivalry actually is in the fictional space of the tale and how this construction is subsequently problematized in the tournament. In the opening lines we meet Theseus, duke of Athens and a great conqueror. Among all his knights Theseus is “the flour” (982). Through the initial episodes we gain a 14th century picture of chivalry as a system that promotes the values of military prowess, the respect of worthy competitors, and, of course, the love of women. More importantly we find that military prowess brings reward, reward often takes the form of a woman, and honoring an opponent accumulates more honor for oneself.

As Theseus makes his way back to Athens “with muchel glorie and greet solemnnytee” (870), he encounters the black clad widows, rides to Thebes to defeat the evil Creon who has dishonored them, and ransacks the city. Much like our contemporary conception, chivalry is concerned with assisting those in need, especially the stereotypically helpless female. Moreover, we learn of the importance of justice in the medieval scheme of chivalry. As in many medieval romances, the defeated party, in this case Creon, clearly deserves the end he receives; the moral decisions are very clear-cut. Finally, this passage highlights the importance of honor to a knight. In many ways the world of chivalry can be seen as an economy of honor. The deadly battles, heroic deeds, and services to ladies all provide opportunities for the knight to prove his worth. Fame, wealth, and love are inextricable pieces of the honor that motivate a knight, but in the end honor supercedes these pieces and becomes a trait desirious all on its own.

From these initial episodes we discover that chivalry is a complete way for the medieval knight to view his world. Ultimately it is a structure of language that empowers and subjects those involved, while attempting to systematize and rationalize the world in which it functions. Strength in war or prowess, love, justice, and most importantly honor guide every move and thought with the promise of great reward.

The main subject of the tale begins after these initial episodes. Two Theban knights, cousins named Palamon and Arcite, are found alive in a pile of bodies after the defeat of Creon, and Theseus immediately imprisons them to a life sentence. While in captivity both knights fall in love with the same woman—fair Emelye, the sister-in-law of Theseus who often walks in the garden adjacent to the prison.

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\(^6\) Patterson makes this point clear in his article regarding the *Knight’s Tale* in his book *Chaucer and the Subject of History*. He sees “honor as chivalry’s guiding principle” and further explains that “the term ‘honor’ became it own verbal symbol, a shorthand for motives that would not bear further inspection” (174).
tower. Despite having only seen and never talked to or even met Emelye, the sworn brothers become sworn enemies. Eventually Theseus frees Arcite thanks to a mutual friend of the duke. Banished from Athens, Arcite can no longer see his love, but after a few years he returns to the city disguised as a squire. While Arcite serves the Athenian court, Palamon escapes from prison and hides in a nearby grove en route to Thebes, where he plans to raise an army, return to Athens, and win Emelye. As chance would have it, the two knights meet in the grove and fight a duel the next day. Before they kill one another, however, Theseus, on a hunting excursion, discovers the dueling knights, stops their fighting, hears their confession, and decides to enact the death penalty on the spot. The ladies in the hunting party, among them Emelye, cry for mercy. Theseus, having a gentle and noble heart, refrains from killing the knights and instead organizes a tournament in order to solve the dispute.

In order fully to understand the significance of the violent encounters in the Knight's Tale we must consider them from an historical perspective. G.A. Lester describes four basic types of chivalric combat in his article "Chaucer's Knight and the Medieval Tournament": the joust, the foot combat, the melee, and the duel (460). One might consider Palamon and Arcite's skirmish in the grove a duel, yet the absence of a judicial overseer makes their conflict nothing more than a rogue brawl. A proper duel involves two knights of equal status and an official overseer (Barker 160). The outcome of such a combat would either be death or surrender, and most often the submitting knight was taken outside the lists and executed (Lester 463). Even though Palamon and Arcite are willing to fight to the death, the absence of a judiciary overseer makes the duel invalid. Theseus' interruption of the brawl, then, is not out of place from a historical viewpoint:

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. (1710-1713)

A knight cannot take chivalry into his own hands. Here we discover one of the many paradoxes of the chivalric system. The knight performs individual deeds for individual honor, but outside of the prescribed system or chivalric community those same deeds become dishonorable. The individualistic flair of chivalry is completely dependent upon adherence to the broader community for validity. Also, the purpose of Palamon and Arcite's combat is not proper for a duel. Fighting a mortal duel typically erupted over an accusation of treason or felony. The battle for a lady nearly always took place in a tournament setting (citation?).

Because it provided the best opportunity for a knight to prove his chivalric prowess against his peers, and because it publicized the display of honor through the presence of spectators, the tournament was the centerpiece of medieval chivalry. While national wars and religious crusades provided opportunities to accumulate honor and define oneself as a knight, the unpredictable shape of the combat and the absence of an audience diminished their effectiveness in comparison with the tournament. These combative spectacles, according to Juliet Barker, “epitomized all that chivalry stood for” (1). She goes on to explain:

What made tourneying doubly precious in chivalric eyes was its glorification of knightly ideology. The medieval tourneyer or joust was not simply putting in a useful bit of martial exercise—he was fighting as the champion of his mistress (real or imaginary) and seeking to win her approbation and that of his companions in arms. To win reputation and renown was his principal object and in the lists it was possible to do this through personal attributes alone. Like the heroes of romance he could sweep all before him, at least temporarily. (1)

The myriad factors that contributed to a knight's identity, and the number of expectations and desires to which he was subjected, all came to a head in the tournament. War, love of women, justice, honor, and community are all powerfully present. That Theseus decides upon the tournament as the best solution to the Theban knights' conflict then comes as no surprise. The tournament provides the controlled atmosphere in which their conflict can be resolved.

The type of tournament Theseus proposes as a solution to the Theban knight's violently chivalric love affair is a hybrid of the melee and the duel. According to Lester "there are no historical analogues for this blend of duel and tourney" (464). In relation to the history of the tournament, it seems strange that Theseus would decide upon the melee, a mock-war type of battle between two large teams of knights, when the one-on-one jousting or foot combat tournaments led not only to a more self-glorifying tournament, but also to a clear individual winner. In a joust the two combatants would attempt to dehorse one another with a lance. The foot combat or feat at arms competition involved a number of different weapons, and a winner was determined when one knight fell to the ground or a judge decided the victor based on overall skill.
Given the need to determine an individual winner, and the fact that the one-on-one style tournaments were more popular in Chaucer’s day, one would assume that Theseus would choose an individualistic kind of tournament. However, he decides on the large-scale melee, for the melee decision involves Theseus’s position of power. The act of Palamon and Arcite hacking one another in the grove shows complete independence on their part, utterly neglecting the law of Theseus and the larger chivalric community. Therefore Theseus’ decision for a melee instead of a one-on-one tournament, such as a joust or feat of arms, is a political move to stamp out a dangerous individualism that threatens the power and control of the ruler over his servants, and in this case, his prisoners of war.

Historically the king who controls the tournament controls the nation. Tournaments were occasions for gathering large numbers of high class, highly armed men. If nobles wanted to voice dissatisfaction or organize rebellion the best place to do so was at a tournament. When Henry III and Edward II sat on the throne in England, disaffected barons manipulated the power of the tournament to their own ends. Chaucer, however, lived during the rule of two kings who patronized the tournament in England. Edward III not only promoted tournaments during his reign, but also participated very successfully in them. As a result, he was capable of capitalizing on the atmosphere of the tournament to gather support for his war efforts in Scotland and France and to increase the royal treasury with the dues required from participants (Barker 69).

Theseus’s use of the tournament is a method of control in his realm. Not wanting to allow the violence and individualism of the Theban knights to disrupt his rule, Theseus forces them to participate in the chivalric activity of the tournament. And this particular tournament will be the biggest the earth has ever seen. Theseus creates an event, a spectacle, and while this event does not completely overshadow the main conflict of Palamon and Arcite, it becomes large enough that they no longer dictate what actions they will take. They are swept into the festival and the enormity of the tournament.

The description of the lists or “noble theatre” (1885) leaves no question to the sheer size or importance of the event. Scholars estimate that such a structure as described in the tale could fit nearly 200,000 people, or over five and a half times the population of London in the 14th century (DiMarco 834). Surely the size of the lists is exaggerated when compared to actual lists, but in the world of the narrative such a grand structure is fitting for the grand event that the tournament is about to become. In exaggerating the lists the narrator could merely be following one of the conventions of writing romance. Exaggeration is commonplace in the romances of Chrétien de Troyes, for instance. However, the extended emphasis on the giant stadium draws our attention to the tournament as the centerpiece of the narrative. The structure takes shape before us and becomes so big that we cannot ignore it. The amphitheatre dominates the imagery in the middle of the text and the size tells us that it is a focal point in the Knight’s narrative (Kolve 105). For Palamon and Arcite the alternative to the “noble theatre”, and Theseus’ original design, is death. The Theban knights gladly become actors, and armed with the script of chivalry the show is sure to be a success.

Following the command of Theseus, Palamon and Arcite each gather the appropriate number of knights for the tourney. A few days before the awaited event, citizens and knights take part in great celebration and merrymaking. On the actual morning of the tournament the whole city is filled “with mynstaelic and noyse that was maked” (2524). After proceeding to the lists in great festivities, the teams take their places at either end of the stadium: Palamon on the eastward side and Arcite in west. The heralds give the signal and the sides ferociously charge one another. The goal of the fight is for one team to capture the other’s captain—Arcite or Palamon—and bring him to the stake on their side of the lists. The battle rages equally for almost the entire length of the day, but as the narrator tells us “Som tyme an ende ther is of every dede,” (2636). In a struggle Palamon falls captive to Arcite’s team. They drag him to their stake and the fighting ends; Arcite wins.

But the conclusion of the tournament is all wrong. As Arcite victoriously rides to meet Emelye, his horse overturns, and he receives a fatal wound from the fall. In light of the chivalric discourse, his death is extremely problematic. Arcite won the day fair and square; his battalions of knights bested that of Palamon. Arcite should acquire great honor and fame and take Emelye as his wife, but the tournament leaves Theseus and the rest of the onlookers at an impasse: the rightful winner cannot gain the honor he deserves for an obvious reason—he is dead. Moreover, the remaining participant has no right to marry

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7 Barker shows evidence that “the eleven grievances presented to the king at the April Parliament of 1309 were discussed and drawn up at the Dunstable tournament” (46). She goes on to provide examples when tournaments at Stepney (1308), Westminster Hall (1386), and Oxford (1400) were used to plot the attempted assassinations of Gaveston, John of Gaunt, and Henry IV respectively.
Emelye because he did not conquer his opponent. Theseus prescribed the tournament as the best way to resolve their conflict, but the actual events undermine the expected honor-giving, joy-bestowing outcome. The only product is grief and pain. Notice the change that takes place in Athens. Before the tournament “the citee large” is decorated throughout “with clooth of gold, and nat with sarge” (2667-8); afterward upon Arcite’s death “the citee...sprad was al with blak” (2902-3). Celebration turns to mourning and the fissures in the chivalric structure are exposed. The efficacy of violence comes into question; the justice of the tournament is shaken; the love of the knights remains unfulfilled. The tournament provides no obvious answer for the Theban knights and deeply troubles the state of chivalry as a controlled and just system.

The subversive effect of the tournament results from the ideology of chivalry itself. According to Theseus, in the context of the tournament each knight “shal have his destyne / As hym is shape” (1842-3). The duke of Athens is confident that the outcome of the tournament will be the result of a divine ordering of events. In other words, what happens in the tournament is what is supposed to happen. Not only does Arcite’s freak accident unsettle this assumption, but we find that even the divine aspect of the tournament is shaped by chivalry, and shaped in such a way that the construct cannot provide its own harmonious resolution.

Before entering the lists on the day of the tournament both knights enter a temple and pray to a god for help: Palamon to Venus and Arcite to Mars. The chivalric discourse in which they operate determines their options: Venus is love and Mars is war. Theseus, the flower of chivalry, has ordered the construction of these temples at either end of the lists and therefore it should not surprise us that his choice of gods epitomizes the dual nature of chivalry that the tale presents. Which temple each knight decides to visit determines who survives the tournament. In order to win Emelye, Arcite prays for victory in battle. On the other hand, Palamon simply prays to obtain Emelye by any means possible. Both ironically get what they ask for. However, before we conclude that Palamon was the wiser knight for choosing Venus and siding with love over war, we must first ask why Palamon picks Venus in the first place. His motivation in this decision is hard to discern, for he is not completely dominated by a desire to serve only Love throughout the tale. Recall that Palamon escapes the prison to round up a Theban army, and Palamon issues the duel to Arcite in the grove:

I wol be deed, or elles thou shalt dye...
I drede noght that uther thou shalt dye,
Or thou ne shalt nat loven Emelye.
Chees which thou wolt, or thou shalt nat asterte! (1587, 1593-5)

Palamon may be a lover, but he is also a fighter. And why does Arcite choose Mars? Is it not Arcite who is so struck with love sickness that he cannot gather forces to conquer Theseus, that his visage drastically changes due to suffering for love? Furthermore, the knights are neither acting against their dispositions when they pick their deity. In fact, readers can hardly distinguish between the two knights at all. When the tale introduces them, they have no distinct features. They might as well be the same person:

Two yonge knyghtes liggynge by and by,
Bothe in oon armes, wrought ful richely,
Of whiche two Arcite highte that oon,
And that uther knyght highte Palamon. (1011-14)

They have different names, but we cannot tell who is who. Even in battle they are practically the same—lion and tiger. Only after the construction of the temples do we find noticeable differences in the characters, and since the temples are merely the product of the chivalric ideology, we conclude that chivalry, which should shape the young knights into honorable heroes, only serves to destroy them. They cannot forsake their love: a battle must ensue, and one must rise victorious.

In part chivalry destroys them because it has no proper answer for knights of equal stature and worth. Earlier in the tale, Theseus defeats Creon because Creon is corrupt and unjust. In few romances do we find warring knights of equal military prowess and moral worth. In Chrétien’s Yvain the title character and the impeccable Gawain unknowingly joust one another, but eventually they reveal their identities and quickly end the fight. In the Knight’s Tale such an easy solution cannot be obtained for both knights have agreed to enter the tournament. Neither can we determine which Theban knight rightfully deserves to win the hand of Emelye based on moral grounds. Not until they enter the temples of the gods do Palamon and Arcite begin to have notably different dispositions. The narrator goes to great lengths describing the paintings and designs in the temples, and only when the knights are surrounded in these images do they begin to speak separate languages of love or war; the languages that are solicited by the spaces they inhabit. Therefore the decision to patronize Venus or Mars is not an externalization of an inner disposition. Rather, their surroundings interpellate, to use an Althusserian term, the two knights into their resulting selves.
Palamon, had he found himself in the temple of Mars, would have prayed the same prayer as Arcite.

The Knight’s Tale cannot be a quaint exemplum praising the triumph of love over violence when we must question if the actors involved had any concrete rationale for the temples they chose and the people they became as a result. Moreover we cannot clearly determine which of the two temples is the objectively best option. “In both temples, the emphasis has been upon frustration,” and the devotees of love just like the devotees of war come to a “dreadful end” (Gaylord 181-2). Even Theseus notices the violent nature of love when he finds the Theban knights in the grove fighting “up to the ankle...in hir blood” (1660):

Se how they blede! Be they noght wel arrayed?
Thus hath hir lord, the god of love, ypayed
Hir wages and hir fees for his servyse! (1801-3)

Love and war, though represented separately in the form of the gods, overlap and intertwine in a chivalric world. Nonetheless the young knights must come to a resolution; chivalry demands a winner, for only one of the knights can get the girl. As Theseus says: “Ye woot yourself she may nat wedden two / Atones, though ye lighten everemo” (1835-6).

Mars and Venus alone cannot resolve the affair of Palamon and Arcite despite being manifestations of chivalry. In short chivalry says love and war are all one needs; from love and war come justice and honor. However, when cracks form in that ideology, as in the case with the equal Theban knights, another force rises and brings resolution. Often this power is harsh and malevolent, and the Knight personifies it in the god Saturn. Listen to Saturn’s description of himself:

Myn is the drenchyng in the see so wan;
Myn is the prison in the derke cote;
Myn is the stranglyng and hangyng by the throte,
The murmure and the cherles rebellnyng,
The groynynge, and the prysee empoysyonyng;...
Myn is the ruyne of the hye halles,
The fallynge of the toures and of the walles
Upon the mynour or the carpenter.
I slow Sampson, shakynge the pilers;
And myne be the maladies coldes,
The derke tresons, and the castes olde;
My looking is the fader of pestilence. (2456-2469)

Here is a force described in nearly antithetical terms to what we have seen of chivalry. Nothing civilized or orderly prevails in the actions of Saturn. Strangling, hanging, death, destruction, and pestilence embody his ways. But in the midst of these horrible events, Saturn describes himself as an agent of “pleyn correccioun” (2461). Arbitrariness and wickedness may typify Saturn's actions, but they are capable of a resolution that chivalry cannot achieve. Perhaps the truly horrible consideration is that the very nature of chivalry invites this sort of intrusion and wicked corrective. Love and war and the unrestrained desire for honor stage the equal Theban knights in such a way that only a ruthless arbitration can settle the dispute.

Critics such as Lee Patterson and Alan Gaylord also read the intervention of Saturn as the direct outcome of the knights and their interaction with Venus and Mars. Both critics hold, however, that the savagery of the Theban knights and their unbridled passions lead them to the cold and arbitrary resolution Saturn represents (Patterson 201). Theseus, they claim, stands opposed to the knights as a model character of reason, moderation, and moral uprightness (Gaylord 183). While Theseus may actually possess these qualities, the young knights are not the embodiment of “aboriginal Theban ferocity” as Patterson would have us believe (201). The only civilizing action that Theseus performs in the tale is the institution of the tournament when Palamon and Arcite allow their passion for Emelye and their desire for honor to erupt outside the controlled community. Compared to many examples of literary knighthood, however, this infraction is a minor one. In romance literature we often find knights battling one another without any spectators or judge. Unlike what critic William Woods would have us believe, Palamon and Arcite are in no need of a “progressive assimilation to chivalry” (288). If the Theban knights are faulted in any way, it is a result of being subjected too deeply by the chivalric discourse rather than not being chivalric enough. From the first glance at Emelye to the final confrontation at the tournament, the actions of the Theban knights seem scripted directly from the romances of the day. Saturn then is not the result of the knights acting in opposition to chivalry, rationality, or Theseus; rather Saturn is the necessary unchivalric closure to the very tournament that Theseus, endowed with both chivalry and rationality, imposes upon the knights.
In order to fully understand how this divine or astrological aspect of the tale relates to the chivalric breakdown found therein, we must turn to Chaucer and his narrator, the Knight. In a departure from his source text of Boccaccio’s *Teseida*, Chaucer adds the god Saturn to the tale and makes the god responsible for the resolution of the tournament. In the *Teseida* Venus and Mars work out their own differences, devising the death of Arcite without any help from an outside source (Gaylord 176). Chaucer allows his knightly narrator to notice something new and to enrich his tale with something that no one has previously taken into account. Likewise, in the fictive realm of the tale, the characters are also blind to the presence of Saturn. The Knight includes Saturn for a very specific reason, one that speaks to his own view of chivalry and of his world.

Subsumed in the ideology of the day, Palamon and Arcite follow its demands, but chivalry cannot give them the happy ending most medieval romances promise. The polarities of chivalry—love and war, justice and violence, honor and humility—are incapable of defining and guiding human experience in a satisfactory way. The Knight, recognizing this insufficiency, makes an important addition to Boccaccio’s *Teseida* and names the nameless, corrupt, and disheartening outcomes that chivalry so often forces. Searching for a signifier, he calls it Saturn, but even with a name the results of chivalry are still unsatisfactory. Saturn is awful and cruel. Hence, after the tournament the onlookers are left in despair, confused and questioning:

...Alas, the pite that was ther,
Cracchynge of chekes, rentynge eek of heer.
“Why woldestow be deed,” thise wommen crye,
“And haddest gold ynoough, and Emelye?” (2833-6)

No one can understand how the death of Arcite could have taken place. He was victorious in the tournament, possessed riches, and won the hand of Emelye. How could such a knight die? It does not make sense, and the tale offers no easy answers, just as there were no easy answers to the historical problems and tragedies of Chaucer’s day.

The Knight shows us that chivalry cannot always reward its devotees for their pursuits of victory, love, and honor. Both along the fringes and in the central cracks of chivalry, the only filler is unjustified, irrational violence and horror that brings a bitter resolution. Looking over history we find instances when the chivalric view of the world provided insufficient rationale for events. Saturn, then, is the “cherles rebellyng” against the aristocracy in the peasants revolt of 1381; Saturn is the recapture of the holy land by Islamic armies; Saturn is the “pestilence” that takes almost half of England’s population in the Black Death; Saturn is everything gone wrong, everything without a rational explanation. The peasants revolt, the failed crusades, the plague, the senseless death of a young tourneying knight: in these cracks of the chivalric ideal an unnamed force reigned. The Knight personifies it as Saturn, the intimate other of the Middle Ages blindly produced by the very ideology of chivalry itself.

Many critics have viewed Theseus’ speech as the harmonizing explanation of the uncontrollable and irrational actions of Saturn, but close reading shows us that Theseus’ First Mover speech does not offer a satisfying solution to the problem. Theseus does not address and redress the insufficiencies of chivalry. Rather his speech rhetorically uses that ideology to produce a political outcome that will ensure the continuation of his own power. Many readers want to connect Theseus’s speech with that of his father Egeus, but we find that Egeus’s speech is much more cyclical than that of Theseus. The old father describes the “worldes transmutacioni” (2839); he has seen “chaunge both up and down” (2840) and relates people to “pilgrymes, passyngye to and fro” (2848). Theseus, on the other hand, views life in degrees with everything tending toward a determined end. Trees die, rocks erode, and rivers run dry. Humans have only a limited number of days, and then they will be gone. There is a certain urgency of now in his speech that is not present in the cyclical worldview of Egeus. Of course, this urgency serves Theseus’ political purpose. He wants the marriage of Palamon and Emelye to happen now in order to secure Palamon’s “contrees alliaunce, / And have fully of Thebans obeiaunce” (2973-4). We saw the same urgency in the young lovers as they battle in the grove and the same urgency in Theseus when he decides upon a tournament as the best resolution. Urgency led to previous problems in the tale, but Theseus is not concerned with solving them. Theseus is too enveloped and subjected by chivalry to explain the unexpected death of Arcite in terms outside of that discourse. He is blind to Saturn and incapable of seeing the problematic nature of the ideology that keeps him in power.

If we do not read Theseus’s speech as a fitting conclusion then what do we make of the tale as a whole, especially in relation to its narrator the Knight and to Chaucer himself? Geoffrey Chaucer, serving at one period in his life as clerk of the king’s works and residing in London, would have experienced first-hand the chivalric and tournament lifestyle of his day. He not only served in Edward III’s army in 1359
when he was captured by the French and later ransomed, but in 1390 he also built the wooden stands at Smithfield for the most popular English tournament in the late 14th century (Brewer 174). Chaucer as servant of the court was surely no stranger to the intricacies of the chivalric lifestyle. But is the Knight’s Tale a carefully plotted critique of the dominant ideology of the day? Coming from the merchant upper-middle class of London was he in a position to see the problematic elements of the tournament and was he exposing them in the Canterbury Tales? Chaucer was often critical of his society; giving examples of his criticism of the church in the General Prologue would belabor the point. However, we must also take into account that Chaucer benefited from the chivalric, aristocratic culture of his time. He served the court nearly all of his life, and nearly all of his best friends and patrons, John of Gaunt for instance, were members of or closely associated with the aristocracy. That Chaucer would write a scathing critique of the very lifestyle that defines much of himself and his peers seems unlikely.

We must also consider that Chaucer meditates this tale through the Knight. Apart from the mostly refuted arguments of a few critics like Terry Jones, we have little reason to hold less than a respectable view of the Knight. While Chaucer does not lead us to believe he is flawless or ideal—“bismotered” garments serve to refute any overly pristine image we may have of the Knight—this character is still respectable and honorable. With such an image of the Knight, we can read the tale as his own realization of chivalry’s limitations. Having much experience with tournaments and battles, the Knight surely would have seen instances in his life where the ideals of chivalry broke down. Participating in crusades that were often as horrific as the description of Saturn, he must have been keenly aware of the unexpected turns that life can take even inside the highly ordered ideology of chivalry. The Knight’s use of a tournament to offer careful commentary on chivalry does not seem surprising for he participated in them on numerous occasions:

At mortal batailles hadde he been fiftene,
And foughthen for our feith at Tramissene
In listes thryses, and ay slayn his foo. (GP 61-3)

The Knight himself has always been victorious, but this description does not suggest that the Knight has never experienced trauma or hardship. On the contrary, the long catalog of crusades and wars serves to give a tiring picture of his activity. Although he is a “verry perfyt gentil knight,” he is also a man who has seen much of the world and the troubles therein. In light of this experience, his tale is an appropriate and poignant story, one in which honor and virtue are praised but also one in which a happy ending comes at an unexplainably heart wrenching price. Palamon and Arcite must suffer alienation from one another because of the demands of chivalry and one must die because of their wholehearted commitment to the chivalric lifestyle.

Despite the problematic nature of chivalry, a tournament that destroys friendship, love, and life, and a ruler who uses all of his persuasive abilities to remain in power, there can still be resolution and happiness for a price. Palamon and Emelye live happily ever after. The Knight’s Tale then is neither a stereotypical romance preaching that love is the greatest virtue nor a biting exposé of the insufficiencies of the chivalric ideology. Rather it is the product of a man who knows life’s evils as well as its joys and expresses them in one of the most enduring ways available to him—in the telling of a tale.

Works Cited
History, Subjectivity, and the Subaltern in Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*.
Nicholas Lauer

On the fiftieth anniversary of India’s independence in 1997 perhaps more than a few found it ironic that the Booker Prize, the prestigious British literary award, went to an Indian writer. Most critics unreservedly agree, however, that Arundhati Roy’s novel *The God of Small Things* deserved the honor. With language that blurs the lines between poetry and prose, Roy’s novel tells the story of two-egg twins, Estha and Rahel, separated at the age of seven and returning twenty seven years later to the house of their childhood in southern India. The incidents leading to their separation—the accidental death of their half-English cousin Sophie Mol and the calculated killing of the untouchable Velutha—along with all the details and small things that lead to their family’s demise are interwoven into the narrative of the twins’ reunion. “It was a time when the unthinkable became thinkable,” the narrator explains, “and the impossible really happened” (31). The purpose of this paper is to explore the oppressive power of a singular elite historical narrative that leads to such a possible impossibility. The novel demonstrates the importance of transgressive minority histories in the face of a traditional, oppressive History, but the text also problematizes the efficacy of transgressive histories in empowering or liberating the subaltern or marginalized figure.

Postcolonial theorists have advocated the re-telling of history in a way that grants importance and privilege to previously excluded, silenced, and marginalized groups. History and historical texts form an unseparable part of the discursive production of the colonial subject. Edward Said, in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), shows how Western discourses created the Orient in the mind of the West. Following the work of French theorist Michel Foucault, Said invariably sees a relationship between knowledge and power. Hence, Orientalism, in words of Said, is “a discourse...by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (3). Historical narratives play one role among many cultural and social texts in the process of European construction and colonization of the Orient. Traditional Western views of history see the past as progressively heading in a single direction toward the present. A colonized people construed as uncivilized, untrustworthy, and un-Christian, combined with the European conception of history as a progressive train of events, led to the justification of colonization and the inscription of the colonized with European ideas and ideals. But as Dipesh Chakrabarty in his work *Provincializing Europe* keenly points out, “the European colonizer of the nineteenth century both preached this Enlightenment humanism at the colonized and at the same time denied it in practice” (3). The narratives of European history casted the colonizer as the hero come to rescue the natives from backward cultural practices and rude forms of society, while the very structure of their historical thought demanded that this be the case. Chakrabarty explains:

> Historicism enabled European domination of the world in the nineteenth century.
> Crudely, one might say that it was one important form that the ideology of progress or ‘development’ took from the nineteenth century on. (7)
By “historicism” Chakrabarty means “the idea of development and the assumption that a certain amount of time elapses in the very process of development” (23). Historicism “takes its object of investigation to be internally unified, and sees it as something developing over time” (23). Hence, both what historical narratives said and how they were structured contributed to the colonization and subjectification of the “non-Western” peoples.

Despite the efforts of nineteenth century colonizers to produce a historical narrative that illustrated the so-called progressive effects of Western education, socialization, and civilisation of the non-western Other, recent intellectual trends deny the existence of a progressive ‘universal human history’ (Chakrabarty 3). The work of Michel Foucault has called into question any type of teleological or progressive historical narrative. Rather than picturing history as a timeline that follows a series of causes and effects toward the ever improving present, Foucault offers the metaphor of history as archeology, in which layers of the past succeed one another but not necessarily. Likewise, while problematizing progressive history, poststructural theorists have called into question any grand historical narrative that proposes a complete and closed explanation of the past and present. Recognizing the embeddedness of all historical narratives, the incapability of telling a ‘disinterested’ story, and the problematic nature of language itself to represent things ‘as they really are,’ recent trends in scholarship value a plurality of perspectives instead of a single History. We might add, in light of the poststructuralist critique of history, that the opposition between literature and history becomes uncertain. Much like literary texts, historical narratives are no longer naively viewed as completely unified, coherent, and capable of ascertaining the Truth (Green and Bhan 112).

Following these developments, the project of the postcolonial critic is not to tell a different, more truthful history, but rather to present a multiplicity of histories. The ever varied embeddedness and situational differences among people groups calls for an equally varied, albeit disciplinarily rigorous, approach to past events. Yet within the production of a plurality of historical narratives, Chakrabarty sees a commonality among postcolonial critics:

However multiple the loci of Europe and however varied the colonialisms are, the problem of getting beyond Eurocentric histories remains a shared problem across geographical boundaries. (17)

We see this push not only in postcolonial countries such as India, but even in the United States. What in the 1970's was called “history from below,” and in the eighties became known as “minority histories” was a push toward representing the experiences of a plurality of groups (97). Histories about marginalized, forgotten, or silenced sections of society, such as women, gays, lesbians, or African-Americans, are becoming part of what was once a monolithic representation of the past. In India, the Subaltern Studies group sought “to make the subaltern the sovereign subject of history, to listen to their voices, to take their experience and thought (and not just their material circumstances) seriously” (102). Again keep in mind that the importance for the re-telling of histories and the re-crafting of narratives is not just to have the reassurance of some sort of metaphysically truer history. We must realize, as Said’s Orientalism shows, that histories which dominate the intellectual landscape have tangible material effects. Knowledge is power, and the histories or stories we tell determine the subjects we become.

The God of Small Things could be read as an act of retelling history. Set in post-independence India, but in scope very private or personal, the novel presents an episode from the margins, relating the events leading to one family’s unravelling and destruction. The God of Small Things grants importance and validity to the story of women, untouchables, and children: three of history’s most forgotten or silenced groups. Moreover, following post-structuralist and postcolonial trends in history, we find neither linearity nor progressivity in The God of Small Things. The novel discards a straightforward approach to storytelling. The past and present become so intertwined that one loses track not only of the sequence of past events, but also of the duration and sequence of the present. From the moment Rahel returns to the Ayemenem house, episodes from her childhood seemingly invade the narrative in no particular order. A chaos of recollections constantly invites the reader to revisit previous anecdotes, to reinterpret their significance, and to reconstruct “the bleached bones of a story” (32). As Julie Mullaneay suggests in her readers guide, Roy’s novel is much like an archaeological tell; we must dig down to see what the story holds (43). Once we begin to uncover the various layers, we find that the episodes of the novel overlap and interconnect. Of the numerous imagistic refrains connecting flashbacks and anecdotes, the mention of a “sourmetal smell” shows us how linearity and the factual mediation of a story are questioned in the novel. In the first chapter, on the bus after Sophie Mol’s funeral “Rahel could smell the sheaf of bus tickets and the sourness of the steel bus rails on the conductor’s hands” (10). Near the end of the novel, when the police brutalize and arrest Velutha, the onlooking twins notice “the handcuffs. / Cold. / With the sourmetal smell. Like steel bus rails and the bus conductor’s hands from holding them” (294). Velutha’s arrest,
although described toward the end of the novel, occurs chronologically before the bus ride. Yet the later sensory image of the steel bus rail smell is used to describe and define the earlier event. This small instance highlights the fact that the totality of our experience shapes the way we remember our past and tell our own histories. The problematic mediation of memory and history could be summarized by an episode when Rahel is middle aged and living in upstate New York. While riding on a train she encounters a disturbingly haggard woman. “Memory,” we are told, “was that woman on the train. Insane in the way she sifted through the dark things in a closet and emerged with the most unlikely ones—a fleeting look, a feeling...Quite sane in the way she left huge tracts of darkness veiled. Unremembered” (69-70). Our memory of the past, and by implication the narratives we construct about the past, are never complete or completely factual. Like the shape of Roy’s novel, “huge tracts of darkness” remain obscured and defining features often work without respect to chronology.

In searching for a starting point to define the tragic state of the twins and the fallout of the family—a simple cause and effect that can explain the present—the narrator questions the easiest answer: “to say that it all began when Sophie Mol came to Ayemenem is only one way of looking at it” (32). Arguing past the key markers of any traditional historical narrative—“before the Marxists came. Before the British took Malabar, before the Dutch Ascendancy, before Vasco da Gama arrived”—Roy situates the story in an ahistorical, mythical eon, “in the days when the Love Laws were made. The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (33). But again the text blurs what exactly is past and what it present. In this initial description of the “Love Laws” they seem to have been forged in a time gone by, yet later when Ammu, the twins’ mother, and Velutha try to trangress the boundaries of what society deems acceptable by having a cross-caste love affair, history will come “to re-wrap them in its old, scarred pelt and drag them back to where they really lived. Where the love laws lay down who should be loved and how. And how much” (168). History, the Love Laws, and the present are inextricable bound together. Although we cannot put an exact date to the Love Laws, they still wield an extraordinary amount of power. In fact their chronology is not the important factor. The Love Laws and History, regardless of their pinpointable facted-ness, are still discourses that function as violent and marginalizing forces in the present.

History functions in the novel, not just as a referent to the past, but as an agent which controls lives and determines outcomes. When Ammu and Velutha first consider a sexual relationship the narrator tells us that “Madness slunk in through a chink in History” (204). Somehow Ammu and Velutha slip from History’s domination for a brief instant and see “Things that had been out of bounds so far, obscured by history’s blinkers” (168). Perhaps hinting at Foucault, the “madness” of Ammu and Velutha is defined as such only because it runs contrary to the controlling discourse of history: history that makes untouchables walk backwards and brush away their footsteps, history that makes Syrian Christians only marry and love other Syrian Christians, and history that reserves the place for a "Man’s Needs" but not for women or untouchables. History controls what they see, how they see it, and most importantly, how they see themselves.

The act of seeing beyond history’s blinkers does not come without its consequences. After the family finds out about Ammu’s relationship with Velutha, History sends its “henchmen...to square the books and collect the dues from those who broke its laws” (292). On the back porch of what the twins call the “History House,” the police officers who find Velutha beat him nearly beyond recognition, in “a clinical demonstration...of human nature’s pursuit of ascendancy. Structure. Order. Complete monopoly. It was human history, masquerading as God’s Purpose” (292-3). Velutha steps outside what history defines as proper for him as an Untouchable, but History retains its control through violence. This is “History in live performance” (293), showing us that our systems of knowledge and our ways of ordering the world have direct implications on our view of self and our material actions.

Velutha and Ammu would pay for their “madness” and become "a history lesson for future offenders" (318); furthermore, the re-Structuring act of History would not only destroy their own lives but also the lives of the twins. Estha and Rahel witness the violent encounter at the History House, and “on the day History picked to square its books, Estha would keep the receipt for the dues that Velutha paid” (190). The scene haunts both Estha and Rahel throughout their lives. Later in life while living in upstate New York, Rahel constantly remembers the sourmetal smell that characterizes Velutha’s death. Likewise, Estha, living with his father in Calcutta, is described as “steeped in the smell of old roses, blooded on memories of a broken man” (14). Estha and Rahel must hold the “receipt” of History’s violent control, but History has an equal grip on their lives as well.

The reason for the twins uncurable haunted-ness, and psychological despair, is also a historical one. The conflict between private and public history is one of the primary tensions that causes the psychological and social dysfunction of the twins. As Estha and Rahel age and move further away from the
incidents of their childhood they find themselves affected in different but comparable ways: “in the absence of words. And in the emptiness in eyes,” respectively (54). The grown Estha does not speak. As a defense against the horrible, guilt-ridden memories of his childhood, he ceases the use of language and allows silence to strip “his thoughts of the words that described them,” leaving them “pared and naked. Unspeakable. Numb” (13). Serving as an “inky tranquilizer on his past,” Estha’s silence becomes an act of self-preservation. We might conjecture that such self-preservation is necessary because he is separated from his sister. Having been returned to his father shortly after the death of Sophie Mol and Velutha, Estha no longer has his sister with which to share his thoughts. He cannot bear the memories alone and therefore takes refuge in a language-less state of forgetfulness and silence.

Yet why can Estha not share these feelings of guilt and abandonment with his new family members in Calcutta? Rahel’s own psychological aftermath will help us uncover this secret. Her marriage relationship in the United States is irreparably damaged when her American husband, Larry McCaslin cannot understand the look in her eyes when they have sex. He places it “somewhere between indifference and despair” (20). However, we are told that the look in Rahel’s eyes is “not despair at all, but a sort of enforced optimism.” Her husband’s misunderstanding of her eyes comes from a misunderstanding about her past:

He didn’t know that in some places, like the country that Rahel came from, various kinds of despair competed for primacy. And that personal despair could never be desperate enough. That something happened when personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine of the... public turmoil of a nation... Because Worse Things had happened. In the country that she came from, poised forever between the terror of war and the horror of peace, Worse Things kept happening. (20).

As Rahel compares the tragedy of her own life against the unrest and terror occurring at the national level, she underestimates the horror and importance of her own private history. “Worse things had happened,” and in light of these things her own story becomes insignificant. How can she accept the gravity of the accidental death of a cousin or the murder of an Untouchable when these incidents happen repeatedly and at magnified proportions in the public sphere? Riots, famines, wars, political upheaval: these tragedies take thousands of lives and ruin thousands of families. Rahel cannot justify personal “indifference and despair” when she comes from a country where widespread suffering occurs daily.

Returning to Estha, we find that his silence, like Rahel’s empty eyes, perhaps results from his inability to treat his own situation with enough gravity to find a healthy outlet for his painful memories. How can a boy grant himself enough self-worth to fully face the horror of his own past when confronted with a national history filled with the horrors of colonization, independence, and post-independence political turmoil? And who will listen to a seven year old boy who feels guilt over a dead Untouchable when Worse Things keep happening? Estha’s fear to speak results in absolute silence.

The twins uncle, Chacko, brings the distraught state of Indian history to the fore in his discussion of the History House. Chacko gives the twins a metaphor of history as “an old house at night. With all the lamps lit. And ancestors whispering inside” (51). One must enter this house in order to understand history; one must “listen to what they’re saying. And look at the books and the pictures on the wall. And smell the smells.” Entering the house, however, is an impossible task. Because of the domination of colonialism, because of the colonizer’s systematic inscription of the Indian people, one can only see shadows and hear indecipherable whispers. Chacko continues in his “Reading Aloud voice”:

Our minds have been invaded by a war. A war that we have won and lost. The very worst sort of war. A war that captures dreams and re-dreams them. A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves... We belong nowhere. We sail unanchored on troubled seas. We may never be allowed ashore. Our sorrows will never be sad enough. Our joys never happy enough. Our dreams never big enough. Our lives never important enough. To matter. (52)

Chacko seems to express a similar problem that confronts Rahel and Estha’s relation to their pasts in light of public history. Chacko feels insignificant, unimportant, and lost. However, for Chacko, a highly educated, middle-class male, the conflict is not one between a public and private history. Note the use of words such as “we” and “our”; Chacko universalizes the problem of Indian people, he gathers them under one narrative and gives a definite source of their problem. Their history as colonial subjects erases their sense of past, steals their dreams, and leaves them with “unanchored” senses of self. If only we could get inside our lost history, Chacko seems to say, then we would recapture our dreams and find our true identity. Since all Indians suffer the inaccessibility of the History House, they all suffer alike.
The past, in Chacko’s estimation, is a quaint place with “lamps lit” and “whispering ancestors,” a place of warmth and community. The great tragedy is the inability to return, to hear, to have continuity with this history. Conversely, the tragedy confronting the twins is their inability to deconnect from the past. Disproving Chacko’s opinions on the inaccessibility of history, the inability to see, hear, and smell history, the twins indeed learn “History’s smell. Like old roses on a breeze”; they eventually see and hear how “history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws” (54). History shatters Chacko’s metaphor of the whispering ancestors by sending its “henchmen” to perform violence with “economy, not frenzy. Efficiency, not anarchy. Responsibility, not hysteria” (293). As cool and calculated as any colonizer, with “Structure” and “Order” and an “urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify” (292), History proves the opposite of Chacko’s imagination: rather than the twins inability to break into the prison that holds history forever captive, it is their inability to withstand history’s violent eruption into the present that causes the most pain and anguish.

Chacko’s universalizing tendency to consider all Indians detached from their (true, liberating) history fails to acknowledge the injustices and terrors that History still perpetrates on the marginalized members of society. Chacko, in his comfortable position as Oxford graduate and pickle factory owner, has the luxury to theorize about a lost, irrecoverable master history. He can also joke about writing a family biography that the family “would have to pay him not to publish” (38). He rightly sees himself as above history’s oppressive power. Unlike the twins and the untouchable Velutha, he occupies a privileged position from which he can bemoan the sad state of India’s history without truly feeling its sting. When Chacko claims that “Our lives [are] never important enough. To matter,” he is simply furthering the discourse of a master history, that Worse Things can and do happen, and that any single person’s life, such as Estha’s or Rahel’s, is never important enough to matter. Chacko’s tone in this passage does sound a cry for justice; it takes the form of a sigh, a blind, romanticized view of history.

*The God of Small Things* shows us, through the story of Velutha and Ammu, how History, more than just a story about the past, is a power structure in the present: it defines who we are, how we must act, and what happens when one attempts to subvert this control. In addition, through Rahel and Estha, we discover how master Historical narratives suppress private histories and reinforce silence and marginalization, hence enacting further injustice against subaltern groups. As the novel’s epigraph from John Berger, reads, “Never again will a single story be told as though it’s the only one.” Following this declaration, *The God of Small Things* rallies against the single silencing narrative of a master history and attempts to reconstitute the story of the twins in a subversive or transgressive act of a minority or subaltern narrative. We might read all four of the above characters as subaltern figures, especially Rahel and Estha. I use the word “subaltern” here as postcolonial critics tend to use the term: as the lowest of the low, beneath otherness, incapable of voicing their own position, incapable of becoming a subject-agent. As Gayatri Spivak says, “in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak” (83). Due to their traumatic experiences as children and the oppressive force of master histories, Rahel and Estha are incapable of expressing their own history, of becoming central “sovereign subjects” of their own stories, and of recognizing themselves as the sinned against. There are “a pair of actors trapped in a recondite play with no hint of plot or narrative” (182). Speaking of their guilt and sense of self-worthlessness, the narrator tells us that for Rahel and Estha “There was nowhere to lay it down. It wasn’t theirs to give away. It would have to be held. Carefully and forever” (182).

Much like the purpose of the Subaltern Group in India, we could read Roy’s novel as an act “to make the subaltern the sovereign subject of history, to listen to their voices, to take their experience and thought (and not just their material circumstances) seriously” (Charabarty 102). This novel allows us to take the perspective and experiences of the twins seriously and elicits compassion from the audience. Granting this small story importance can have positive repercussions. Again we can turn to Foucault on this point:

> to make visible the unseen can also mean a change of level, addressing oneself to a layer of material which had hitherto had no pertinence for history and which had not been recognized as having any moral, aesthetic or historical value. (qtd. in Spivak 80-1)

In making the story visible we can understand the hurt the twins have experienced and we can desire for them a way to experience restoration or liberation from their current state. The compassionate response of the reader, then, could be taken for the success of the novel.

Yet *The God of Small Things* opens with the twins as hopeless in the face of history, and upon exiting the narrative, the reader equally leaves the twins in a state of hopelessness. To what avail, then, has this story been told? We have retraced the steps of their story, we have seen where manipulation and power outside of their control dictated their lives, yet our knowledge of the story does not constitute the release of
Estha and Rahel from their suffering. Their story has been told, the silence broken, but justice and healing remain unattainable. It is a bleak picture indeed. A third party re-telling of the personal history is not a sufficient enough event to empower the disenfranchised and the trangressed-against. It seems they must tell the story themselves in order to constitute their own selves and realize their own innocence.

But this leads us to a paradox. How can the powerless empower her/his self? How can one without a voice speak? *The God Small Things* transgresses the master historical narrative, but will this transgression bring empowerment or a renewed sense of self? If we consider the other acts of transgression in the novel than we might be inclined to answer “no.” Ammu and Velutha’s sexual relationship only ends in destruction, and the twins final act of trangression, their incestual relationship, does not free them either. They find “not happiness, but hideous grief” (311). If we look closely at both sexual encounters we find that they immediately relapse into the past; the transgressions cannot carry the involved parties across or out of the seemingly transcending and undeniably oppressive Love Laws held in place by master Historical narratives. They are trangressions that do not transgress.

First, let us consider Rahel and Estha. In breaking the strict social taboo against incest, they “share...hideous grief” and the narrator tells us that there is not much to say but that they broke the love laws once again. The narrative then turns to the dilapidated pickle factory and the remains of the barn owl in one of empty vats. The twins’ grief along with the image of the abandoned factory and dead bird do not give us a positive outlook on the transgression described in the previous lines. This scene marks the chronological end of the novel, but the narration does not stop. Immediately plunging back into the past, we are taken back to Sophie Mol’s question about dead birds and the events of her arrival, leaving Estha and Rahel alone in their grief. The eluminating moment for the middle-aged twins is obscured in the all too present past. Even with their attempt to reunify with one another, they are not able to overcome the story that has ruined their lives.

Seemingly, however, the novel does end on a hopeful note. The final lines of the novel describe Ammu and Velutha’s parting after their first night together:

She kissed his closed eyes and stood up. Velutha with his back against the mangosteen tree watched her walk away. She had a dry rose in her hair.

She turned to say it once again: “Naaley.”

Tomorrow. (321)

The presence of a dry, hence old, rose in this scene works chronologically as a foreshadowing, but textually as a recalling; this foreshadowing/recalling points to the moment of Velutha’s death and the oft repeated line concerning his murder “like old roses on a breeze,” which we are told is “History’s smell.” The rose casts a shadow upon this transgressive scene reminding readers of the tragedy that is to come. Likewise, the final word of the novel vaguely points toward that which is “to come”: “Tomorrow.” This word spoken in a moment of hope and uncertainty on the heels of trangression is highly ironic. As readers we know that tomorrow holds neither hope nor liberation for either Ammu or Velutha. Textually the concluding Tomorrow, in an act of circularity, pulls us back into the midst of the text when history resumes its complete monopoly by murdering Velutha.

The text itself cannot find an ending point, and there is no exit from the narrative. The chronological ending—Rahel and Estha’s incest—is seemlessly and intricately tied to a previous moment; and the textual ending—Ammu and Velutha’s affair—points on numerous levels to the preceding events. The specific narrative Roy presents cannot overcome its own boundaries. In her attempt to recast a history and a past, in her writing of a singular private story, Roy still is left with a closed circle and a story which does not liberate those involved: a transgressive history that cannot transgress, cross, pass over, or exceed the violent and subjectifying nature of all representation.

Just as their transgressions do not carry them out of History’s discursive power, so also the act of telling a story for the subaltern cannot gift that person with an unbiased or authentic sense of self and empowerment. Rahel and Estha have no voice. In the act of writing a novel with such characters, Roy is attempting, in light of the above discussion, to bring to the fore ways in which historical discourses continually silence the subaltern. The circular nature of the text is representative of the aporetic nature of the twins’ or the subaltern’s position: they cannot liberate themselves. If the twins or any subaltern could speak then they could begin to construct their own consciousness, but by definition they cannot. The story tries to bring justice to the lives of Rahel and Estha, but it can only represent or impress upon them the story that the author, with authority, creates. In this way the text is also closed, for even though Roy’s novel looks like an archaeology, we must remember that it is equally an architecture, a structure, another cohesive (read constituting or controlling) narrative. Since we are dealing with a piece of fiction, of course,
if we erase the story then we erase or eradicate the characters altogether. So it seems that the conditions of the novel’s possibility become the conditions of its impossibility. If the twins achieved liberation in or through the text, then it would not evoke a pity response from the audience. Turning to “actual” cases of subalternity, if we erase historical narratives about subaltern groups do they not likewise disappear into the silence of the margins? So the difficulty remains the same whether we are dealing with fiction or history. The act of representation is fraught with difficulties.

*The God of Small Things* seems to point to a similar problem in dealing with the subaltern that Gayatri Spivak delineates in her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” While representing the subaltern and granting “consciousness” is necessary, this cannot not occur without its own epistemic violence:

We should...welcome all the information retrieval in these silenced areas that is taking place in anthropology, political science, history and sociology. Yet the assumption and construction of a consciousness or subject sustains such work and will, in the long run, cohere with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learing and civilization. And the subaltern...will be as mute as ever.

(90)

However, given this difficulty with the human sciences and representation, the intellectual’s response should not be paralysis. As Spivak says earlier in the essay, “the intellectual’s solution is not to abstain from representation” (80). What then do we do? It seems that all acts of narrative are helpful and harmful, just as all acts of identification are enabling and debilitating. We find a clear example in the novel of this problematic in the figure of the kathakali dancer. His self is constructed by the story he tells:

It is his color and his light. It is the vessel into which he pours himself. It gives him shape. Structure. It harnesses him. It contains him. His Love. His Madness. His Hope. His Infinnate Joy. Ironically, his struggle is the reverse of an actor’s struggle—he strives not to enter a part but to escape it. But this is what he cannot do. In his abject defeat lies his supreme triumph. (220)

The great stories of the kathakali define who he is, and they enable his life, and give him hope and joy. Yet at the same time he cannot exist outside of this shape, and in the face of globalism and a tourist economy, he must become a regional flavor in order to survive. The stories of kathakali give him his pride, but also rip it away from him. He is closed. Likewise, Rahel’s life also has “a size and shape now...Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits have appeared like a team of trolls on their separate horizons” (5). Her life and self has become defined, but this is seen as ominous, like trolls on the horizon, like the power of History to enact violence. Perhaps our only option is to remain open to the Other, not only of the subaltern but also in ourselves. The novel characterizes this openness in the initial chapter when it speaks of the coming monsoon rains that blur boundaries, and again later when the unpredictability of the river causes the fishermen pray. Perhaps this is a start toward the act of openness necessary to ensure that our histories, representationss and self definitions do not close in an act similar to that of death. We have no choice but to represent and categorize, but we must always question how these representations hinder, limit, and enact violence.

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**Works Cited**


