LOVE IN HELL
THE ROLE OF PLUTO AND PROSERPINE
IN CHAUCER'S MERCHANT'S TALE

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The late fourteenth century in England—in the midst of the Hundred Years War, the aftermath of the Black Death, and the challenges to the authority of the nobility, the church and the crown—was a period of widespread social, religious and political change. Alongside a literature of satire and protest which engaged these changes directly, the popular genres of romance and the novella (popular tale) collection tended to be conservative, reinforcing social hierarchies and subordinating diversity to didactic frames and unquestioned closure. These genres, however, share the potentially revisionary narrative structure of a journey away from the familiar, and in a novella collection the relations among tellers and tales may be used to raise questions about the tales it contains.

While social, religious and political critiques are often suppressed in romances and popular tales, they are central to Chaucer's reworkings of romance, popular tale, classical and Biblical traditions on the pilgrimage journey of the Canterbury Tales.\(^1\) Late fourteenth-century theories of language evoke this same image of a

\(^1\) For a fuller discussion of these literary, cultural, and popular-tale contexts and their relation to the Merchant's Tale, see my dissertation, "'Sires, by your leve, that am nat I:'"
text as a journey of both creation and discovery, "a combination of desire, perspective, choice and judgment" in which the knower as a "viator and linguistic craftsman" is always both on a journey in search of truth, and at the same time constructing truth. 2

Chaucer's works often depict the ways in which cultural traditions and institutions both imprison and suggest alternatives, and they thus raise questions about the effect of inherited tales and traditions, as well as the motivations of the "auctorites" who have passed them on. The Merchant's Tale is a particularly vivid example of Chaucer's ability to "envision the place of the Other" as he investigates "the difficult relations between abstract or figurative . . . formulations and people with real bodies." 3

To fully appreciate the play of the Merchant's Tale's version of the well-known "pear tree tale" and the traditions and contexts it calls together, we must use a broad definition of "tradition," as Chaucer so often does himself. In this essay I follow David Fowler's lead in placing the Merchant's Tale in the context of the International Popular Tale tradition to broaden the sense of the tale's history as well as of the audiences who have shaped its various tellings. 4 I follow Fowler's lead in considering both written and oral, sacred and secular traditions in the study of ballads and of medieval tales. 5

While there are potential drawbacks in relying on structural tale types, Chaucer's tales include repeated references to "ancient books," to telling old tales, and even to "Isope" and "Piers Alfonse" in the Tale of Melibee. Research on Chaucer and on oral dissemination of texts suggests that we might usefully discuss many of the

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4 My analysis of the essential elements of the 49 extant versions of International Popular Tale #1423 (as designated by the Aarne-Thompson Tale Type system of identifying narratives, hereafter referred to as AT#1423) for this essay originated in the context of David Fowler's Popular Fiction: The International Popular Tale.
Canterbury Tales as, in part, versions of popular tales which would have been recognized by Chaucer and his audience.6

However, this international popular tale tradition is only one aspect of the Merchant's Tale's context, which includes Biblical and Ovidian sources; romance commonplaces from the Roman de la Rose, the relation of Orpheus and Euridice as it appears in Sir Orfeo, and Chaucer's own writings. In light of many other tellings of a traditionally anti-feminist tale and the romance, classical and Biblical contexts it evokes. Chaucer's conjuring of Pluto and Proserpine before the eyes of the readers—while invisible to January and May—inves us to renegotiate the journey of the Merchant's Tale.

The manner in which the Merchant's Tale evokes the details of the classical tale of Pluto and Proserpine is central to Chaucer's telling of the tale, as January's mercantile concern with begetting an heir is displaced by the issue of who will inherit the past and what it will come to mean. Whether viewed as a version of AT#1423, a combination of the conventions of Biblical exegesis, courtly romance and fabliau (seemingly contradictory though they may be), or a representation of and response to fourteenth-century English culture, the Merchant's Tale challenges its society's literary and cultural assumptions, demonstrating both their life-denying effect on men and women, and their sometimes unseen potential for change.

According to Bryan and Dempster, the only versions of the pear tree tale that Chaucer might have known directly are the Italian prose Novellino and the Latin fable of Adolphus.7 In the Novellino God and St. Peter intervene on the husband's behalf, and God has the last word on the untrustworthy glibness of women. In the

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Adolphus tale, God restores the husband's sight and goes so far as to say that "no poison is worse than a woman."8 Seen in the context of these often-cited sources, the Merchant's Tale has been read as a traditional misogynist justification of the view that women are not to be trusted, and that marriage is to be avoided—in other words, as a bitter Merchant's sorrowful autobiography.9 Chaucer's unique choice of Pluto and Proserpine as intervening deities in the pear tree becomes a simple mirror image of January and May: both Pluto and January are feckless old men whose wives, taken initially against their own will and Nature's, have accepted their lot and learned to keep the upper hand in marriage. Of the forty-nine versions of the pear tree tale surveyed in my study, the majority reinforce this sense of the tale's tradition, ending with an anti-feminist moral, as does the tale by Adolphus. St. Peter and Christ are common intercessors, adding the weight of Christian authority to the Merchant's bitter anti-feminist conclusions about women, as the Novellino and Adolphus likewise do.10

However, the Merchant's Tale not only introduces uncommon intercessors, Pluto and Proserpine (whose presence raises questions about the authority of the anti-feminist tradition), but consistently develops themes and images associated with the rape of Proserpine and Ceres' desperate search for her daughter, creating a tale which both embodies the potentially life-denying effect of inherited tradition and suggests alternatives. No earlier version shares these elements, or suggests, as I will argue the Merchant's Tale does, that the young wife of the pear tree tale and her aging husband are both

8 "The blind man and his wife" in Bryan and Dempster, pp. 352–53. The class of the participants is not mentioned. The action takes place in a pear tree. The preface announces anti-feminist intentions and asks Christ's help. The tale ends, "No poison is worse than a woman."


10 "Von Eitem Plinten" ("About a Blind Man"), a German tale of 1460–80 with a blind husband, a young wife, and a student lover. Christ and St. Peter intervene. Christ says, on behalf of the woman, "Don't you know I gave my life for this sinner?" See A. von Keller, Erzählungen aus Altdeutschen Handschriften, vol. 35 (Stuttgart: 1855), pp. 298–305; also Bryan and Dempster, p. 543.

Italian "facezia" of the fifteenth century (partial). Christ and the Devil intervene; the devil provides an excuse for the wife. See Albert Wesselski, Die Schwanke und Schnurren des Pfarrers Arlottio (Berlin: 1919), 2:333; also Bryan and Dempster, p. 552. According to Schwarzbaum, the source for Wesselski's version is an early fourteenth-century Italian MS. Due novelle antichissime inediti.

Low German version, second half of fifteenth century, with a blind man, a young wife and a lover. The action takes place in an apple tree. St. Peter and God intervene. See G. W. Dasent, Theophilus in Icelandic, Low-German and Other Tongues (London: 1845), pp. xxvi–xxvili; also Bryan and Dempster, p. 547.
culpable, and both victims. One French version from the early thirteenth century does share Chaucer's apparent awareness of the role of literary structures in perpetuating religious and social structures: in it a young wife is raped by a priest as her husband exclaims "This is like a fabliau!" This conclusion that the Merchant's Tale revises a widely-known tradition is based in part on the fact that versions preceding Chaucer's tend to involve a husband, wife, and lover of the same social class, sometimes with a serving woman who aids the noble wife, while later versions more often follow the Merchant's Tale example of a rich husband, a wife of lower class (4.1625) and a "servysle squier" or student lover (4.1909, 1907). The Chaucerian revision suggests a concern with the need for change in both class and marriage relations, and the larger political and religious institutions which they mirror. The Disciplina Clericalis version of the pear tree tale is much closer to Chaucer's telling than the Italian Novellino usually cited as his source, especially in the matter of intervention by pagan deities—Jupiter (brother of Pluto and father of Proserpine) on behalf of the blind husband, and Mercury (messenger of Pluto to Jupiter) on behalf of the wife. While the Disciplina preserves the anti-feminism of the novella tradition, the nature of the intervention suggests both a pagan model and, because Jupiter and Mercury are involved

11 "Du Prestre ki Avesete" (The Priest who Pecked) by Guerin, early thirteenth century. The husband and wife are peasants, the wife is raped by a priest. This is one of two versions (Irish Tale 18 is the other) in which the adultery is a rape (Anatole de Montaiglon and Gaston Raynaud, Recueil général et complet des fabliaux des XIIe et XIVe siècles, 6 vols. [Paris: 1872-90]).

12 All quotations from the works of Chaucer are taken from Larry D. Benson, ed., The Riverside Chaucer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

13 The Novellino or Le Cento Novelle Antiche was compiled in 1280. The husband, wife and lover are all well-to-do neighbors. St. Peter and the Lord God intervene. The action takes place in a pear tree. God says "and thus you see how faithful women are and how quickly they find an excuse" (Bryan and Dempster, p. 341).

The Disciplina Clericalis of Petrus Alphonsi was composed early in the twelfth century in Spain in either Hebrew or Arabic. The author translated the work into Latin, and it was widely available in Western Europe in Latin and in most vernaculars. Not all versions contain the same tales. While AT #1428 does not appear in Alphonsi's original version of the Disciplina, it is ascribed to Alphonsi in the fifteenth-century Spanish La vida del Ysopet as well as in English and French translations of the Disciplina. (Metzitzki, p. 97; Haim Schwarzbaum, "International Folktale Motifs in Petrus Alphonsi's Disciplina Clericalis," Sefarad, 22 [1962], p. 341). The class of the participants in the tale is not mentioned; the husband prays to Jupiter and his wife to Mercury. The moral is an accusation about the wiles of women.

14 Regarding the anti-feminism of the novella (framed tale collection) tradition, a genre also characterized by humorous social critique and diversity of tellers and types of fictive material, see Robert J. Clements and Joseph Gibaldi, Anatomy of the Novella: The European Tale Collection from Boccaccio and Chaucer to Cervantes (New York: New York University Press, 1977).
in Ceres’ attempts to regain her daughter, the tale of the rape of Proserpine. Chaucer’s choice of Pluto and Proserpine as the intervening deities in the tale is a move away from both the most common Christian God and saints—more likely to be viewed as final judges of May’s morality—and the Disciplina’s use of Jupiter and Mercury, the gods who decided the fate of Proserpine. Pluto, having obtained his own niece as wife by rape, can hardly be taken without question as a moral authority on the side of old January or the Merchant. And Proserpine, who speaks for women so that “For lak of answere noon of hem shal dyen” (4.2271), raises significantly different issues than would Jupiter’s messenger Mercury.

The Merchant’s Tale’s questioning of the inherited roles of class and gender is particularly clear in the context of the twelfth-century French fabliau branch of the popular tale tradition. In these tales it is usually the son who steals the father’s key, using it to unlock his strongbox to purchase a wife. In Chaucer’s tale it is the young wife herself who takes the role of son, counterfeiting a key, unlocking the prison-garden-strongbox, and, presumably, producing an heir other than January’s own child as a result of her tryst in the tree. Pearcy’s genre analysis suggests that the Merchant’s Tale is most clearly viewed as a satire, in contrast to both tragedy and comedy, because of the metaphysical element added to the social dimension, the “bleak depiction of a world stalled in time between death and rebirth” (p. 336). Chaucer’s evocation of the rape of Proserpine, in which the time between harvest/death and spring/rebirth is accounted for by incestual rape and maternal intervention, reinforces the suggestion that Chaucer’s tale depicts a world trapped in the results of its own actions.

Chaucer’s acknowledged classical source for the tale of Proserpine, Claudian’s De Raptu Proserpinae, says “Diana looks back to the myth that she is called moon in the sky, Diana in the forest, and Proserpine in the Lower World” (4.2232). Chaucer’s choice of the various manifestations of this triple goddess as the protectress of both May in the Merchant’s Tale and Emilye in the Knight’s Tale

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(1.2082–84) suggests a continuing concern in the *Canterbury Tales* with the issue of how women are defined by more powerful men and, on a larger scale, how individuals are defined by their culture. Emilye’s prayer to the “Queene of the regne of Pluto derk and lowe, / Goddesse of maydens” (1.2299–2300) that she desires “noght to ben a wyf and be with childe” (1.2310) is concerned with virginity in its classical sense: the power of self-determination rather than male-determination.17 The goddess in the *Knight’s Tale* is unable to rescue Emily, and while Proserpine in the *Merchant’s Tale* helps to preserve May’s life, May is still trapped by the fabliau-romance her culture provides as her identity.

However, Chaucer’s revisions of traditions (classical, medieval, and personal) do more than suggest the culpability of men in the structures of genre and power, or of January alone in his marital woes. While the rape of Helen by Paris is identified in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* with the male structures which belie Hector’s claim not to “selle” women (*TC* 4.182)—and the image of the Merchant’s January “ravyshed” by the thought of his wedding night, intending to “streyne” May in his arms “as Parys dide Eleyne” (4.1750–54), further connects these images—issues of self-definition and rape in the *Merchant’s Tale* are part of a momentary identification of both January and May with Proserpine, who is “ravyshed” from Ethna against her will by Pluto (4.2250). January’s comparison of his “hoary head” to a fertile “blosmy” laurel tree (4.1461–66) contributes both to our sense of the unnaturalness of his designs on May, and to our sympathy with a man whose vision of the world must delude him as well. January is simply enacting the role of a knight in a romance when he plans to mold a young wife to his desires “as men may warm wex with handes plye” (4.4729). This image turns back on itself when May uses “warm wex” to “emprent the clyket,” counterfeiting a key to January’s garden for her lover Damian (4.2117).

January must deceive himself to see his hoary head as a blossoming evergreen “laurer” (4.1466), a delusion the Merchant pointedly counters by describing January’s “thikke brustles of his berd,” his “slyn of houndfyssh” and the “slakke skyn” about his neck which “shaketh / Whil that he sang, so chaunteth he and craketh” (4.1824–25; 1849–50). As the Reeve observed,

For in oure wyl ther stiketh eveere a nayl,
To have an hoor heed and a grene tayl,
As hath a leek; for thogh oure myght be goon,
Oure wyl desireth folie eveere in oon.

(1.3877–80)

January hopes to enclose a world in which May would belong only to his personal paradise. When Pluto and Proserpine appear beneath the “alwy grene” laurel in January’s own pleasure garden (4.2037), we cannot help but understand his culpability in his own fall.

The Merchant, blinded by bitterness, would like the audience to understand only that January is a fool for having sought a wife. But the tale shows that January is also the garden itself, made barren by a culture which demands that he view women as objects to be used to produce heirs. The Merchant’s Tale suggests that January and his mercantile view of humanity are products of a literary and cultural inheritance which insists that women are owned by men who are interested, like the Merchant himself, only in “th’encrees of [their] wynnyng” (1.275). The appearance of avaricious Pluto and his wife/victim reinforces this conclusion, and also provides a striking alternative view of Biblical and clerical teachings about the guilt of women in their own fall from grace.

If January’s opening invocation of Adam and Eve and their “paradys” “in this world” (4.1265) would have been likely to prejudice Chaucer’s audience to favor January/Adam over the treachery of May/Eve, the pear-tree story can be superficially understood as a simple allegory of the Biblical fall. The Merchant takes great care to show us that even the traditionally positive women of the Bible ought to be seen as incarnations of Eve rather than precursors of Mary, and many versions of the tale include final judgment of the wife by God or St. Peter. However, as Karl Wintersdorf suggests, the pear tree story told by Chaucer sets up a contrasting mirror of the pagan Fall, exemplifying the lust and violence of men.18 Chaucer

18 Karl P. Wintersdorf, “Theme and Structure in the Merchant’s Tale: The Function of the Pluto Episode,” PMLA, 80 (1965): 527. Wintersdorf’s publication of eighteen Irish versions of AT#1425 notes that one version (his #18) records a rape rather than a tryst (see n. 6). Mortimer J. Donovan also notes that the Pluto/Proserpine episode introduces the issue of rape into the marriage of January and May in “The Image of Pluto and Proserpine in the Merchant’s Tale,” Philological Quarterly, 36 (1957): 55. The issue of rape in the works and life of Geoffrey Chaucer is the subject of complex
recalls Proserpine "ravysshed" from the fields by Pluto (4.2230). The pomegranate she eats in the gardens of Hades, like the "fruyt" May attempts to enjoy in the walled garden of January, emphasizes the extent to which women's actions must be seen as desperate attempts to survive within structures cultivated unnaturally by men.

In choosing Pluto and Proserpine, Chaucer chose deities who demand to be read two ways, both as emblematic of the misogynist view which holds women's physicality and immorality responsible for their own rapes, and as a revision of that view. Chaucer chose from among the deathless "happy gods" of Olympus the story of the pain of the goddesses Ceres and Proserpine, the goddesses who suffered like mortal women. Their story is a "pagan fall" which revises the Christian fall by underlining male culpability. However, it is also a "pagan" version of loss and partial recovery, of sorrow and hope in the face of human despair. The Eleusinian mysteries, the center of classical religion, celebrate the seasonal return of a Daughter because of the force of her Mother's love. Overcoming the greater power of the gods, Ceres' love won Proserpine's partial freedom. In the Merchant's Tale, Proserpine continues her story, bequeathing her intercessory inheritance to the uncomprehending May.

While Chaucer's acknowledged source, Claudian's De Raptu Proserpinae, breaks off with Ceres' search, Chaucer would have known a full tale of the rape of Proserpine from one of his favorite "auctorites," Ovid, who tells the story in both the Metamorphoses and the Fasti. In the Metamorphoses, Pluto rises from his underworld realm to assure himself of his defenses. Venus—who represents destructive heterosexual passion and possession both in Ovid and at the marriage of January and May (4.1723–24)—allows Pluto to rape Proserpine. When Ceres confronts Jupiter about the rape perpetrated by their brother Pluto, he demands that Ceres "call things by their proper names. This deed was not a crime but an act of love" (5.525).

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debate which cannot be done justice here. "Rape and Chaucer" was the subject of a session at MLA 1990 with Christine Rose, Carolyn Dinshaw, Beth Robertson and Gail Sherman. See also Gayle Margherita, "Some Thoughts on History, Epistemology, and Rape," Medieval Feminist Newsletter, 11 (1991): 2–5.


In many ways, the Merchant’s Tale is an effort to discover and call things by their proper names so that change will be possible. While the Merchant as narrator “dar nat” tell whether May thought her wedding night to be “paradys or helle” (4.1963–64), Chaucer as inheritor of the complex of literary and cultural institutions and relations of late fourteenth-century England recognizes that he is also necessarily the revising viator who will be judged by his own reading of his inheritance.

In the Fasti Ovid tells much the same story of Proserpine, stressing (as in the Metamorphoses) the idyllic glade where Proserpine is raped, her youth, and her incessant calls to her mother for help. Ceres runs after Proserpine, calling her name “as lows the mother whose calf has been torn from her udder” (4.456). As in the Metamorphoses, Ceres goes to Jupiter and accuses Pluto of theft, and the final settlement is made in which the earth will be barren during the months that mother and daughter are forced to be separated because of the lust and power of male gods.

The only other mention of Proserpine in the Metamorphoses is in connection with Orpheus, who pleads for the return of his wife Euridice on behalf of the “rape of long ago” in which Pluto and Proserpine were “brought together by Love” (10.28–29). When Orpheus defies Pluto’s conditions, gazing at Euridice and causing her to slip back into hell, Ovid says “What was there to complain of, but that she had been loved?” (10.60). Chaucer’s tale might be seen as “Ovid answered,” again seeking to call things by their proper names. Euridice and Proserpine, May and the women defined by fabliau and romance, must complain precisely because of the way they are envisioned as objects of “love.”

The full Ovidian story of Proserpine and her connection with Orpheus (who appears in Chaucer’s description of January’s wedding [4.1716]) is echoed in the English romance Sir Orfeo, in which the King of Fayerye abducts Heurodis (Euridice) as she sleeps beneath a tree. Sir Orfeo specifically identifies Orfeo as a descendant of Pluto’s, creating a genealogical relation between the tormentor and the rescuer of Heurodis.21 Her apparent salvation is, in some ways, simply another loss of self-determination.

21 Sir Orfeo, ed. A. J. Bliss (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), pp. 4–5. Bliss’s edition includes the Auchinleck, Harley 3810 and Ashmole 61 versions of Sir Orfeo. Ashmole does not discuss Orfeo’s genealogy; Harley 3810 identifies his parents as descendants of “Syr Pilato” and “Yno.” Auchinleck, a manuscript known by Chaucer, says Orfeo’s “fader was comen of King Pluto / And his moder of King Juno” (l. 43–44).
John Block Friedman's *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* discusses the medieval figure Orpheus-Christus who, following Euridice's temptation by forbidden fruit and deadly wounding by the serpent/Satan, descends to regain his wife from Hell. The words Orpheus speaks when attempting to redeem Euridice are the words the feckless January speaks to May from the *Song of Songs*: "Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away" (4.2138).

The issues raised by the identification of Pluto and Orfeo, tormentor and failed rescuer, in *Sir Orfeo* are further developed in Hope Weissman's argument that the enthralling male gaze which creates images of women as articulations of masculine subjectivity finally culminates in self-extinction. Reading Aphrodite (Venus) as an image of male mastery, and Artemis (Diana) as an image of female disempowerment of the masculine, Weissman's analysis suggests terms which help to analyze gender relations in the *Merchant's Tale*, demonstrating January's role in his own deception. Weissman argues that "the function of the female under the 'male gaze'" is essentially to affirm the maleness of the subject "within a hierarchically arranged public, political world regulated by men" (p. 92). However, she also suggests that this gaze can undermine the place of the male in that same system. I would argue that the Merchant's image of January's "herte" as a "mirour" in the "commune marketplace" (4.1581–83) emblematizes both January's reflected mercantile gaze, and the illusory, narcissistic nature of his sense of power. "By his mirour" Januarie begins to "devyse / Of maydens" (4.1585–86), believing he can "mold" the nature of the one he chooses as "warm wax" (4.2117). Yet the *Merchant's Tale* reminds us in the next breath that "love is blynd alday, and may nat see" (4.1598), and it is May who finally molds warm wax (4.2117).

In Weissman's terms, while January thinks he has envisioned Venus, exhibiting his heterosexual male mastery in the mirror in the marketplace, his own language underscores the disempowerment resulting from the sight of Artemis/Diana. When January explains his desire to marry, revealing that he would rather be "etene" by "houndes" (4.1438) than leave his estate to a stranger, he both

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predicts his own demise and recalls the commonplace metamorphosis he has just performed in referring to May as "yong flessh" and "tendre veel" (4.1418–20). Ovid’s Acteon, transformed into a stag in consequence of seeing Diana, pleads with his hounds: "I am Acteon; recognize your master" (p. 98). Acteon, cuckolded and bestialized by his transformation into a horned stag, is devoured by his own dogs. January's "squire" Damyan further develops this image of January/Acteon when "to Januarie he gooth as lowe / As ever did a dogge for the bowe" (4.2012–13).

Referring to Chaucer's Wife of Bath and Alison of the Miller's Tale, Weissman suggests that "female resistance to the urgencies of male-gaze dynamics" can provide "a measured freedom from sexual stereotyping" (p. 115). The Merchant's May, however, only seeks to free herself from one lover for another. She believes she has manipulated January and Damian into believing they have won, but all three remain deluded, locked in the system of signification and authority they have accepted without question, despite the appearance of debate and counsel from Placebo and Justinus. In contrast to earlier versions of the pear tree tale, all of the references to locks and keys are unique to Chaucer's telling. Though May molds "warm wex" to counterfeit a "clycket" (4.2117), allowing Damian's entrance into January's wife and garden, it never occurred to her to use that key to let herself out. May is not the victorious huntress Diana, but the doomed Euridice, whose fate is determined by the gaze of Orpheus which consigns her to hell.

However, Proserpine (a guise of Diana in the Underworld according to Chaucer, Claudian and Ovid), provides a third option to the Venus/Diana duality suggested by Weissman: initially completely determined by the gaze of Pluto, Proserpine is partially rescued by her mother's intercession, their cycles of joy and grief determining the cycle of seasons which produce "old lewed" January during the dark barren winter and "fresshe" May with the return of spring. Like Eve and Mary, Venus and Diana are necessary sides of the same dehumanizing coin. Proserpine and her partial salvation raise questions and possibilities not accounted for by these oppositions. Enacting the resistance Weissman sees in Alice of Bath and the Miller's Alison, Proserpine's act of resistance in

her re-reading of Solomon (4.2292 ff.) identifies him with January and Pluto as rich old lechers who are, finally, impotent. A Russian version of AT#1423 evokes these same issues of resistance and reinterpretation when King David’s wife, pregnant with Solomon, witnesses both a neighbor’s adultery, and her ability to save herself with words. Proserpine’s revision of misogynist authority, granting a voice to the oblivious May, suggests an alternative no character in the Merchant’s Tale is able to see.

January’s blindness and his quasi-allegorical name not only identify him with the barren season resulting from Pluto’s rape of Proserpine; they also add to the tale a number of ironic associations with both the classical Olympian gate-keeper Janus and his Christian counterpart St. Peter, who is often the husband’s intercessor in medieval versions of AT#1423. Chaucer’s January thinks he can build walls and make locks, controlling who comes and goes in his earthly “paradise” (4.1265). But January cannot see, as Janus can, in two directions at once; he is completely blind.

January’s blindness and culpability have Biblical resonance as well. January embodies St. Paul’s negative exemplum, enacting the truth that “he who has evidence of the way to salvation and denies it is blind.” January’s abuse of religious tradition is clear in his misuse of St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, in which Paul says “Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her. . . . He who loves his wife loves himself.” In a reversal of both the letter and the spirit of the scripture, January justifies his lust: “Love wel thy wyf as Crist loved his chirche, If thou lovest thyself, thou lovost thy wyf” (4.1384–85).

27 A prose and verse ballad collected during the nineteenth century (Bryan and Dempster, pp. 350–51). A merchant’s wife and her lover commit adultery in an apple tree in their garden in Jerusalem. King David and his wife witness the act. David’s wife believes the woman would find an answer, even if her husband regained his sight. The merchant’s wife saves herself by claiming the action was prescribed in a dream to cure her husband’s blindness.
30 Eph. 5:25, 28.
Like the breaching of narrative levels in the Merchant’s Tale when the anti-feminist character Justinus refers to the anti-misogynist pilgrim the Wife of Bath (4.1685), the breaching of the “hortus conclusus,” the enclosed garden to which January alludes in his “lewed” references to the Song of Songs (4.2029–37), brings the courtly, classical and Biblical traditions together in a single image. That garden—fallen in Eden, redeemed through the “hortus conclusus” Mary, breached and ravaged in the Roman de la Rose, the site of abduction in Orfeo, and of rape in the story of Proserpine—becomes in Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale the stage upon which the terms of tradition and authority are called into question and found wanting. It is on this garden stage that Pluto and Proserpine appear, as King and Queen of Fairy, to debate the relationship between learned authoritative tradition and male/female relations.

Proserpine, like the Wife of Bath (3.679), calls attention to this tradition by questioning the arch-misogynist “Saloman” in support of women (4.2277–81). Lawrence Besserman points out that Proserpine’s citing of Solomon as a rebuttal to Pluto’s citing Ecclesiastes 7:28 (4.2247 ff.) is an orthodox reading based on the Glossa Ordinaria.31 Her orthodoxy calls to our attention the Merchant’s Tale’s reversal of the Biblical text: in the Song of Songs, the young woman offers her lover spiced wine made from the juice of pomegranates (8:3); January drinks spiced wine to be able to ravish his wife against her will, a rape which suggests that we remember Proserpine’s sentence to Hell because of a pomegranate. In the Song of Songs, the young woman reminds her lover that his mother gave birth beneath the apple tree (8:5); January’s laurel tree is designed as a place for taking his own pleasure, a pleasure which we know will not result in the conception of his child.32 In the Song of Songs, “love is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave . . . .” (8:6); for January, victimized by a view which has defined love as possession, love is not possible. Only jealousy and the grave exist. His “hoary head” is not a “blosmy laurel tree” as he imagines, or a fig tree blooming with blessings as portrayed in the gospel according to Mark, but an almond tree, flowering uselessly at the end of days, a vanity of vanities.33

31 Lawrence Besserman, “Glosynge is a Glorious Thyng: Chaucer’s Biblical Exegesis,” in Jeffrey, p. 66.
33 Eccles. 12:5.
Whether seen as a courtly lover, a classical god, a Biblical patriarch, a new Christian, or a tree, January fails, demonstrating Chaucer's insistence that we acknowledge the effect of traditional constructions of gender and power in the lives of individual people. January's keys, his eyes, his generative powers all fail as he attempts to twist authority and experience to serve his "old lewed" physical and financial needs. The "fantaseye" in which January lives is fantastic in the full Middle English sense of "fantaseye": illusory, unfounded, a failure of the mental faculties involved in reception and retention of sensory impressions, and a delusion in the formation of mental images and ideas.34

Many of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales ask questions about the relation between inherited vision and present practice, about the ability of seemingly disparate, and seemingly moral, traditions to create contemporary problems. Manuscript evidence suggests that, late in the revision of the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer reassigned Alys of Bath's fabliau to the Shipman so that she could speak a more complex call for equality. At about the same time in revision, the Merchant's Tale was used to head the B2 fragment, and Chaucer took the tale of Melibee and Prudence from the Man of Law, giving it to his pilgrim persona as "a moral tale vertuous" (7.2130), told in recompense for the romance of "Sir Thopas" which the Host had deemed "drasty rymyng . . . nat worth a toord" (7.2120).35

Reinforcing the hypothesized connection in the chronology of writing and revision of the Canterbury Tales, all three tales set up a traditional description of human behavior and then renounce it in nearly identical terms. Alys of Bath admits the grace of virginity and poverty, but chooses marriage over that perfection: "Lordynges, by youre leve, that am nat I" (3.112). Melibee's wise wife Prudence cites Solomon, that great misogynist cited by both Pluto and Proserpine. Solomon says men must avoid riotous women, says Prudence, and "Sire, by youre leve, that am nat I" (7.1088). January, the only man to speak these lines, forgoes chastity to indulge his desire for sex and power: "Sires, by youre leve, that am nat I" (4.1456).

The two female characters who speak these lines provide a Chaucerian context for judging January. In the Tale of Melibee, Prudence gives the advice women are not supposed to be able to comprehend, much less follow. She understands that the ways of people need to follow the ways of God more closely, that flatterers, fools and frightened servants are not wise counselors. Return peace for war, she advises. Be wise and kind. Melibee, whose January-like tactics would have led to violence and the loss of his daughter, regains Sophia through the ministry of Prudence. The daughter's name, original with Chaucer's translation of the tale, underlines what is at stake: Sophia is Wisdom.

Melibee, like many of the husbands created by Chaucer in works such as Troilus and Criseyde, The Legend of Good Women and The Knight's Tale, is interested in victory; in Margaret Gist's terms, he is "anti-woman and pro-war" at the outset of the tale.56 By the end of the tale, Melibee thanks God "that hym sente a wyf of so greet discrecioun" (7.1872), making peace with his enemies, and repenting "in the sighte of oure Lord God" (7.1885). Citing Nicholas of Cusa's De visione Dei sive de icona, Hope Weissman invokes this same gaze, which is not destructive but "reciprocal, fostering, constituted because constituting."57

Thus, then, Lord, I comprehend Thy face to precede every face that may be formed, and to be the pattern and true type of all faces... In the mirror of eternity what he seeth is not a figure, but the truth... Absolute truth cannot abandon the truth of my face...

For Chaucer, the revisionary nature of the Merchant's Tale is possible because the presence of meaning is not a "fantastic" illusion mirrored in the pool of Narcissus, or the mirrored marketplace of January's "herte," but a promised final homecoming for the viator who both journeys toward and helps construct truth. Rather than simply despising May and January, the Merchant's

57 Weissman, p. 118.
Tale suggests the possibility that they are both victims whose culpability in their own misery might suggest a way out—as does the textual connection to the Wife of Bath and Melibee's wife Prudence, and the intercessory traditions of Ceres and Proserpine.

Many readers have pointed out that we feel sorry for May only until we realize that she will not put up much of a fight about marrying rich old January, and that she does not take much urging to carry on a romance beginning with love letters in the "pryvee" (4.1954) and climaxing with hasty sex in a tree (4.2352–53). Damyan himself seems to exist mostly as a parodic place-marker, filling the position of the "naddre" (4.1786) in the Biblical fall, the student/priest in the fabliau and the courtly lover in the romance. His desires are comically exaggerated, his betrayal of January cast in part as class warfare rather than a "gentil" contest between social equals. Even the adulterous act is not truly enjoyed: compared with other versions of the pear tree tale, Chaucer systematically reduced the lovers' time in the pear tree, substituting "Damyan / Can pullen up the smok, and in he throng" for earlier versions' references to pleasure (4.2352–53). 39

Both in spite of and because of the universality signaled by their allegorically significant names, January and May are developed to the extent that we feel rage, disgust and sorrow in turn as they fall victim to the various literary and cultural traditions which have defined them. January, May and Damyan are all products of the "heigh fantasye" of classical, clerical, romance and fabliau anti-feminism and the "curious bisynesse" of viewing people as property (4.1577). The Merchant's Tale defines these traditions as a rape, a theft of self, underlining this truth by connecting both January and May to the story of rapist husband/uncle, ravished maiden and sorrowful mother.

The haunting cries of Ceres and Proserpine for self-determination are echoed in May's male-determined attempts to survive and perhaps to produce a child with a man she chooses. It is only in Chaucer's pear tree tale that January strokes May "on hire wombe" (4.2414), that Proserpine calls on her grandfather as her "mother's sire" (4.2265), that God's "Mooder Sainte Marie" is called upon for a blessing in the final words of the tale (4.2418).
And it is only in Chaucer's version that the "ravished" January, who has attempted to identify his own hoary head with the regeneration of a blooming tree, cries out "as dooth the mooder whan the child shal dye" (4.2365). The fury and terror of Ceres, crying out "as lows the mother whose calf has been torn from her udder" in Ovid, is echoed in January's moment of vision when May and Damyan's love-making is revealed.

When the Merchant narrator invokes "Seinte Marie" at the end of his tale, he is invoking that one woman among all women whom the anti-feminist tradition sees as a fully acceptable human being, an acceptability which can only be effected by a miraculous transgression of nature. This invocation, in the anti-feminist context, does not so much praise Mary as it reminds listeners that no other woman is any good. But for Chaucer, blame is not so simply assigned; the prayer to Mary reminds us of her humanness. Mary the intercessor, identified with the triple goddess by Villon as "Dame du ciel, Regente terrienne, / Emperiere des infernaux palus" ("Lady of Heaven, Regent of earth, Empress over the swamps of Hell") is also the sorrowing mother Ceres, and Proserpine made Queen of Hades. Mary also reminds us of women's suffering, and of their power for intercession, a power which is preserved in some Irish versions of AT#1423, in which it is Mary who speaks on behalf of the young wife.

There is much critical debate about the physical location and interpretive significance of the garden "paradys" in which the popular pear tree episode takes place in the Merchant's Tale. Perhaps Chaucer's tale asks us to envision the Merchant narrator and each of his characters inhabiting this scene in a way which both clarifies the terms of their delusion, and creates a web of significations which suggests a way out. May, unaware of Proserpine's intercession, sees herself as a success within the house and garden of a world constructed by misogynist tradition. January, unaware of Pluto and talked out of the witness of his own eyes,


41 Three Irish versions collected in 1936 for the Folklore of Ireland Society. One version has a blind old husband and the intervention is by fairies. This takes place in a tree. Two versions have intervention by Christ for the husband and the Virgin for the woman. One takes place in a hedge, the location is not identified in the other. All versions concern neighbors.
experiences the pear tree tale in the fruitless “paradys” of May’s body (4.1822), which will, according to fourteenth-century science, produce an heir only if she enjoys the sexual encounter which might initiate conception. The Merchant, whose failing marriage and devotion to profit have embittered him, sets his exemplary pear tree tale in the paradise lost of wicked Eve and foolish Adam, counterparts of May and January, and of shrewish Proserpine and feckless Pluto.

But the Merchant’s Tale, revealing the necessary connection of the popular tale, romance, classical and Biblical anti-feminism which damned these people, understands that the tale takes place in the well-tended gardens of Hades, presided over by Pluto, where May, Damyan and January must eat the fruit of the only tree available in order to survive.

Rather than reflecting the passing crowd, the “mirror” January erects in the marketplace of his heart is turned back on itself, revealing the delusions of his “heigh fantase” and “curious bisyness.” His corruption of the mercantile and the mirror recall both Chaucer’s own vision, as he takes leave of the Canterbury Tales, of the “beneigne grace of hym that . . . boghte us with the precious / blood of his herte” (10.1090), and the “mirror of eternity” in which “Absolute truth cannot abandon the truth” of each human face.⁴⁸ The Merchant’s Tale explicitly calls up the literary and cultural traditions, genealogies and communities of readers inherited by Ricardian England in a “middled” world where shape is given to the present by telling stories about its place in eternity.⁴⁸ While Pluto and Proserpine mirror human conflict, their presence focuses and magnifies both the shared culpability of inherited tales and traditions in making “paradys” into hell, and their revisionary potential.

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