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Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale*, Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Tale of the Enchanted Pear-Tree*, and *Sir Orfeo* Viewed as Eroticized Versions of the Folktales about Supernatural Wives

ABSTRACT

Two of the tales mentioned in the title are in many ways typical of the great collections of stories (*The Canterbury Tales* and *Il Decamerone*) to which they belong. What makes them conspicuous is no doubt the intensity of the erotic desire presented as the ultimate law which justifies even the most outrageous actions. The cult of eroticism is combined there with a cult of youth, which means disaster for the protagonists, who try to combine eroticism with advanced age. And yet the stories in question have roots in a very different tradition in which overt eroticism is punished and can only reassert itself in a chastened form, its transformation being due to sacrifices made by the lover to become reunited with the object of his love. A medieval example of the latter tradition is here the Middle English romance, *Sir Orfeo*. All of the three narratives are conspicuously connected by the motif of the enchanted tree. The Middle Ages are associated with a tendency to moralize ancient literature, the most obvious example of which is the French anonymous work *Ovide moralisé* (Moralized Ovid), and its Latin version *Ovidius Moralizatus* by Pierre Bersuire. In the case of *The Merchant's Tale* and *The Tale of the Enchanted Pear-Tree*, we seem to meet with the opposite process, that is with a medieval demoralization of an essentially didactic tradition. The present article deals with the problem of how this transformation could happen and the extent of the resulting un-morality. Some use has also been made of the possible biblical parallels with the tales in question.

ABSTRACT

The three tales that this paper is concerned with use the motif of enchantment. They are also clearly erotic, and their most intensely erotic aspects and scenes are clearly associated with that motif of enchantment. So the most obvious question that imposes itself is about the link between eroticism and enchantment. This link is, in a sense, obvious and trivial if we consider the basic definition of the verb “to enchant,” even when used in its mythological and folkloric sense, namely “to exert magical influence upon; to bewitch, lay under spell,” and even more so when the word is used in its more general and loose sense “to charm, delight, enrapture” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Chaucer himself talks, in his *The Knight's Tale*, about “The enchauntementz of Medea and Circes” (l. 1944) in a strictly erotic context when describing the temple and nature of Venus, the goddess of love, whose devoted servants Medea and Circe, both powerful witches and enchantresses, no doubt were. They were also both famous as ancient embodiments of the archetype of the *femme fatale*, that is of a dangerous and irresistible woman who seduces men to bring about their undoing, even though of Medea we often say that she reveals her dangerous aspect only as a reaction to having been shamelessly deceived by the man she chose for her lover or husband.¹ As regards Circe, she is, as is well known, in the habit of turning men into swine, which indeed might be interpreted as an ironic and quasi-puritanical metaphor of human sexuality whereby the behaviour of even highly civilized persons becomes reduced to mere animal instincts. Circe would then be an allegory of the dehumanizing power of sexuality, an allegory perhaps based on a misogynistic idea that this power is a female weapon used to turn men into women's abject slaves and kept animals. An interesting embodiment of the Circe archetype is the character of Acrasia from Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. She is an enchantress inhabiting the so called Bower of Bliss into which she attracts unwary knights who become her toys, and she turns them into beasts when she is bored with them. They become so beastly that they resent being restored to a human shape and they long for relapsing into an inhuman condition (Spenser 137–39).

¹ This is the usual interpretation of her behaviour based on the classical play *Medea* by Euripides, where she murders her own, and Jason's, children to take revenge on him, but in Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths* the same story is shown as much more complicated. For example, Medea shows her murderous aspects even earlier, when she deceived king Pelias into believing that she would bring about his rejuvenation, while in fact she intended to kill him (with Jason's connivance), which she did with the unwitting help of Pelias's daughters (Graves 2: 250–56).

Let it be also noticed that there is a significant lack of symmetry between the terms “enchanter” and “enchantress”; the latter seems to be much more often used in an erotic context than the former. A male enchanter is usually a magician performing various tricks by means of genuine magic or sleight of hand, while the female enchantress is nearly always a *femme fatale*, who may use magic, in its basic or metaphorical sense, but only for the purpose of achieving an erotic success. Enchantment then functions in practice as a term referring mainly to the supposedly female style of playing erotic games.

And yet, if we have a look at the way the motif of enchantment is used in folktales, we notice that it almost never refers to the act of falling in love, or becoming erotically fascinated by somebody. The male hero does indeed often fall in love with a woman who has something to do with enchantment, but usually in the sense that she has already been enchanted when she meets the male protagonist, and “to be enchanted” in this context means to be transformed, usually by a malicious sorcerer, or sorceress, into a supernatural creature that can sometimes appear in its human form, but very often appears in the form of an animal, typically, in the case of enchanted women, as a swan, or some other bird.² At the same time, it still remains true that it is dangerous to fall in love with an enchanted character, no matter whether the one who becomes enamoured is a man, and the object of his love a woman, or rather a female monster, or the other way round. We might risk a statement that, in folktales, the enchanting characters (in the sense of possessing great sex-appeal) are usually also the ones who have been enchanted (in the sense of being transformed into a non-human, or not entirely human, creature).³ It is not easy at all to domesticate the enchanted character, and eventually to disenchant him or her, and thus turn them into conventional and fully human wives or husbands. The enchanted figures tend to be demanding and are very easy to take offence (if their conditions are first accepted, but then broken by their mortal partner), and when they do take offence, they turn their backs on their mortal lovers, and often forget about them altogether, choosing new mates for themselves among other

² Enchanted men, or boys, also often take on the form of birds, but they are more usually crows or ravens.

³ There are exceptions to this rule; for example in Type 313 (The Girl as Helper in the Hero’s Flight) it happens quite often that the hero finds himself in the power of an ogre and falls in love with his daughter, who is willing to help him in carrying out a series of impossible tasks and eventually in escaping from the ogre’s house (see Thompson 89). She is clearly a magical creature, but she does not have to, even though she can, assume non-human forms. A good example of this type is the Scottish tale *Nicht Nought Nothing* (see Foss 24–28).

supernatural creatures. The mortal protagonist can, however, find them and win them back, but only at the cost of great suffering and privation. The whole vast class of tales about supernatural husbands and wives⁴ seems to serve as a metaphorical representation of the great difficulty and risk inherent in an erotic, or heterosexual, relationship as such, even though the so called tales of magic are regularly provided with a happy ending.⁵

Let us return, however, to Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale*.⁶ Apparently, it has nothing to do with tales about supernatural husbands and wives. January, a respectable elderly citizen of the North Italian town of Pavia marries a young woman called May, who, in keeping with the convention of the so-called fabliaux, quickly proceeds to betray her highly unsatisfactory husband with a young man, and she gets away with it, while formally remaining January's wife. January is watchful and insanely jealous of his wife but he still lets himself be quite easily deceived by her. May is not shown as a supernatural creature; she is an ordinary healthy young woman who is clever enough at satisfying her carnal desires without weakening her social position, which she owes to her union with January. And yet it is enough to compare *The Merchant's Tale* with an anonymous English Breton lay called *Sir Orfeo* to find out that we have here to do with a drastic, but still recognizable, transformation of the narrative pattern of the tales about supernatural wives.

In *Sir Orfeo*, which is vaguely similar to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, we have a king, named Orfeo, whose wife, Queen Heurodys,

⁴ In the classic work of A. Aarne and S. Thompson they extend from Type 400 to Type 449, and their most fundamental forms are Type 400 (The Man on a Quest for his Lost Wife), where the motif of the Swan Maiden often appears, and which is represented by the following tales in the Brothers Grimm collection: *The King of the Golden Mountain* (92), *The Raven* (93), and *The Drummer* (193); and Type 425 (The Search for the Lost Husband), represented by the Grimms' tale entitled *The Singing, Soaring Lark* (88). See Aarne and Thompson 62–71. See also Chapter 5 [Lovers and Married Couples] in Thompson (87–105).

⁵ The legends corresponding to the tales about supernatural wives naturally do not have to end happily; indeed they usually do not, like, for example, the French medieval legend of Mélusine, who is a fairy wife that takes offence, like in tales of magic, with her mortal husband, but, unlike in tales of magic, refuses to become reconciled with him (see Clier-Colombani). The same concerns the mythical parallels, such as the myth of Pluto and Proserpine, in which both husband and wife are supernatural, and where, instead of a static reunion between the husband and wife, typical of tales of magic, the wife regularly leaves her husband, and regularly returns to him, in keeping of course with the rhythm of natural seasons.

⁶ J.S.P. Tatlock calls it "one of the most surprising pieces of unlovely virtuosity in all literature" and goes on to say "One might feel half ashamed of so greatly enjoying so merciless a tale, and might balk at prolonged analysis" (Tatlock 175–76).

having slept under a grafted tree, gets into contact with a powerful king of fairies who abducts her by magical means, in spite of armed guards that Orfeo placed around her, provoking her husband to a long search, in which he assumes the position of a lowly outcast and an itinerant musician wandering alone through deep woods. The search ends with Orfeo's recovering his queen from the hands of the fairy king, who, impressed by the beauty of Orfeo's musical performance, keeps his promise of granting the hero every wish that he may express, and with Orfeo's and Heurodys' joyful return to their country and to their former social position. Unlike in classical versions of the tales about supernatural wives, Heurodys is not an obviously enchanted character. She does, however, become psychologically transformed as a result of seeing the fairy king in her dream—this induces in her a fit of despair bordering on madness. She does not become offended with her husband, and she does not leave him, or rather, she does leave him, but not of her own volition. In later scenes, however, she appears as a typical fairy lady taking part, together with other female fairies, in the social events of the Fairyland, being apparently oblivious of her former life and her mortal husband. The latter's taking her out of that Fairyland and making her again into his queen has obvious features of removing the spell under which she has fallen. We may speculate that originally she was also a kind of swan-maiden, a denizen of the otherworld, whom Orfeo managed, albeit only for a time, to isolate from the contacts with her original fellow creatures.⁷

January, like Orfeo, is a man who has got out of touch with reality; he has created a fantastic image of marriage (or of life) based on his egotistic dreams. This can be seen in the following lines:

Heigh fantasye and curious bisynesse
 Fro day to day gan in the soule impresse
 Of Januarie aboute his marriage.
 Many fair shap and many a fair visage
 Ther passeth through his herte nyght by nyght,
 As whosotooke a mirour, polished bright,
 And sette it in a commune market place,
 Thanne sholde he se ful many a figure pace

⁷ It is interesting that Robert Graves represents the Greek mythological Eurydice, who was a model for Dame Heurodys, as a serpent woman, so definitely a supernatural wife (Graves 1: 115, 128). From a folkloristic point of view, the mythical story of Orpheus and Eurydice, in its best known form, is, just like the myth of Pluto and Proserpine, a version of the tales about supernatural wives in which the happy reunion of the pair, characteristic of tales of magic, is rendered impossible (even though in the case of Orpheus and Eurydice we come, so to speak, within a hair's breadth of such a reunion), or given a pessimistic interpretation, which is generally typical of myths and legends.

By his mirour.

...

Yet is ther so parfit felicitee
 And so greet ese and lust in mariage
 That evere I am agast now in myn age
 Tha I shal dede now so myrie a lyf,
 So delicat, withouten wo and stryf,
 That I shall have myn hevene in erthe heere.
 (Chaucer 158–59, ll. 1577–85, 1642–47)

Busy imagination, strange invention
 And soaring fantasy obsessed the attention
 Of January's soul, about his wedding.
 Came many a lovely form and feature shedding
 A rapture through his fancies night by night.
 As who should take a mirror polished bright
 And set it in the common market place,
 And watch the many figures pause and pace
 Across his mirror;

...

Yet there is so perfect felicity
 In marriage, so much pleasure, so few tears,
 That I keep fearing, though advanced in years,
 I shall be leading such a happy life,
 So delicate, with neither grief nor strife
 That I shall have my heaven here in earth[.]
 (Coghill 383–85)

The lines that, in *Sir Orfeo*, seem to correspond to the above are the following ones:

Orpheo most of ony thing
 Louede the gle of harpyng.
 Syker was euery gode harpoure
 Of hym to haue moche honoure.
 Hymself loued for to harpe,
 And layde theron his wittes scharpe;
 He lernyd so, ther nothing was
 A better harper in no plas.
 [In] the world was neuer man born
 That euer Orfeo sat byforn—
 And he myght of his harpyng here—
 He schulde thinke that he were
 In one of the ioys of paradys,

Suche ioy and melody in his harpyng is.⁸
(French and Hale 324, ll. 25–38)

Sir Orfeo, too, all things beyond
of harping's sweet delight was fond,
and sure were all good harpers there
of him to earn them honour fair;
himself he loved to touch the harp
and pluck the strings with fingers sharp.
He played so well, beneath the sun
a better harper was there none;
no man hath in this world been born,
who would not, hearing him, have sworn
that as before him Orfeo played
to joy of Paradise he had strayed
and sound of harpers heavenly,
such joy was there and melody.
(Tolkien 134)

Orfeo trusts his skill at harp playing, just like January trusts his imaginary mirror, and both instruments serve to evoke visions of paradise, a fool's paradise. The difference of course is that Sir Orfeo's fantasies are based, after all, on some kind of reality, for he really is an excellent harpist, and can enchant even wild animals with his playing, while January can be only a passive object of enchantment, contemplating his mirror images.⁹

Of crucial importance, however, is the motif of a tree. It is through the tree, as we remember, that the fairy king manages to gain access to Heurodys's mind. A tree is also very important in *The Merchant's Tale*, namely the pear tree¹⁰ growing in January's garden. When walking there, together with her husband, May is suddenly seized by an irresistible desire to eat a pear from that tree, which she represents, falsely as we should understand,¹¹ as a pregnant woman's whim. January, to humour his wife,

⁸ In the spelling, "thorn" is here represented by "th," and "yogh" by "gh."

⁹ If January had not been merely an old fool, it could have been perhaps possible to see him as almost a male equivalent of Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott*, or of the prisoners in Plato's famous *Allegory of the Cave*, whose attempt to escape the world of dreams, or rather to translate them into reality, ends in a dismal failure.

¹⁰ Pear, as a symbol, is often associated with eroticism and femininity: "this is probably due to its sweet taste, juiciness and also to its shape which has a suggestion of the feminine about it" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 742). On the other hand, it is true that the pear appears as masculine symbol in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, see *Romeo and Juliet* I.2.837.

¹¹ J.S.P. Tatlock calls it a "silly pretense" (178).

helps her even to climb the tree in the branches of which the young Damian, who is a figure of small importance in the tale, is waiting for May to make love to her, which of course January, being blind, is completely unaware of. In *The Merchant's Tale*, the figure of the hero's supernatural rival undergoes an interesting reduplication. Apart from Damian, there appears Pluto, the king of the Underworld, who, however, contrary to expectations, does not seem to be interested in May; in fact, he tries to make January realize the unworthiness of his wife. It looks as though the scandalous sexual act in the crown of the pear tree, and the total humiliation of the husband who unwittingly assists the lovers, awake or summon the king and queen of fairies, whose names are Pluto and Proserpine. So, exactly as in *Sir Orfeo*, the ancient myths of the Underworld are collated with the folk legends of the fairy Otherworld.¹² Pluto immediately feels a kind of masculine solidarity with January, so he decides to restore his eyesight to make him see his wife's blatant disloyalty, while Proserpine takes of course the side of May and promises to give her the presence of mind sufficient to refute her husband's reproaches. In *Sir Orfeo*, the fairy king has clearly two faces: one is that of the hero's ruthless rival who brutally claims his wife for himself, the other that of an arbiter of good manners who can appreciate the hero's efforts, abide by the rules of the agreement between himself and Orfeo, and, albeit reluctantly, give him his wife back.

Let us have a closer look at the scene in which May is shown climbing the pear tree:

“Allas,” quod he, “that I ne had heer a knave
 That koude clymbe! Allas, allas,” quod he,
 “For I am blynd!” “Ye, sire, no fors,” quod she;
 “Bit wolde ye vouche sauf, for Goddes sake,
 The pyrie inwith youre armes for to take,
 For wel I woot that ye mystruste me,
 Thanne sholde I clymbe wel ynogh,” quod she,
 “So I my foot myghte sete upon youre bak.”
 (Chaucer 167, ll. 2338–45)

“Alas,” he said, “that there’s no boy about,
 Able to climb. Alas, alas,” said he,
 “That I am blind.” “No matter, sir,” said she,

¹² There is also a structural similarity, already indicated, between the myth of Pluto and Proserpine, that of Orpheus and Eurydice, the story of January and May, and the folktales about supernatural wives, as they all contain the motif of the protagonist who has to separate, for a time or for ever, from his wife, who is, in one way or another, transported into a different world, even though, in the case of the story of January and May, this “different world” is merely the crown of the pear tree.

“For if you would consent—there’s nothing in it—
 To hold the pear-tree in your arms a minute
 (I know you have no confidence in me),
 The I could climb up well enough,” said she,
 “If I could set my foot upon your back.”
 (Coghill 404)

What follows is a passage from *Sir Orfeo* concerning the precautions Orfeo takes to prevent his wife being abducted by the fairy king:

Amorwe the vndertide is come,
 And Orfeo hath his armes ynome,
 And wele ten hundred knightes with him,
 Ich yarmed stout and grim;
 And with the Quen wenten he
 Right vnto that ympe-tre.
 Thai made scheltrom in ich a side
 And sayd thai wold there abide,
 And dye ther euerichon,
 Er the Quen schuld fram hem gon.
 (French and Hale 329, ll. 180–88)

On the morrow, when the noon drew near,
 In arms did Orfeo appear,
 and ten hundred knights with him,
 all stoutly armed, all stern and grim;
 and with their queen now went that band
 beneath the grafted tree to stand.
 A serried rank on every side
 they made, and vowed there to abide,
 and die sooner for her sake
 than let men thence their lady take.
 (Tolkien 137–38)

A thousand excellently armed and prepared knights, led by Orfeo, that is their king, certainly make a more serious impression than an old, blind man pathetically embracing a tree. And yet both scenes are functionally, and to a large extent also formally, analogous. Both describe a futile attempt on the part of the mortal husband, to protect his wife from rivals, both consist in encircling a tree, with soldiers, or merely with arms, and both are totally ineffective, the difference being that January, embracing the tree, actually helps his rival, instead of creating any obstacles for him, or for his treacherous wife. Another difference naturally consists in the fact that Orfeo wants to protect his wife, who is visibly

repelled and terrified by rather than attracted to Orfeo's supernatural rival, while January's motivation is much more egoistic. He agrees to help his wife to climb the tree, as he cannot, being blind, do it himself,¹³ but he also wants, as his wife readily recognizes, to make sure that nobody approaches that tree, being obsessively, even if not without reason, jealous of his wife (Chaucer 167, ll. 2341–44). Naturally, the husband's gesture of embracing the tree only repeats, on a metaphorical level, the gesture of enclosure embodied in the institution of marriage, and in the structure of the garden, and January's garden is described exactly as a tightly closed space:

Amonges othere of his honeste thynges,
He made a gardyn, walled al with stoon;
(Chaucer 163, ll. 2028–29)

And among other of his handsome things
He had a garden, walled about with stone;
(Coghill 395)

Orfeo is not a ridiculous and off-putting figure, like January, but he also shows a certain lack of intelligence in placing his guardians and his wife under the grafted tree, even though he could have realized, seeing that his wife had a nightmarish vision of the fairy king when sleeping under that tree, that the tree functions as a kind of lightning rod which attracts denizens of the Otherworld, or, in other words, that the tree is, or at least could be, a gateway to fairyland. Such is also, in a sense, the function of the pear tree in *The Merchant's Tale*, for the crown of that tree is inhabited not only by May and her lover making love, but also by Pluto and Proserpine, who are explicitly and repeatedly referred to as “kyng of Fairye” (ll. 2227, 2234) and “queene of Fayerye” (l. 2316).

A slightly different variety of the enchanted tree can be found in the story of Lydia and Pyrrhus (day 7, tale 9) from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the story which, in its rough outline, is almost identical with the plot of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*. But the tree functions there in a slightly different way. In Chaucer's tale January's rival, Damian, is hiding in the garden, while, in Boccaccio, Pyrrhus, the youthful rival, and, like Damian, a servant of the old husband Nicostratus, is walking in the garden together with his master and the master's wife Lydia. When Lydia expresses her desire for a pear from the pear tree, Pyrrhus immediately climbs the tree to fetch it. Probably a pun is intended here because “pear tree” in Latin is “pirus,”

¹³ This may well be a symbolical representation of his sexual impotence, which is not explicitly referred to in this tale.

so Pyrrhus¹⁴ is himself a spirit of the pear-tree, and he is also the pear that Lydia really desires.

... once in the tree, Pyrrhus called to his master, "Have you no shame, making love like that in broad daylight?" The master demanded an explanation for the strange remark, and Pyrrhus concluded that the pear tree was enchanted, giving the impression of unreal happenings below. To test the theory, he asked his master to climb the tree, and see if he too would behold impossible things below. His curiosity piqued, Nicostratus mustered enough strength to climb onto one of the pear tree's lower branches. Looking down, what did he behold but Pyrrhus and Lydia making fervent love. From his precarious perch, he shouted curses, threats, and insults at them, but they—engaged with other pursuits—quite ignored him. Nicostratus climbed down from the tree, only to find Pyrrhus and Lydia seated discretely on a garden bench. Their innocent demeanor convinced him that nothing unseemly had happened. Fearing that only a bedevilled tree could be responsible for the vile images that he had perceived, he sent for an ax and had it cut down immediately. From that time forth Nicostratus relaxed his watchful vigil over his young wife, and thus Pyrrhus and Lydia were able to pluck the fruits of their love at regular intervals, even without the help of their enchanted pear tree. (Ashliman)

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Boccaccio's lovers do not then make love on the pear-tree, like in Chaucer, but rather under it, and the pear-tree itself is not so much enchanted, even though it is called an enchanted pear-tree, but rather it is used as if it were a universal enchanting device capable of turning fiction into reality, and reality into fiction. Nicostratus orders the "bedevilled tree" to be cut down, but this does not help much. The mechanism of confusion between reality and fiction once set in motion cannot be so easily halted, and old Nicostratus can no longer exercise his rights as a husband because he is no longer so sure about what is and what is not, and without such assurance no rights can be exercised. Lydia calls the pear tree "il nimico della mia onestà" (Boccaccio 492), "the enemy of my honesty," and it is obvious that the tree is treated here as a convenient scapegoat on which Lydia's sin may be laid. The classical scapegoat, however, is said to remove, or to bear away, the sins of the sinner,¹⁵ whereas here no such moral purification is intended. On the contrary, Lydia hopes, in spite of her protestations, to be able to practise her dishonesty perpetually and

¹⁴ Of course the name Pyrrhus is really a Greek one, and means "of the colour of fire," which is not a bad name for a lover.

¹⁵ "And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness" (Lev. 16:22).

with impunity. Even after the tree is cut down, it remains “a friend of Lydia’s dishonesty.”

In Chaucer’s tale, the lovers, or rather May herself, finds a slightly different way out. Owing to Pluto’s intervention, January recovers his eyesight, but the first thing he sees is the sight of his wife making love to his servant, which of course makes him lose his temper:

“Out! Help! Allas! Harrow!” he gan to crye,
 “O stronge lady stoore, what dostow?
 And she answerde, “Sire, what eyleth yow?
 Have pacience and resoun in youre mynde.
 I have yow holpe on bothe youre eyen blynde.
 Up peril of my soule, I shal nat lyen,
 As me was taught, to heele with your eyen,
 Was no thyng bet, to make yow to see,
 Than struggle with a man upon a tree.
 God woot, I dide it in ful good entente.”
 (Chaucer 167, ll. 2366–75)

“Help! Out upon you!” He began to cry,
 “Strong Madam Strumpet! What are you up to there”
 “What ails you, sir?” said she, “what makes you swear?
 Have patience, use the reason in your mind,
 I’ve helped you back to sight when you were blind!
 Upon my soul I’m telling you no lies;
 They told me if I wished to heal your eyes
 Nothing could cure them better than for me
 To struggle with a fellow in a tree,
 God knows it was kindness that I meant.”
 (Coghill 404–05)

January naturally questions the word “struggle,” since he saw the couple doing something rather different, but then the wife manages to convince him that he was wrong to have trusted his eyes, which, having been dysfunctional for so long, are not yet perfectly reliable.

We can indeed ask why the wife’s “struggling with a fellow in a tree” (“struggle with a man upon a tree”) should be considered a possible medicine for blindness. If this is a Biblical allusion, and of course the pear tree in January’s garden has already been compared to the tree growing in the middle of the Garden of Eden,¹⁶ then we would have to conclude that May alludes

¹⁶ “Januarie is ‘hoor and oolde’, sharing the bare and unfruitful characteristics of his title month, whereas his youthful and ‘fresshe’ wife represents the spring seasons. This has

to the serpent's words: "For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5), and that she offers an alternative version of the story of the Garden of Eden as a story about how Eve betrayed Adam with the serpent (a fellow on a tree) under a truly "bedevilled tree," which is a version of the tales about supernatural wives, in which case Eve would reveal her true nature of a serpent-maiden, an enchanted woman whom Adam, in a rather light-hearted gesture, took as his wife. Thus May, falsely and ironically at the same time, applies to her husband the promise that the serpent, also falsely and ironically, made to Eve. January, just like Adam, is granted new knowledge, but he is not pleased with what he gets to know, as it turns out that he is no longer the master of the garden, that, like Boccaccio's Nicos-tratus, he has lost his bearings, and no longer knows the difference between truth and falsehood, so that his physical blindness has been replaced by a metaphysical one. Thus he prefers to pretend that he still is in control of the situation, while his wife pretends that she is still loyal to him.

Let it be also noticed that Proserpine, in *The Merchant's Tale*, for a moment imitates the style of God's pronouncements after the sin of the First Parents has been discovered: she declares that from now on the nature of women will change, simply because such is her divine will, even though she also quotes the authority of the god Saturn, her grandfather, described as her mother's father, who was often represented as an aged man, i.e. a figure a little similar to God the Father:

Now by moodres sires soule I swere
 That I shal yeven hire suffisant answere,
 And alle wonnen after, for hir sake,
 That, though they be in any gilt ytake,
 With face boold they shulle hemself excuse,
 And here hem down that wolden hem accuse.
 For lak of answere noon of hem shal dyen.
 (Chaucer 166, ll. 2265–71)

Now, by my grandsire's soul, though she is young
 I'll put a ready answer on her tongue
 And every woman's after, for her sake.
 Though taken in their guilt they shall make
 A bold-faced explanation to excuse them
 And bear down all who venture to accuse them;
 For lack of answer none of them shall die.
 (Coghill 402)

particular relevance when considering the parallel between this tale, and the Biblical tale of Adam and Eve" ("The Merchant's Tale").

The above words sound like a heavily ironical echo of the words that the God of the Old Testament directs at Eve: “Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee (Gen. 3:16). In *The Merchant’s Tale*, the role of Jehovah, as the one who banishes a sinful pair from a pleasant garden, could have been played by January, who is appropriately old and hoary, and who should have indeed chased away Damian and May, but who does nothing of the sort, which is again a clearly ironical touch.

We should briefly consider another biblical analogy to the story of January and May (and also the story of Orfeo and Heurodys), the one provided by the story of Susanna and the Elders from the Old Testament Book of Daniel.¹⁷ Contrary to the appearances, it is not January that constitutes the structural parallel to the Elders, but rather Damian, while January is represented by Susanna’s husband Joakim. In this story, the seducers of other people’s wives are shown not as attractive youths, but as repulsive, vengeful and dirty-minded old men with whom no reader can sympathize. Joakim is indeed, like January, a rich man, probably much older than Susanna, and they both, i.e. Joakim and January, have secluded gardens. The story, unlike the fabliaux of which *The Merchant’s Tale* is one, supports the cause of marital fidelity and Susanna is herself a champion of it. What connects the story of Susanna and that of May, or that of Heurodys, or that of Eve, is that her alleged act of adultery, or disloyalty, happened under, or in connection with, a tree. The lack of clarity as to what kind of tree it was—one of the Elders claims it was “a mastick tree,” while the other says it was “a holm tree”—indicates the unreality of the act itself, but the tree in *Sir Orfeo* is also unspecified as to the species, and we know only that it was “a grafted tree,” which means that it is composed of elements of two kinds of trees. The story of Susanna may be said to cast some light on the paradoxical, and potentially devilish, nature of the tree in *Sir Orfeo*.¹⁸ Like Heurodys, who is assaulted by the fairy king when sleeping under a tree at noon, Susanna exposes herself, unwittingly, to the Elders’ lust when she is overcome by the heat of the high noon and decides to take a bath in the garden. But of course January is, in a sense, like the Elders; he uses his superior social

¹⁷ It seems that in the Protestant versions of the English Bible the story of Susanna is set apart from the Book of Daniel, or does not appear at all, while in the Catholic ones it is treated as part of that Book. But of course there are no differences in the contents of the story.

¹⁸ The strong prejudice against the idea of “two in one” is also visible in the superstitious fear of the birth of twins reflected, for example, in the Middle English romance *Lay le Freine*, based on Marie de France’s *Le Fresne*.

position to have sex with an attractive woman, even though in his case this leads to a failed marriage, while in their case the consequence is an attempt to bring the innocent woman to death, fortunately unsuccessful, though only narrowly prevented. But the parallel between January and Joakim is also interesting as in both cases we have to do with husbands whose marriage is saved, but at the cost of exposing their ineffectuality as husbands. The traditional role of the husband as a protector of his wife, but also as the one who defends his marital rights against potential male rivals, is in *The Merchant's Tale* fulfilled by Pluto, and in the story of Susanna by Daniel.

Thus, in the narratives discussed here, the appearances of a happy ending in the fairy tale style are preserved, the apparently disenchanted wife returns to her husband, just like Lady Heurodys returned to Sir Orfeo, but in fact it is the powers of enchantment, understood as uncontrollable transformation, that emerge triumphant. Nicostratus and January become easy scapegoats, that is passive victims, for ever enchanted and deceived by their wily wives, as is usual in an eternal triangle of this kind. Orfeo, however, from the Middle English romance, is an active and regenerative type of scapegoat, in a manner remotely reminiscent of Jesus Christ himself: he takes on himself the sins of his community, and his own, suffers an extreme humiliation, in order finally to emerge triumphant from a death-like experience, thus achieving a successful disenchantment by means of mastering, or sometimes negotiating with, the forces of enchantment.

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