THE SCORPION OF CHAUCER'S MERCHANT'S TALE

By George B. Pace

The climactic section of Chaucer's Merchant's Tale opens with the malediction:

O sodeyn hap! o thou Fortune unstable!
Lyk to the scorpion so deceyvable,
That flaterest with thyne heed whan thou wolt stynge;
Thy tayl is deeth, thurgh thyne envenymynge.
O brotil joye! o sweete venym queynete!
O monstre, that so subtly kanst peynete
Thy yiftes under hewe of stidefastnesse,
That thou deceyvest bothe moore and lesse!
Why hastow Januarie thus deceyved,
That haddest hym for thy fulle freend receyved?
And now thou hast biraf hym bothe his yen,
For sorwe of which desireth he to dyen.¹

(2057-68)

January now begins his fall from Fortune's favor.

My purpose is to consider the meaning of the scorpion as a symbol in The Merchant's Tale. Robinson writes: "The scorpion was the symbol of treachery" (p. 694). That Chaucer so views the creature is apparent from his phrasing ("deceyvable," "deceyvest") and from his development of the similitude. Moreover, treachery is virtually inherent in the medieval scorpion, which was widely believed to behave in the manner that Chaucer describes: to present to its victim a mild, flattering face before delivering its sting. One can cite no less an

authority than Gregory the Great: "Verily, the scorpion comes with flattery, but strikes with the tail; it does not sting with the face." Long before Chaucer this conception of the scorpion had also been applied to human beings. One can again cite Gregory: "They are scorpions who appear flattering and innocuous of face, but behind the back bear the means of pouring out poison.".

The scorpion has, however, another connotation: sexuality. This connotation has been virtually ignored in previous discussions of the symbol, but it can be shown to have existed and to have been known to Chaucer. The essential question which I shall attempt to answer is: Does the connotation of sexuality have relevance for The Merchant's Tale?

One association of the scorpion with sexuality is found in the astrological medicine of late classical and medieval times, in the connection believed to hold between the signs of the zodiac and the parts of the human body. Each sign controls a particular anatomical area. The province of the scorpion is the pudenda, as the following passage from Manilius indicates: "Aries has to do with the head, Taurus with the neck; the arms are under Gemini... and Scorpio rules the privy parts." This association persists long past Chaucer's time, and can be seen even today in the diagram of the human figure printed in farmers' almanacs, where Scorpio is still shown as governing the reproductive organs.

In his Treatise on the Astrolabe, Chaucer writes of the zodiac:

And everich of these 12 signes hath respect to a certeyn parcel of the body of a man, and hath it in governaunce; as Aries hath thin heved, and Taurus thy nekke and thy throte, Gemini thin armholes and thin armes, and so furth, as shall be shewid more pleyn in the 5 partic of this tretis. (I.21.70-77)

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3 "Scorpio enim palpando incidunt, sed cauda ferit: nec mordet a facie" Migne. PL. LXXVI, 879 (Hom. in Ezechielum I.9)
4 "Scorpiones ergo sunt qui blandi et innoxii in facie videntur, sed post dorsum portant unde venenum fundant." idem Gregorius. Gregory is hardly the originator of this commonplace, for which numerous later citations could be made.
4 I find no extended discussion of the scorpion as a symbol Morton W. Bloomfield. The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept (East Lansing, Mich., 1952), includes the scorpion among the symbols for lechery, but virtually without discussion
Actually, Chaucer never returned to the physiological significance of the signs, but a miniature in the Brussels MS of the Astrolabe leaves little doubt as to the meaning of his “and so furth.” The miniature, depicts a naked human figure with the signs arranged on the parts of the body governed by them. A scorpion is placed over the organs of generation, and a gloss in the margin states: “Scorpio . . . has power, outside the body, over the genitalia, and also over the privy parts of the testicles, the bladder, and the anus, even to the thigh.”

Another early sexual association of the scorpion appears in the Bible, in Ecclesiasticus 26:10. Here the focus is not on sexuality generally but on one aspect, woman’s sexuality: “As a yoke of oxen is moved to and fro, so also is a wicked woman: he that hath hold of her is as he that taketh hold of a scorpion.” This verse—supplemented, presumably, by the zodiacal association (Bloomfield, p. 48)—leads to a specifically medieval development of the scorpion as a symbol, a development which occurs as a result of the animalization of the sins. Of this process Bloomfield writes: “Gradually the whole wealth of animal lore and science that appeared in Latin writers and culminated in the Physiologus began to be used by the Church for moral instruction. Jerome in his Commentary on Isaiah VI.14 had set a fashion for animal instruction . . .” (p. 79). In due course certain animals came to symbolize sins, especially the seven deadly sins. The sin symbolized by the scorpion was lechery.

The Ancrene Riwle, in which man is viewed as inhabiting a wilderness made perilous by seven “beastly” sins, furnishes a striking example of the scorpion as a symbol of lechery:

\[
\text{i} \text{pisse} \text{wildernesse beo} \text{ monie vuele bes-tes. liun of prude. neddre of attri onde. vnicorne of wre} \text{g} \text{e. beore of dead slou\text{h}e. vox of 3iscunge. Suwe of 3iuernesse. scoriun mid te teile of stinkinde lecherie.}
\]

After discussing these sins, the author explains why the scorpion is chosen to symbolize lechery:

Inouh is e\text{c}\text{ene hwu ich habbe i efned prude to liun. . . . & of alle}

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7 The Douay translation is used, here and elsewhere, as sufficiently close to the Vulgate.

Although the primary basis for this passage is obviously Ecclesiasticus 26:10 (misattributed to Solomon), the fancy from natural history adds a significant effect. Woman is not merely like a scorpion; the scorpion is physically like a woman.9

That Chaucer was acquainted with the scorpion as a symbol for lechery is shown by The Parson’s Tale:

And theryfore seith Salomon that “whoso toucheth and handleth a womman, he fareth lyk hym that handleth the scorpion that syng- eth and sodeynly sleeth thurgh his envenymynge.” (853)10

This passage comes from the section of The Parson’s Tale dealing with the sin of lechery (Sequitur de Luxuria). The scorpion was thus known to Chaucer in two prominent sexual connotations: as the zodiacal sign governing the sex organs; as a symbol for lechery, a symbol emphasizing woman’s role and asserting biblical authority for doing so.11

Do these connotations have relevance for The Merchant’s Tale? The scorpion appears once in the tale, in the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper. I repeat the appropriate portion:

9 Walter W. Skeat (Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, V [Oxford, 1894], 365) quotes Vincent of Beauvais (“Scorpio blandum et quasi virgineum dicitur vultum habere,” Spec. Nat. xx.160) and says that Vincent is, in turn, quoting “the Liber de Naturis Rerum” (Alexander Neckam’s?).

10 This quotation does not prove that Chaucer knew the symbol in all its picturesque detail, although it is difficult to believe that he escaped acquaintance with the Ancræ Reule (cf. Hope Emily Allen, “Some Fourteenth Century Borrowings from Ancræ Reule,” MLR, XVIII [1928], 1-8, and “Further Borrowings from Ancræ Reule,”” MLR, XXIV [1929], 1-13). The symbol appears in all the principal versions of the Ancræ Reule, see the following volumes in the EETS series: No. 225 (1952), pp. 87-92; No. 229 (1954), pp. 54-59; No. 252 (1953), pp. 63-67; No. 249 (1962), pp. 101-107 (Ancræ Wesse); No. 216 (1944), pp. 67-73 (Latin version); No. 240 (1958), pp. 39-40, 271 (French version); see also J. Pålssøn, ed., The Recluse, Lundı Universíeténs Årskrift, nrd VI (1011), 96; 102-103. The symbol occurs also in a Latin poem by Petrus Presbyter (see Ch.-V. Langlois, “Notice et extraits du ms. 164 de la bibliothèque du Mans,” Revue Historique, L [1892], 285. lines 498-501) and, according to Bloomfield (p. 151), elsewhere.

11 The scorpion has still other sexual associations, but hardly known to Chaucer, see, for example, the note in Louis Ginzberg, Legends of the Jews, V (Philadelphia, 1925), 233 (Abraham circumcised by the bite of a scorpion).
O sodeyn hap! o thou Fortune unstable!
Lyk to the scorpion so deceyvable,
That flaterest with thyn heed whan thou wolt stynge;
Thy tayl is deeth, thurgh thyn envenymynge.
O brotil joye! o sweete venym queyne!
O monstre....

Unquestionably the scorpion was a symbol of treachery, and unquestionably the overt subject of these lines is the treachery of Fortune. But the passage as a whole cannot be explained on the assumption that treachery is the only meaning present.

To begin with, the lines contain the unmistakable sexual puns, *tayl* and *queynte*. Both words have, of course, innocent surface meanings. But both have also a vulgar signification (pudendum) which was well known to Chaucer. One pun is pointedly related to Fortune by the pronoun *thy* ("thy tayl"). The other pun is less specifically attached to the goddess but is nonetheless inescapable (cf. the emendation in Physicians MS: "o sweete venymous queyne").

The sexuality apparent in the puns is continued in the phrases *brotil joye* and *sweete venym*. These oxymora cannot refer to the literal, nonsymbolic scorpion, the sting of which is neither joyous nor sweet. Both logically and syntactically the phrases concern Fortune—Fortune as a scorpion—and require a context which is at once pleasurable and dangerous. Lechery, a meaning just established for the scorpion, supplies such a context perfectly.

Lechery must underlie a final detail: "Thy tayl is deeth, thurgh thyn envenymynge." At first sight this statement may seem to be merely gratuitous information (no one dies in The Merchant's Tale). The same statement occurs, however, in The Parson's Tale, with repetition of phrasing: "the scorpion that styngeth and sodeynly sleeth thurgh his envenymynge." Here the remark is an addition to the verse from Ecclesiasticus. The reason for the addition is obvious: lechery, one of the seven deadly sins, leads man to the most feared of all deaths—damna-

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12 Chaucer puns upon *tayl* in The Wife of Bath's Prologue (line 466) and in The Shipman's Tale (line 416; perhaps also line 494); see Claude Jones, "Chaucer's Taillynge Ynough," MLN, LII (1957), 570; Robert A. Caldwell, "Chaucer's Taillynge Ynough, Canterbury Tales, B* 1624," MLN, LV (1940), 285; Albert H. Silverman, "Sex and Money in Chaucer's Shipman's Tale," PQ, XXXII (1958), 835. Skeat observes (I, 479) that the Merchant's Tale passage is a rewriting of lines 636-41 of The Book of the Duchess. The puns are additions, as are the other features commented upon below.

13 John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, Text of the Canterbury Tales (Chicago, 1940), VI, 467.
tion, death of the soul. The _Ancrenne Riwle_ makes the idea explicit: “ße teil [of the scorpion] & ñe attri ende is ñe eche pine of helle” (p. 92). In _The Merchant’s Tale_ the statement, like the oxymora, refers not to the scorpion but to Fortune. Fortune’s “tayl” is death. Why:

The preceding features create a picture of Fortune which is strikingly similar to the woman-visaged scorpion of the _Ancrenne Riwle_: that is, a picture of the treacherous goddess as a woman who smiles seductively but carries death in her “tayl,” in its “sweete venym queynte.” In short, a harlot: “For the lips of the harlot are like a honeycomb dropping, and her throat is smoother than oil. But her end is bitter as wormwood, and sharp as a two-edged sword” (Proverbs 5:3-4). To present Fortune as a harlot is in keeping with the goddess in medieval tradition, for she was often viewed as such. Moreover, to present her as a harlot is most in character for the bitterly antifeminist Merchant.

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14 See Howard R. Patch, _The Goddess Fortuna in Mediaeval Literature_ (Cambridge, Mass, 1927), pp. 56-57, and especially p. 57, n 1