"The Knight's Tale": Against Synthesis

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Summary

Loosely following Bakhtin's lead, this paper points to the successive acts of marginalisation that have over the years led to the standard critic's production of internally consistent and coherent readings of Chaucer's "Knight's Tale", and supplies readings of select passages from the text in an attempt to demonstrate the inherently fractured or heteroglossic nature of this text and, by implication, of all texts.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel skets – deur in breë trekke op Bakhtin te steun – die opeenvolgende handelinge van marginalisering, wat oor die jare gelei het tot die standaard kritikus se produksie van intern konsekwente en samehangende lesings van Chaucer se "Knight's Tale". Dit verskaf lesings van geselekteerde gedeeltes van die teks in 'n poging om die inherent gefragmenteerde of heteroglostiese aard van die teks en, by implikasie, van alle tekste aan te toon.

Critics usually attempt to make sense of what they read, as if literature, unlike life, were meaningful and coherent. The "Knight's Tale", for instance, is generally read as a rational, harmonious, and philosophical document, though much of the evidence in the Tale points the other way. "Man's physical prowess on the field of battle, the control exerted by moral codes over the amatory appetites, the acquisition of virtuous resignation to the will of God", says Paul G. Ruggiers (1965: 54) typically, are the themes that constitute the Tale as an exemplary didactic romance. But such a reading is never quite comfortable as it is unable to accommodate much that is undeniably part of the Tale, as Ruggiers, for one, is aware:

> The problem of the human will and its responsibility, merely hinted at, is supplanted by the gradual depiction of destinal forces controlling the lives of men within the plan of Providence and creating that delicate philosophical topic "necessity" which seems at once both to tantalize and to fatigue the mind of the poet.
>
> (Ruggiers 1965: 151)

The plain fact is that no single reading will fit the entire text; and the pleasant ascription of fatigue to the poet's mind should not be allowed to obscure that fact. Eventually many critics admit awkwardness in the face of any Chaucer text. J.A. Burrow, for instance, agrees that the stories in the *Canterbury Tales* exemplify "some truth or concept concerning human life and conduct" (1971: 82), but finds it typical of Chaucer to work so elusively within the exemplary mode that it is impossible to determine what any story means (1971: 90).

Although he does not notice the orderliness with which Chaucer deploys slices of time (see Appendix), and writes instead of "random references to

generous periods of time", Charles Muscatine (1950: 916) perceives the Tale
as being massively symmetrical. From this perception he derives the judge-
ment that "the poem may seem to have a coherence and fullness of meaning
which the traditional critics have hardly touched upon" (1950: 911), but he
cannily describes this "coherence" in such a way as to accommodate
incoherence. The Tale, he says, is organised

> to a complex design expressing the nature of the noble life .... Order, which
> characterises the framework of the poem, is also the heart of its meaning ... life's
> pattern is itself a reflection, or better, a reproduction of the order of the universe.
> And what gives this conception of life its perspective, its depth and seriousness,
> is its constant awareness of a formidable antagonistic element – chaos, disorder
> – which in life is an ever-threatening possibility, even in the moments of
> supremest assuredness, and which in the poem falls across the pattern of order,
> being clearly exemplified in the erratic reversals of the poem's plot, and deeply
> embedded in the poem's texture.
>
> (Muscatine 1950: 920)

The statement represents a subjective judgement of the relative weight of the
orderly and the disorderly elements in the poem. But a blink of the eye, a
moment of inattention, and Muscatine might seem to be saying that the
poem is disorderly. He must therefore repeat his point, and blind us with
rhetoric:

> This subsurface insistence on disorder is the poem's crowning complexity, its
> most compelling claim to maturity. We have here no glittering, romantic
> fairy-castle world. The impressive, patterned edifice of the noble life, its dignity
> and richness, its regard for law and decorum, are all bulwarks against the
> ever-threatening forces of chaos, and in constant collision with them.
>
> (Muscatine 1950: 929)

Alfred David agrees with Muscatine initially, and therefore needs to insist
that the style of the Tale is heroic: "To make that order as clear as it is
imposing, Chaucer has projected it upon a brilliant surface and painted it in
a deliberately artificial style" (1976: 85). But he also acknowledges that the
Tale "contains elements which I have ignored up to this point, that cannot be
reduced to pattern or explained away by all of Theseus' philosophy" (1976:
86). These elements are largely "passages written in the lower style, [which]
are a pervasive reminder that what passes for tragedy in the chivalric view of
things can be at times funny, at times nasty" (1976: 87). He attempts to make
sense of this conflict by suggesting that "What the Knight's Tale expresses
most faithfully is not the prevailing order but the nostalgic wish for an order
that might have been once upon a time" (1976: 88). He supports this
suggestion with the statement that "the feudal order [the knight] represents at
its best is threatened by a new class that refuses to keep the place assigned to
it in the great hierarchical chain" (1976: 88). David is suggesting something
like an iconic nature for the Tale. He seems to be suggesting that the
disorderly style of the Tale stands in a one-to-one relation with the break-

down of the rigidities of feudal stratification in Chaucer's day. The notion is theoretically untenable.

Helen Cooper avoids this awkwardness, and attempts to avoid producing a single, paraphrasable meaning in the text: "The insistent relativity of the structuring of the *Canterbury Tales* ... serves to undermine the notion of literature as a vehicle for some fixed and accessible truth ...." (1984: 240). With a glance in the direction of post-structuralism ("The *Canterbury Tales* is one of the clearest examples of the kind of discourse recently described as the interrogative text" (1984: 241)) she argues from her analysis of the structure of the *Canterbury Tales* as a whole to the structure of the "Knight's Tale" in isolation, and finds it to consist of "structural and thematic oppositions" which are "more than ironic" (1984: 74) in intention and effect. "Chaucer works", she says, "to enhance the differences and point them up in every way he can" (1984: 81). But in her view "the perpetual juxtapositions of joy and grief, brilliant colour and darkness" (1984: 105) and the counterpointing of the "use of high style" with a "rougher, more idiomatic use of language" (1984: 105) constitute an "architectonic form" (1984: 93) intended by the author, and lead eventually to a grasp of authorial intention which turns out to be not unlike the statement of meaning she so obviously wishes to avoid: "... grief, death, and the imposition of order on disorder are [the Tale's] dominant motifs" (1984: 95).

Derek Pearsall is alive to these difficulties, and approaches them with great tact in a general statement about the *Canterbury Tales*:

> The characteristic experience of the reader at the end of the best of the tales is not that of satisfaction at the elucidation of a design but that of excitement at a precarious feat completed, in which one's imaginative-energies and powers of discrimination have been fully stretched and examined, and many unexpected vistas opened up. Chaucer is exceptional in the extent to which he will allow his handling of stories to create problems, to ask questions, and to suggest ambiguities that are not easily resolved.
>
> (Pearsall 1985: xiii)

If one attempts to reconcile the non-elucidation of design (is that what Pearsall means?) with the metaphor of "a precarious feat completed", one may conclude that Pearsall has contrived to refer to these issues and to avoid them simultaneously. But Pearsall was a co-editor of Elizabeth Salter's book (1983), and it is possible that he was attempting a gentler and more general version of her bold statement about the "Knight's Tale":

> it comes, in the end, to rest upon conventional moral attitudes. But on the way to that ending, it allows its human beings a temporary freedom to act magnanimously and to speak movingly about their doubt of divine justice and benevolence. The fact that we can feel the power of what they say, and yet remain uncertain of Chaucer's overall intention for his poem's meaning, still recommends the Tale as unusually well endowed with incentives to thought.
>
> (Salter 1983: 180)

Nevertheless, the difference in emphasis from Pearsall's statement to Salter's

is striking. Though both of them may be thought to be saying the same thing, Pearsall seems to defer to the idea that a poem should have a single meaning, a grand design, even if it is "not easily" perceived, whereas Salter rejects the notion that the elements of this poem in particular can be resolved into a single, meaningful design, while preserving her estimate of the great value of the poem. Pearsall is, perhaps unconsciously, subscribing to the Romantic insistence on the "organic unity" of a text; Salter is not.

   Those who produce a single meaning for the Tale do so by marginalising part of the text, a practice which, taken to extremes, amounts to omitting from the reading those elements of the text that jar with the critics' purposes. Salter, on the other hand, notes Chaucer's complexity repeatedly: "It is, however, one thing to predict a possible moral theme for a poem by Chaucer, and another to find it consistently carried through, in terms not only of content, but also of tone" (1983: 128). A Chaucerian poem may not be "a single-toned, unified composition, but one which admits some dissonance to its loose-knit harmonies" (1983: 127). Of course she is right. She could have gone further and said that a Chaucerian poem is *never* a single-toned, unified composition. She believes that critics have been

> reluctant to admit an inability to find answers to all the special problems presented by Chaucer's poetry. And, indeed, [they have] been expert in minimizing, even disguising those problems. Chaucer criticism still deals in the skilful administering of *placebos* to readers [who sense that] not all of [the elements of a work] can or will be dealt with in the logical formal structure of the total work.
>
> (Salter 1983: 121)

Muscatine (1950) is another who criticises the practice of marginalisation, but he does so for his own, special purposes:

> Each [critical approach] disregards important aspects of the tale; together they indicate that it has generally not been dealt with as poetry, that is, as an organization whose fullest meaning is dependent on the interplay of a variety of elements.
>
> (Muscatine 1950: 914)

Muscatine is justifying the fact that he will be concentrating on elements other critics have ignored. It is common cause that New Criticism, the paradigm within which he works, assumes that all the elements of a work are related in a meaningful whole (an assumption that hindsight permits us to see as false), but in practice always selects those elements of a work that would seem to support one another. Muscatine is compelled by his system to marginalise the less heroic passages of the poem (for his reading of the poem as a whole is heroic) by characterising them as the "leavening, balancing element of common sense" (1950: 924). We shall see, later, that they can be variously described, but as "common sense" only if we take the phrase to refer to the many, varied, and sometimes contradictory notions that groups of people have in common about the world, which is not what Muscatine seems to have in mind.

Another method of marginalisation involves the inflation and deflation of different elements of a literary work in order to impose on it a structure that supports a specific interpretation. Thus, David tells us that

> the characters [in the "Knight's Tale"] are kept at a distance so that we continue to view them as types of the qualities they represent. Palamon, Arcite, and Emelye are the human counterparts of Venus, Mars, and Diana, who in turn represent Love, War, and Chastity.
>
> (David 1976: 81)

This falsifies our ordinary experience of reading the Tale. Most readers would find it difficult to distinguish the qualities of Palamon's conduct from Arcite's. Both knights seem equally bellicose and equally in love; Emelye is a shadowy presence in the poem in comparison with the lovers; chastity is never really an issue with which the poem concerns itself; and Diana is no more than a planetary make-weight, in comparison with Venus and Mars. But David has his own purpose to fulfill, and unwittingly distorts the poem to that end. The most extreme form of marginalisation, though, is the attending to a single element of a work so thoroughly as to make the rest of it seem peripheral. This is what I believe D.S. Brewer does to the "Knight's Tale" when he whittles it down to Theseus' Boethian speech, which, he says, "rouses that unique sense of philosophical and aesthetic satisfaction which is the product of true metaphysical poetry.... It seems to be Chaucer's own reply to the problem of evil..." (1953: 93–4). In fact, the speech seems fairly trite when its full context is restored.

In the influential essay on the "Knight's Tale" published in her book *Chaucer and the Making of English Poetry*, P.M. Kean describes the Tale as "a love story [which] forms the pretext for a philosophical poem" (1972: 2), and supplies a single-minded Boethian reading of it. It would be dull to analyse this reading in detail, and I shall instead focus on her insistence that "order is finally achieved" (1972: 25) in the Tale, which forces her to attend closely to its fairy-tale ending and accord it special significance:

> for Chaucer, as for other medieval authors, marriage stands for order and harmony in human life in a fundamental way, both literally and figuratively [and involves] love as a principle of order, working to bring about a new unity in which the problems of the poem are resolved in the final marrige of Palamoun and Emelye.
>
> (Kean 1972: 7 & 28)

Later she qualifies these statements when she notes that this view of marriage is "by no means the only possible point of view in the fourteenth century, as Chaucer himself shows us in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and *Tale* and elsewhere; but it is, nevertheless, not an uncommon one" (1972: 49). Her argument would have been weakened still further if she had noted that marriage in Chaucer (as in Boccaccio and others of Chaucer's models) is as frequently a disaster as it is a triumph, the significance attached to it in a particular instance being chiefly generically determined. The Tale ends, she

says, "with a satisfactory solution to all the problems it has raised" (1972: 48). It might be more accurate to say that the closing passage constitutes a satisfactory cadence to the Tale (if we ignore the generic shift), while resolving none of the fairly important issues raised within it. Salter, for instance, claims that Theseus' speech "protects itself against the charge of being called a patchwork affair" only "by some impressive rhetorical phrasing", and says of the marriage that "the announcement of this long-delayed union prompts relief rather than gratitude: the narrative, like the poem, exhausts itself" (1983: 179).

Kean's attempt to read the poem as a coherent unit leads her into innumerable difficulties, one of which is her need to discount Arcite's role as far as possible. To this purpose she describes him as "a man who, through failure to rule his passions, lays himself open to [the gods'] power" (1972: 40), which is a highly questionable statement, particularly as Palamon behaves no differently from Arcite, but lives and is rewarded. She claims that "from the viewpoint of the philosophical ideas which inform the "Knight's Tale", [Arcite's dying speech], as we have seen, is only part of a whole which, seen whole, has a very different significance" (1972: 38). This could conceivably be said of Arcite's death as an event, but could never be true of his speech, which plainly contradicts the "whole" that Kean produces in the Tale.

Chaucer omits any reference to Arcite from the last thirty lines of the poem, in order to produce his closing cadence. Palamon and Emelye, we are told, live happily ever after "in blisse, in richesse, and in heele" (3102. All line references are to Robinson: 1957), but we are left to remember that Arcite remains "in his colde grave/Allone, withouten any compaignye" (2779). Chaucer's sleight of hand seems rather clumsy in the final couplet of the poem: "Thus endeth Palamon and Emelye./And God save al this faire compaignye! Amen" (3107–8), the formulation of which seems to suggest that this has all along been the tale of Palamon and Emelye rather than of Palamon and Arcite. To include reference to Arcite would have been to destroy the feeling of resolution the end of the poem offers us, for Arcite's dying speech cannot be reconciled with anyone's living happily ever after. Chaucer runs the risk of conjuring up Arcite's shade with his use of the word "compaignye" in the last line, which may awkwardly remind the alert reader of Arcite's line, "Allone, withouten any compaignye" – a line particularly moving for the unheroic homeliness of its frame of reference in the face of the least homely of man's necessary adventures – but few readers would draw the relationship. David idiosyncratically denies that Arcite's speech is emotionally telling: "The very lyricism of the language, the repetitions and balanced phrasing, mitigates any of the pain we might feel at a personal tragedy" (1976: 84). And if David were right, Kean would be exonerated to some extent. But Muscatine expresses a more generally held opinion when he points out that the effectiveness of such a speech "lies not in the reproduction of how a particular character would speak at such a time and place, but in the amount of poetic value the poet can generate in a lyric commentary on the action at the point" (1964: 27–8). Our pain is heightened, not mitigated, by the lyricism

of Arcite's speech; and if we give it its full value as one of the more moving elements of the Tale, the edifice of Kean's argument collapses.

Much current critical practice still involves reading the Tale as a homogeneous work supporting a single paraphrasable statement about the nature of life, whatever that statement might be. Most critics, though, have had difficulty in carrying this project through to their own satisfaction.

The difficulty seems to lie chiefly in the impossibility of establishing a uniform style in the poem. Muscatine exemplifies typical uneasiness with this quality of the Tale: "the diction and figurative speech in the 'Knight's Tale', for all its noble characters, classical setting, and elevated theme, is sprinkled with rural familiarity" (1967: 92). He is not entirely sure how to account for this unevenness. On the one hand he suggests that "few of us will be willing to accept the notion that [the Tale] contains anything which is more than incidentally satirical" (1950: 913); on the other, he describes Chaucer's language in general as an "ironic mixture" (1967: 109). Donald Howard would prefer the latter view: "In the 'Knight's Tale' an undercurrent of comic irony and a certain number of ridiculous circumstances or anticlimaxes undercut the romance idealism" (1976: 113). And Salter, relating diction to what is said and for once presenting the sort of overview she cautions against elsewhere, seems to support the idea that the Tale is sadly cynical:

> The Knight's Tale, at its most remarkable, is an uneven work of "sad lucidity", presenting a view of a world in which there is "nor certitude, nor peace nor help for pain", and expressing best not the great orthodoxies of medieval faith, but the stubborn truths of human experience.
>
> (Salter 1983: 180)

Donaldson (who reads the Tale dramatically, as an expression of the pilgrim-Knight's character, a reading I find insupportable, particularly as the "Palamon" and "Arcite" pre-existed *The Canterbury Tales* by some years) is more cautious and gives no reason why "At several of the most serious moments of the poem, the Knight's humor provides an antidote to the overinvolvement of the characters in their fate" (1958: 1065–6), and the lack of an interpretative explanation of the need for this comic "antidote" makes it seem very like the regretted authorial "flippancy" others find in the Tale. David, for instance, thinks that such a "flippancy" "sporadically disturbs the calm, majestic surface" of the Tale (1976: 87–8). So does Brewer: "There are also ... slight touches of flippancy ... which jar unpleasantly" (1953: 91). Cooper, too, regrets "a note of flippancy" in some passages – "when the serious potential of the work would seem to be at its greatest" (1984: 106). Kean attempts to force these touches into her single-minded reading: "His down-to-earth comments, therefore, although they may seem intrusive, or even flippant, to some readers, help to indicate a change of focus and to reinforce the effect of the careful organisation of the philosophical arguments" (1972: 16).

This "flippancy" is, the critics assume, a product of Chaucer's personality, which, as we know little about it except from his writing, can be employed as

an incontrovertible explanation of the qualities of his writing. Muscatine, for instance, seems fairly sure of what Chaucer was like as a person. Writing of "the interplay of conventional and realistic styles" as having "a clear basis in earlier medieval tradition", he says that

> The historical influence fell in, as it were, with a temperament and personality. . . that were admirably (almost explosively!) receptive to it. . . . His insouciance, his amateur stance, itself implies a requisite freedom from the strict bonds of decorum. Equally congenial is his tendency to play with perspective . . . .
>
> (Muscatine 1976: 108).

He is sure that "the requirements of recited narrative, and also [Chaucer's] temperament, prevent his writing a poetry of steadily high compression" (1976: 99). But this understandable impulse to think that a favourite poet must have been a good fellow does not help us a great deal with the detailed reading of his texts; so even Muscatine must propose that Chaucer nods at times. He writes of Chaucer's "relaxed moments" (1976: 110) and of his "amiable inconsistency of tone, or of perspective, or of detail, as his narrative goes along. The fact is, Chaucer does not seem to have worried about consistency beyond a certain point" (1976: 89). He also writes of these inconsistencies as "lapses", as in "a lapse of the high style and the introduction of colloquialism" (1950: 924), or, in the instance of Chaucer's commentary at the end of his description of the medical reasons for Arcite's death (2758–2761), as a "digression" which must not be mistaken for "buffoonery" (1950: 926). Writing in the same spirit, Burrow marks "a real failure of 'seriousness' " (1971: 127) in the passage in which Chaucer refuses to trace the flight of Arcite's soul. Ruggiers is even more censorious in his assessment. He points to "the clumsiness, or the inconsistencies, or even the occasional silliness which some have noted" in the poem, describes them as "defects", and concludes that they mark the Tale as "an experiment of sorts", certainly inferior to the *Troilus,* "an artistic endeavor, that perhaps does not bear excessive repetition" (1965: 152). To the best of my knowledge, none of these critics examines the assumption that a successful poem must be written in a homogeneous style, the assumption which lies at the root of their objection to the style of the Tale.

Ruggiers seems to be suggesting that the style of the Tale is eccentric to its period. This idea will not bear scrutiny. It would be futile for me to attempt here to describe the typical styles of the period, for the work has already been admirably performed by Muscatine and by Burrow. "Ricardian" poetry, as Burrow calls it (1971), is typically written in a mixed style, and the fact that the "Knight's Tale" is fractured in style does not mark it off as being different from any other late medieval poem, or alien from the late medieval ethos. The style does the opposite, in reproducing fairly accurately the fractures in the period that produced the Tale.

As Salter points out, it makes sense to anchor the style of a work in the history of its period: "to read [medieval English poetry] is, in a very real sense, to read the English medieval world . . ." (1983: 1). One would have

thought the point to be so obvious as not to be worth making, but we have just been looking at a number of critical opinions that would seem to deny it. Salter is firm about it: "There is, indeed, a very real sense in which later fourteenth-century writing such as Langland, Gower, and Chaucer can be seen as perfectly explicable products of the moral and intellectual climate of later fourteenth-century London" (1983: 118). "The heavy conditioning of all medieval English poetry by social, political, and religious factors is a plain historical truth" (1983: 19), she says. Muscatine makes a similar statement, without permitting the notions it contains to impinge greatly on his critical practice:

> The difference between *Il Filostrato* and the *Troilus* follows broadly the differences between the poets and their cultures. Chaucer wrote his poem in an England nagged by interminable war and beset internally by social, political and religious turmoil, and in a city with an economy based more on hard-won commerce than on feudal tribute . . . .
>
> (Muscatine 1964: 128)

Salter bases her work more thoroughly on her grasp of the sociology and economy of the period, which she describes succinctly. I quote her here at some length, because I wish to use her vision of the period later in writing my own interpretation of passages from the Tale.

She gives us "a picture of a restless, not a static society, in which ambition and political or dynastic allegiance encouraged, even necessitated, movement and actively discouraged the isolation of particular areas and classes of people" (1983: 64). She notes

> the differences of temper between the attitudes to warfare in the reign of Edward III and in that of Richard II; the peace-movement . . . reflected not only political realism but also perhaps a more general sense of disillusionment with traditional medieval theories about the glorious and beneficial nature of the exercise of martial skills. The disillusionment with war is both political and ideological. . . . More dramatic still is the evidence from the lower registers of English medieval society of the breaking of old bonds, once thought divinely sanctioned. The Peasants' Rising of 1381, though defeated, was heavily symptomatic of change . . . some "dissolution" can also be observed in the sphere of religious thought. Not only must we take into account the radical denials of basic Church doctrine by John Wiclif . . . there are signs of innovation and speculative boldness everywhere . . . sentiments of protest, dissent, revolt were often held in uneasy balance with those of acquiescence and conformity.
>
> (Salter 1983: 102–4)

And, she might have said, if we are no longer to look for coherence in what is no longer the Romantic subject, we need not expect coherence in the literary production of an author: "A sense of danger is part of our experience of reading Chaucer, too; there are ways in which the dilemmas of the age emerge in his poetry – most crucially when he is dealing with old-established

source-material" (1983: 105). I like the word "dilemma" here, in the sense of "cut in two". Chaucer's writing, indeed all writing, is made up of such dilemmas, and that is what makes it readable.

The "Knight's Tale", then, appears to be more typical of its period, both stylistically and thematically, than eccentric to it, so that a full account of it could perhaps supply a reader with a grasp of the sociology of the period. The accounts of the Tale surveyed above must therefore be unsatisfactory in one of two ways – those that supply unitary meanings in that they ignore many of the varying qualities of the Tale, and those that describe it as "flawed" in that they imply that other literary productions of the same era are not "flawed" in similar ways – and it yet remains to supply a reading of the Tale that takes its qualities into consideration as being embedded in the qualities of its age. Such an account cannot lean heavily on the personality of Chaucer the man, not only because we know too little about him, but also because a man is inevitably a particular product of his time as well as a part of what produces that history, and any relevant qualities we might hope to locate in Chaucer as a subjective being, his personality being largely a matter of conjecture, could more concretely be located in the politics, history, literature, and general culture of Chaucer's era.

Loosely following Mikhail Bakhtin's lead, I should like to suggest that all writing reproduces in varying degrees the *Weltanschauung* of its period and place; that every world-view contains numerous fractures and contradictions which are not recognised as such by those who hold them; and that the closer and more diligent the reading of a piece of writing is, the more evident the fractures and contradictions in the writing become. These "flaws", to return to the term frequently used of the "Knight's Tale", permeate all literature, and are only more evident in some works than in others. (Bakhtin would exempt true lyrics from this "flawed" state, but does not succeed in finding a "true lyric".)

Bakhtin is convinced "that every literary work is sociological, and that it is so internally, immanently" (Todorov 1984: 34). He believes that even "the most primitve human utterance, realized by an individual organism, is already organised outside of the latter, in the inorganic conditions of the social milieu, and that is it so from the point of view of its content, its meaning, and its signification" (Todorov 1984: 44). He typically stresses "the social life of discourse beyond the artist's studio, in the vast spaces of public squares, streets, cities and villages, social groups, generations, and epochs" (Todorov 1984: 34). He contemplates the idea that the style is the man, and suggests instead that "style is, at least, two men, or more precisely, man and his social grouping, incarnated by its accredited representative, the listener" (Todorov 1984: 62), who is a "normal representative, so to speak, of the social group to which the speaker belongs" (Todorov 1984: 43). Seen thus, language consists of "the ossified deposits of the intentional process" (Todorov 1984: 20) and every writer "intervenes in his own context from another context, already penetrated by the other's intentions. His own intention finds a world already

lived in" (Todorov 1984: 20). Language is "totally saturated with living intonations; it is completely contaminated by rudimentary social evaluations and orientations". It is "not an abstract system of normative forms but a concrete heterological opinion on the world. Every word gives off the scent of a profession, a genre, a current, a party, a particular work, a particular man, a generation, an era, a day, and an hour" (Todorov 1984: 56). "At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form" (Bakhtin 1981: 291).

I apologise readily for the brevity and over-simplicity of this representation of Bakhtin's thought, which are forced on me by exigencies of space. In such a system, to demand of a literary work homogeneity or strict coherence would be to falsify the nature of language and of the literary act, in the service of a habit of reading specific to the reader's time and place, and based on a set of false assumptions, which habit can be broken productively if the reader is prepared to focus attention not only on that which tends towards synthesis but also on the fissures in the work.

There is a danger, in attempting to read in this way, that the reader may, without intending to do so, produce two internally consistent sets of literary statements in a text, and have them reflect ironically upon each other. To do so would be to produce an ultimately homogeneous reading once again. What I am suggesting is that every human being contains within himself or herself a number of unexamined, historically determined presuppositions about the world; that many of these conflict with each other, without the subject's being aware of it; that language from time to time contains and expresses these judgements, so that words, phrases and styles are from time to time indicative of specific attitudes, regardless of the intention of the utterer; that an author, as both a living human being and as a producer of literary discourse, is doubly prone to the production of internally incoherent material; that literary texts prove upon close examination (avoiding marginalisation) to be fraught with contradictions; and that these contradictions reproduce fairly faithfully the contradictions in the world-view held in the period in which the literary text was written. All of this is very different from saying that a particular literary text is ironical in intent. True, any text may or may not be ironically intended, but that is not the issue here.

I am unable to follow David Aers in his particular method of producing Bakhtinian readings of Middle English texts. As a materialist, he seems to me to have a relatively unproblematic vision of the world and its history as being readily accessible to us, and accordingly produces relatively coherent ac-counts of the texts he scrutinises, while relating them to "the historical communities in which they were made, some of whose concerns they articulated and whom they addressed" (1988: 2–3). I could doubtless be numbered amongst those Aers accuses of

cthe fashionable idealism of post structuralism. [Poststructuralism] habitually results in what Perry Anderson describes as a "free-wheeling nescience" where the "megalomania of the signifier" ensures that there is "no determinable relation to any extra-linguistic referents" and no "possibility of truth as a correspondence of propositions *to reality*".

(Aers 1988: 3)

I take up what I believe to be the more radical aspects of Bakhtin's thought, focusing on the notion of heteroglossia, and pit the word against the word in discourse-bound generic and socio-historical contexts in order to attempt to demonstrate the elusiveness of any final meaning primarily in the "Knight's Tale", but by extension in all texts.

It is not possible for me to do more, here, than to analyse a few passages and themes from the "Knight's Tale", in order to attempt to demonstrate in action the style of reading I have in mind. This selectivity is forced upon me by exigencies of space, and is not intended to be at all like the practice of marginalisation. I have selected passages and themes either because they neatly demonstrate the system of reading I am propounding, or because they are central in standard criticism of the Tale. The brief reading below takes for granted a grasp of the history of the period, such as that indicated in the quotations from Salter given above, or that of Bakhtin, who describes the late medieval world as being in "the process of disintegration and decadence of verbal and ideological centralism", and who believes the period therefore to have been particularly conducive to the production of "heteroglottic and heterological" literary work (Todorov 1984: 58).

* * *

After Arcite has been visited by Mercury in a dream, he resolves to return to Athens in disguise "To se my lady, that I love and serve./In hire presence I recche not to sterve" (1397–8). It is possible to ask if the author, knowing that Arcite would eventually die in Emelye's presence, intended this otherwise conventional declaration of resolve to be taken as ironic, but attempting to impute meaning to a text by divining an author's intention is not a practical project. Arcite's statement can be taken by a reader to be purely convent-ional, or ironic, or a combination of the two, and a prudent reader will take these possibilities into account in the context of the Tale as a whole, of other works by Chaucer, and of other works of the period. If this were a tightly structured romance of the order of "The Wife of Bath's Tale", for instance, Arcite's statement would probably be chiefly ironical in effect. If it were a longer romance of the order of *Troilus and Criseyde*, for instance, we should be inclined to read the lines as representing chiefly the conventional lover's resolve to "serve" his lady or die in the attempt – nothing more. But as the "Knight's Tale" is something of a hybrid in form, we are left at a loss, and a careful reader will be content with his sense of the interpretative possibilities inherent in the lines. From a Bakhtinian perspective no one, final interpre-tation is available to us. Discourse is fraught with meanings produced by other

texts at other times, and by other speakers for other groups of listeners in other contexts, and foreclosure is never a valid possibility.

Before the tournament in the lists at Athens, Palamon sets out for the temple of Venus:

> The Sonday nyght, er day bigan to sprynge,
> Whan Palamon the larke herde synge,
> (Although it nere nat day by houres two,
> Yet song the larke) and Palamon right tho
> With hooly herte and with an heigh corage,
> He roos to wenden on his pilgrymage
> Unto the blissful Citherea benigne,–

(2209–15)

Again there is little point in asking if the author intended irony in the lines. What we have is a juxtaposition of two contrasting generic worlds: the world of chivalric romance and the world of clocks. Any sense of comic irony arising in the reading from the juxtaposition must derive from the juxtaposition in the text itself, rather than in the author's mind as he wrote the text. It will be an effect resident in the reader's mind, and determined by his competence as a reader. An astute reader might note that the heroic world in which the lark is said to sing is naturalised by the context of the passage, in particular by the May-Day setting, the influence of Venus, the splendid courtly feast we have just had described to us, and the vestigial memory of Emelye's gathering flowers in Theseus' garden on the occasion when Palamon and Arcite first saw her. And the mundane world of clocks is forced upon us by the statement in the more heroic lines that Palamon heard the lark sing "er day bigan to sprynge", a fact that requires explanation or, in this instance, apology, in the context of the less conventionally literary. The contradiction remains, and does not require explaining away.

We can take for granted the standard chivalric admiration for things martial, which is implicit in many passages throughout the Tale. The description of the arrival in Athens of Lycurgus and Emetrius is exemplary of such passages. Yet even such passages suggest inherent interpretative fractures. For instance, we are told of Lycurgus that "His longe heer was kembd bihynde his bak;/As any ravenes fethere it shoon for blak" (2143–4); and we may well wonder what to make of the raven. Are we meant to think of the bird as ominous or as exemplifying a colour only? The latter is common literary practice elsewhere. In the *Mikado*, for instance, a chorus of women can sing of Yum-Yum's braiding her raven hair without imputing malignancy to her character. But in the context of the description of a hero who is about to engage in combat, both conflicting interpretations are available to the reader, who does well not to choose between them, particularly because of the varied opinions of military action that the poem presents elsewhere, fractures which would be represented in medieval life by differing attitudes from class to class, and even within the chivalric class itself. The well-documented differences in attitudes at Richard's court, for instance, were of national importance (Salter 1983: 102–3).

Theseus' rules for the tournament are benignly designed to promote the general good: "He wilneth no destruction of blood!" (2564). The tournament is to be chiefly a display of military splendour, it seems. But the action of the tournament is bloody enough: "Out brest the blood with stierne stremes rede;/With myghty maces the bones they tobreste" (2610–11). Our sense of conflicting worlds is reinforced by the shift to the alliterative line, which, though other poets elsewhere use it to convey a variety of effects, here suggests a return to archaic Anglo-Saxon martial values totally at odds with the civilised gentility of Theseus' rules. And, as though two contrasting worlds were not enough, we have the introduction of a third when we are told of a knight (any knight, the line being exemplary of such action) that "He rolleth under foot as dooth a bal" (2614). This is, I believe, the trace of a memory of a football match, nothing else in medieval English life being quite so apposite; and village football matches could be extraordinarily violent affairs, frequently resulting in permanent injury, and sometimes even in death. The point is not that Chaucer is suggesting that heroic attitudes towards the tournament or war falsify a reality that is more appropriately described by the more vicious village metaphor (in which violence was not tempered by chivalric mercy, and there were scarcely any rules to abide by). The point is, instead, that the late medieval world had a multifaceted view of things.

> The Church was openly hostile to tournaments; it repeatedly prohibited them, and there is no doubt that the fear of the passionate character of this noble game, and of the abuses resulting from it, had a great share in this hostility. Moralists were not favourably disposed towards tournaments, neither were the humanists. Where do we read, Petrarch asks, that Cicero or Scipio jousted? The burghers thought them useless and ridiculous. Only the world of the nobility continued to cultivate all that regarded tournaments and jousts, as things of the highest importance.
>
> (Huizinga 1924: 71)

The multiplicity of these attitudes forces itself into the poem through the heteroglossic nature of the words of which the poem is constituted. After all, when Chaucer describes the assembly of people preparing for the tournament, and ranges from "lordes upon steeds and palfreys" (2495), through squires, armourers and yeomen going about their proper business, to a "paleysful of people up and down" (2513), a veritable Tattersalls, laying irreverent bets on the outcome of the proceedings: "Somme helden with hym with the blake berd,/Somme with the balled, somme with the thikke herd;" (2517–18) – when he does this we do not feel that the commoners' prosaic view of life, suggested in these last lines, impinges on the chivalric view of life contained in the earlier lines. We know the multiplicity of the world, and also know that opposites cannot be made to coincide. We know these things in our daily lives, but are inclined to forget them when we read.

The description of the temple of Mars, which has given pause to so many critics over the years, becomes more assimilable if understood in this way. The basic context of the passage is heroic, classical and general, as in the lines

And al above, depeynted in a tour,
Saugh I Conquest, sittynge in greet honour,
With the sharpe swerd over his heed
Hangynge by a soutil twynes threed.

(2027–30)

But the generality of such a style and world gives way to a set of particularities derived from the lower orders of society in the passages that illustrate the inversion of right order in Mars' domain:

Yet saugh I brent the shippes hoppesteres;
The hunte strangled with the wilde beres;
The sowe freten the child right in the cradel;
The cook yscalded, for al his longe ladel.
Noght was foryeten by the infortune of Marte
The cartere overryden with his carte:
Under the wheel ful lowe he lay adoun.

(2017–23)

Again, the point is not that the "low" passages are more true to life; life is not single, and neither is literary truth. Nor is the point that our author was more familiar with low-life than with the court, a statement which would be patently untrue. It is merely that these conflicting worlds of meaning exist both within and beyond the poem, and need not be reconciled, which is what we should have to do in order to construct a single meaning in the Tale. An attempt to do that for this passage might conceivably lean heavily on ascribing a particular attitude to the authorial persona, especially as the descriptions of the temples are attributed to an "I" who claims to have seen them, and is therefore inexplicably engaged in the action and in the (conflicting) attitudes expressed in the passage. But the same persona concludes the description of the paintings with a late fourteenth-century economic statement: "Wel koude he peynten lifly that it wroghte;/With many a floryn he the hewes boghte" (2087–88), an interpolation suggesting the narrator's distance from his material. And the contemporary bourgeois world of Florentine coins, so briefly evoked in the Tale and so detached, can scarcely impinge on either the world of the scalded cook and the crushed carter, or the world of Mars and his chamber of personified horrors.

Such contradictions, once noted, can be found in passages which had previously seemed straight-forward. Thus, we can now begin to wonder at the fact that Theseus displays Mars' banner as he marches on Thebes, and to think of the war against Thebes as being not entirely unambivalent in the context of varying group, class and generic evaluations of matters military. We grant that Thebes signified everything evil in such literary contexts, yet the literary context cannot exist in total independence of the historical, medieval context, and the wholesale destruction resulting from Theseus' victory seems more appropriate in any event to the character of Mars than to that of Theseus, who "rente adoun bothe wall and sparre and rafter" (990) and produced a "taas of bodyes dede" (1005), in which the pillagers find

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Palamon and Arcite, "Thurgh-girt with many a grevous blody wounde" (1010). "Not fully quyke, ne fully dede they were" (1015). A just war remains a war, and some of its effects will be horrible. Was this, in any event, a just war? Not according to Palamon, who believes that his lineage "is so lowe ybroght by tirannye" (1111). In contemplating the dislocation of values in these passages I am reminded of an event in the life of Philip Augustus. He attacked Beziers in 1209, in a cause deviously connected with the matter of the Albigensians and Waldensians. As the walls of the town were being carried seven thousand of the populace fled for sanctuary to a large wooden church. Philip had the doors locked and had the church burned to the ground (Painter 1953: 311); yet he was reputed to be a great and noble king. Huizinga writes about the way in which contemporary historians viewed such matters as follows:

> And yet all those writers viewed the history of their times in the full light of their major ideal, that of chivalry. In spite of the confusion and the monotonous horror of their tales, they saw that history bathed in an atmosphere of gallantry, fidelity, and duty. They all begin by announcing their design of glorifying bravery and the knightly virtues, of reciting "noble enterprises, conquests, deeds of valour, and feats of arms" (d'Escouchy), "the great marvels and fine feats of arms that have come to pass as a result of the great wars" (Froissart). Later on they more or less lose sight of it. Froissart, the *enfant terrible* of chivalry, recounts an endless list of betrayals and cruelties without being very much aware of the contradictions between his general views and the contents of his narrative.
>
> (Huizinga 1960: 198)

So contradictions in the values attached to military action were glossed over even in the perceptions of fairly homogeneous groups. Chaucer, who may be thought of as a member of a group in transition and therefore particularly prone to subscribe unwittingly to internally conflicting norms (Strohm 1989: 10–13) seems to wish us to draw a distinction between Creon's acts and Theseus', a distinction established in antiquity and naturalised in the minds of his contemporaries. But we may reasonably be excused for having difficulty in following him in this, particularly as the words he uses to describe both acts are very similar.

"Tirannye" is the very word Theseus uses of Creon, to justify his attack (941). The war is motivated chiefly, of course, by Creon's refusal to permit burial of the Seven, a fact which relates strangely to Theseus' creating the fresh "taas of bodyes dede", corpses which receive scant respect from the ferreting pillagers. These actions, we know, were fully naturalised both in literature and in medieval life, but so too was the dread of war and its attendant destruction. We are told that Theseus slew Creon and "wan" (989) the city of Thebes thereafter, the blandly heroic verb, which exists in a world totally separate from the carnage described in the surrounding lines, being precisely the word used to glorify Theseus in the opening lines of the tale:

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 was ycleped Scithia,
> And weddede the queene Ypolita, . . .

(861–68)

Conquest was a royal duty at the time, and victory and melody (872) formed a fairly automatic couplet of words; but some of the words here are amenable to being read in a less euphoric manner. In the description of the Temple of Mars, "Conquest", as we have seen, is one of Mars' creatures, and is horrifying. Theseus is about to respond mercifully to the Theban widows, as a hero should; but we may perhaps remember that he is returning home after conquering a nation of women and taking their queen by force. An alert reader will accept that Theseus' victory over the Amazons is presented as a splendid act, will note that this vision of conquest cannot be reconciled with attitudes elsewhere in the poem, and will be content to accept such multiplicity in the point of view as inherent in the nature of human consciousness, and therefore unavoidable in a literary text.

The views of the erotic suggested by the Tale are as various as those of military valour. Theseus, for instance, is made to condemn love as the ultimate, inescapable foolishness:

> A man moot ben a fool, or yong or oold,–
> I woot it by myself ful yore agon,
> For in my tyme a servant was I oon.

(1812–14)

Presumably these lines refer to his feelings for Ariadne, whom he had so harshly deserted on his journey back to Athens from Crete. But they could also reflect awkwardly on his relationship with Hypolita. Is his love for her, too, foolish? Is connubial love a different thing from erotic love? His lines are echoed in the description of the Temple of Venus:

> Thus may ye seen that wysdom ne richness,
> Beautee ne sleighte, strengthe ne hardynesse,
> Ne may with Venus holde champartie.

(1947–49)

But the types of love suggested in the description of the temple vary from the conventional posturing of the courtly lover, "The broken slepes, and the sikes colde,/The sacred teeris, and the waymentynge" (1920–21), to the more everyday "Charmes and Force, Lesynges, Flaterye,/Despense, Bisynesse, and Jalousye" (1927–28), and the plainly physical, "a cokkow sittynge on hir hand" (1930). I doubt that these various notions can be fully reconciled. The description of the temple claims that all these forms of love are malignant in effect, a claim that could be supported from sections of the narrative. Palamon and Arcite, for instance, "defye the seurete and the bond" (1604)

that bind them together when they fall in love with Emelye, and their first experience of her is much like a physical wound on the field of battle:

> He [Palamon] cast his eye upon Emelya,
> And therwithal he bleynte and cride, "A!"
> As though he stongen were unto the herte.
>
> (1077–79)

The arrow in question is blind Cupid's, but the conventional metaphor is brought to unusual life by the direct depiction of its physical effects. Perhaps the malignancy of love is tempered here by a slightly comic effect; and perhaps we are dealing here not so much with love, as with lust at first sight. Nevertheless, the effects of the experience, whatever we may wish to call it, are anything but comic, as the course of the narrative demonstrates. Surely Chaucer has the plague (scarcely a comic theme) in mind when he writes:

> A man moot nedes love, maugree his heed.
> He may not fleen it, thogh he sholde be deed,
> Al be she mayde, or wydwe, or elles wyf.
>
> (1169–71)

One might attempt to avoid the Black Death by fleeing it, with little chance of success. Both love and the plague are equally destructive, it seems, of ordinary social bonds.

But love is also depicted in the Tale as gentle and connubial, a form of grace accorded by one human being to another. Thus, Theseus eventually exhorts Emelye to accept Palamon: "That ye shul of your grace upon hym rewe,/And taken hym for housbonde and for lord" (3080–81). We understand the nature of such a feeling, but may yet be baffled by Arcite's last words to Emelye:

> Dusked his eyen two, and failled breeth,
> But on his lady yet caste he his ye;
> His laste word was, "Mercy, Emelye!"
>
> (2806–08)

What can he mean by "mercy" here? What could she give him that would be useful to him after death? Are we to assume that "mercy", here, is used purely conventionally, as a signifier without denotation? And if that is possible here, is it not equally possible in the conclusion of the Tale? But the last few lines of the Tale conjure up God's great love for his creation as a trenchant analogy for Palamon's love of Emelye: "And God, that al this wyde world hath wroght,/Sende hym his love that hath it deere aboght" (3099–3100). The notion is conventional and Neo-Platonic, but is it appropriate? That it is invoked not merely to bring the Tale to an end is demonstrated by the fact that we have already had Arcite's love of Emelye described in a telling set of Christian metaphors, in his lament on being released from prison. Prison was purgatory to him, and he is being banished eternally to hell, he says. To see Emelye was to live in a state of bliss, though denied her

grace (a neat paradox). To be exiled from prison is to be denied all hope of grace, in which exile he expects to die in the most mortal of sins, despairing of grace (1225–49). There would seem to be a massive chasm between the type of love envisaged in these metaphors and the type of love depicted on the walls of the temple of Venus – yet all of these are images of Palamon's and Arcite's disastrous love for Emelye.

As if this were not enough, the Tale has other modes of "love" to offer us as well. For instance, when Palamon and Arcite first see Emelye she is depicted in a conventional Garden of Love (1033–55), as a being apart, in a place apart, an emanation of the Classical notion of the grace of spring, despite the slightly inappropriate Christian reference in the line "And as an aungel hevenysshly she soong" (1055). We are reminded of other such passages in *The Canterbury Tales*, such as the first eleven lines of the "General Prologue", or the garden of delight in the "Franklin's Tale", and of a variety of such passages in Medieval and Renaissance writing generally. (Belmont is, perhaps, the most telling example.) Such places are usually entirely beneficent, but Emelye's eruption into the "Knight's Tale" precipitates disaster. Or, in contrast, there is the narrator's commentary on the usual knightly attitude towards love as a splendid game:

> Ye knowen wel that every lusty knyght
> That loveth paramours and hath his myght,
> Were it in Engelond or elleswhere,
> They wolde, hir thankes, wilnen to be there, –
> To fighte for a lady, *benedicitee*!
>
> (2111–15)

This has as little to do with erotic emotion as it has to do with God's blessing. And we should not forget Theseus' amazingly inappropriate comment when he comes upon Palamon and Arcite fighting in the grove. He says of Emelye that "She woot nammore of al this hoote fare,/By God, than woot a cokkow or an hare!" (1809–10). The innocent Emelye cannot usefully be compared with a cuckoo, which lays its eggs in another's nest, or with a hare, which is thought to rut constantly. What we have here is surely the intrusion of a jaundiced, comic view of heterosexual relations, a view which must be attributed to that aspect of the multivalent medieval *Weltanschauung* transmitted to us through fabliaux, for instance, rather than to specific purposes inherent in "The Knight's Tale". There is no sense of irony in the writing. A variety of attitudes would have seemed equally "natural" to the writer and his readers, and are naturalised in the Tale, which is of sufficient length and is sufficiently loose in form to accommodate them easily.

Finally, something must be said about the vexed question of the philosophical/metaphysical frame of the poem.

During the course of the Tale, Palamon is made to utter the following prayer:

> I am so confus that I can noght seye
> But "Mercy, lady bright, that knowest weele

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My thought, and seest what harmes that I feele!"
Considere al this and rewe upon my soore,
As wisly as I shal for everemoore,
Emforth my myght, thy trewe servant be
And holden werre alwey with chastitee.

(2230–36)

But for the last word, this passage might well be read out of context as the prayer of a Christian knight to the Virgin Mary, rather than to Venus. The form of the prayer is conventionally pious, and "lady bright" could serve as a formula for the Queen of Heaven. The language, too, being English, suggests a Christian frame in which a knight would more frequently protect chastity than make war upon it. The sexual ideal for what Robin Lane Fox calls over-achieving Christians, had for more than a thousand years been virginity. Writing of the second-century "apocryphal" texts and fictions which urged an extreme opposition to sex, he suggests that

> Like Jewish novels in Greek, these stories did owe an ultimate debt to the literary form of pagan fiction. In pagan novels, however, the plots have been summed up as not a "Whodunnit?" but a "When will they do it?" In Christian fiction, [married] couples of good family learned never to do it at all.
>
> (Fox 1986: 356)

Female virgins were the Brides of Christ, and to lose their virginity would be to commit adultery to Christ (Fox 1986: 371).

> In its origin, motivation and practice, this esteem for virginity was something entirely new. It owed nothing to pagan example or the "mood of the times". It became a distinguishing feature of Christian life, where it created its own forms of organisation, and has survived ever since wherever the faith takes root. It inspired its own poetic imagery, using the symbols of whiteness and transposed erotic desire . . .
>
> (Fox 1986: 373)

By the mid-fourteenth century, with the triumph of the cult of the Virgin, the celebration of virginity was thoroughly naturalised in literature and art, and as a performative ideal amongst those striving for Christian perfection on earth. As the Wife of Bath reminds us the numbers of the latter were limited, and they frequently fell far short of their ideal. But such a fall, too, was naturalised as inherent in their (sinful) human nature. There is no context in which a war on chastity is completely approved of in Christian discourse, and Chaucer's lines, upon reflection, seem to contain a striking dissonance in (literary) world views.

I doubt that it is sufficient in itself to impute this felt disjunction to the necessary effects of his telling a pre-Christian tale in a Christian medium. Perhaps one needs to look further and to take into account the partial endorsement of certain classical norms in the chivalric system, particularly in the notion of *amour courtoise,* in order to ground the disjunction in the minds and behaviour of Chaucer's readership. One could appositely call to mind the

nature of Sir Gawain's perils in Sir Bercilak's castle, or Tirant lo Blanc's pursuit of Carmesina. But there is not the space, here, to pursue these matters further. I return, therefore, to my perception that the pagan content of the metaphysical frame (partially naturalised in medieval Christianity) is at odds with the medium of its expression, and produces an awkwardness compounded elsewhere by a continual clash of contradictory frames of reference. Granted, the medieval world was inclined to think of the planetary forces and Dame Fortune as ministers of God's will, but not of the will of a god like Saturn whose "look is the fader of pestilence", and who is made to characterise himself (correctly, in the astrological context) as being totally malignant to human kind (2453–69). In teasing out the relationships set up by similar fractures in other passages from the Tale (especially 1302–32) Salter suggests that

> the inconsistency of reference to the "deities" or the "Deity" makes, on the one hand, for uncertainty about [whether we are to accept Palamon's protests as legitimate in their literary-historical setting but illegitimate in the sense that their Boethian model is designed to be self-evidently fallible]; on the other, it makes for an interesting "open-ended" situation, in which we may begin to think that the poet is motivated less by moral considerations than by the desire to give a favoured theme full, dramatic, and imaginative scope.
>
> (Salter 1983: 153)

Arcite would seem to believe that the gods are malignant when he states "That shapen was my deeth erst than my sherte" (1566), and though we readily grant the chronology of these events we find it difficult to reconcile the imaginative world in which predestination is an issue with that in which shirts are made and worn. Of course these worlds co-exist, but they usually bring themselves to our attention separately – or we tend to believe that they do. More to the point, the world in which shirts are worn is comfortably human, whereas the world of destiny is unkindly cruel. Earlier, Arcite had attributed the Theban knights' imprisonment to the ill-will of the prevailing god of the Tale: "Som wikke aspect or disposicioun/Of Saturne, by som constellacioun,/ Hath yeven us this" (1087–89); and Palamon's implicit agreement with Arcite's sentiments would seem to be justified when, in his prayer to his tutelary goddess Venus, he wonders if "my destynee be shapen/By eterne word to dyen in prisoun" (1108–09). Shortly thereafter, in a thirty-line passage (1302–32) written with care and imaginative vitality, Palamon is made to typify in some detail the malignancy towards mankind as a whole of the "cruel goddes" to whom mankind is of less worth than "the sheep that rouketh in the folde" (1308), and asks a question that is not fully addressed elsewhere in the Tale: "What governance is in this prescience,/That giltelees tormenteth innocence?" (1313–14). The speech is something of a meditation on the meaninglessness of life, and we should have expected an immediate authorial rejoinder at least, if not an answer. Instead, Part One of the Tale comes to a hasty conclusion with an irrelevant *demande d'amour*. The vision of a meaningless life will be permitted to coexist with Theseus' contrasting view.

Egeus not having contrived to say anything to the point (2843–49), the notion of life as meaningful is left for Theseus to propound. His key speech (2987–3074) has delighted those readers of the poem who take an optimistic view of being and enjoy synthesising literary works into sermons. A précis of the speech would demonstrate that for all its Boethian frame it does not hold water. For instance, Theseus' thanking Jupiter "of all his grace" (3069) would seem to be rather anomalous, that grace having been singularly absent from the Tale so far. Indeed, Jupiter himself (Jove/Jehovah?) has acted only by permitting Saturn to assume the responsibility for patching up the quarrel between Venus and Mars (2442–49). Granted, it would have been impossible for the narrator to impute the malignancy of the pagan gods to the Christian God, but the ploy he has used to avoid doing so results in his having two totally conflicting views of divinity survive to the end of the Tale. In essence, Theseus' speech is a development of Egeus' platitudes. Theseus suggests that we know that everything in the world must pass away (to become one with the whole from which it emanated as a part – but this notion is not foregrounded in the speech) and says only that as we can not change this state of affairs, we should accept it. The world, as he depicts it, remains "wrecched" (2995), and he does not ask why a benign godhead should create a wretched world. Peace is possible only in eventual union with the First Mover, and living men, caught in "this foule prisoun of this lyf" (3061), are advised to strive for the "excellence and flour" (3061) of worldly honour which, presumably, – Theseus does not actually say this but there must be a reason for men to act honourably – is a model of the perfection attainable after death. The fact that such a notion of honour, which gives a particular slant to chivalry's performative ideal, has not previously been an issue in the Tale is, in my reading, unimportant, as I do not look for internal consistency in a literary work. The Boethian view was well established and widely held in Chaucer's day, and it finds its way into a consolatory ending to a long tale without upsetting its flow, but without impinging on its major concerns either. Theseus' speech, as I read it, is far from being the main point of this massive poem, which reverberates richly with the equivocal attitudes of its age and cannot reasonably be reduced to a simple sermon.

Appendix

The deployment of time in "The Knight's Tale" is far from random. The bulk of the action occurs on a succession of May Days. Palamon and Arcite first see Emelye and fall in love with her on May Day, which she is honouring in solitude in Theseus' garden (1034–1055). It is common cause among critics that Emelye must here be seen as personifying Spring renewal, and hence as exemplary of the day itself. An interpretative complication follows rapidly, when Palamon identifies her as Venus (1101–1111), because Venus will soon become something of a malignant presence in the Tale. If we insist on completing the design, we are compelled to relate the persona of Emelye either to that of Venus or to that of Diana (in whose temple she is to pray)

despite the poem's lack of concern with Emelye as anything more than a prize for the winning knight.

The next major event occurs precisely a year later, also on May Day. Disguised as "Philostrate" Arcite goes a-Maying in another place apart (1491–1539), the grove in which his funeral pyre will eventually be built, and meets Palamon, who recognises and fights him. Theseus sets out to celebrate the season with a hunt, but instead of flushing a "hert" he finds Palamon and Arcite fighting like animals in the wood. Spring transformations are malignant at this stage of the poem. Palamon and Arcite are not only the ferocious lion and tiger of the early lines of the relevant passage, but are also the cuckoo and hare of Theseus' amazed commentary (1809–10).

Theseus there and then arranges the tournament that precipitates the climactic action for "this day fifty wykes, fer ne ner" (1850) by which must be intended yet another space of a year, for the description of the preparation for the tournament (in which Venus is to ensure Arcite's death) begins with a perfunctory description of how "every wight" felt compelled by the season to spend "that Monday . . . in Venus heigh servyse" (2483–2487). In the building of Arcite's funeral pyre, the felling of the trees in Venus' grove (which, if one reads in this way, must be seen as an equivalent of the garden at Theseus' palace, and therefore as a conventional garden of love) allows the rational light of day to penetrate its fastnesses, and the godlings of the place flee in fear (2919–2932). But for the fact that Emelye, partially a Venus persona, is made much of at the end of the poem, the Tale's linking of time sequence with significant places would therefore seem to signify a rejection of the disorderly, erotic world of Spring, in order to prefer order and reason. Of course, other elements in the poem would seem to contradict such a reading of the whole. It is dangerously easy to make too much of the significance of schematic structure.

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