

THE GARDEN IN THE MERCHANT'S TALE

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The Garden in the Merchant's Tale

An initially charming and continually fascinating quality of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is the richness of meaning woven into the fabric of the tales. A careful reading, while being delightfully entertaining, discovers Chaucer's essentially serious intent as well. Even more meaning is revealed to the reader by acquaintance with literary traditions at work in the tales.

This is certainly true for the reader of the Merchant's Tale. The theme of the misunderstanding and misdirection of love becomes more and more apparent through close reading of the tale and familiarity with literary conventions and models Chaucer puts to use in it. The theme of this tale is dramatized by setting the main action in an enclosed garden which functions as a metaphor of Januarie's misconceptions of love and marriage. Januarie's garden is viewed from two perspectives in the tale: Januarie's own field of vision and the narrator's (Merchant's) description. The tension created by the differences in these two perspectives is the source of the irony of the tale. The audience, with a third perspective of its own recognizes the garden as a perversion of the marriage ideal and is able to see the irony implicit in this setting for the chief episode of the tale.

That Chaucer intends to expose and ridicule perversion of love becomes obvious during a careful reading of the Merchant's Tale. The reader finds the characters' misunderstanding and misdirection of love being highlighted and mocked either openly or subtly in every scene. Though Damian and May, the squire and the wife, are certainly not depicted as blameless innocents, it is Januarie, the old knight, whose foibles are most mercilessly exposed. Damian might be little more than a mockery of the courtly lover and May a selfish adultress, but Januarie is a foolish, blind lecher who is more false and selfish than they.

Januarie considers his garden a paradise on earth. At the beginning of the tale, even before the garden has been built, Januarie indicates his conception of marriage as a garden of earthly delights. In his own words:

"Noon oother lyf," seyde he, "is worth a bene;
For wedlok is so esy and so clene,
That in this world it is a paradys."
(E. 1263-65)¹

"Yet is ther so parfit felicitee
And so greet ese and lust in mariage,
That I shal lede now so myrie a lyf,
So delicat, withouten wo and stryf,
That I shal have myn hevne in erthe heere."
(E. 1642-47)

It is a "hevne in erthe heere" because the garden represents to him the realization of his hopes for his marriage to May. That is, as Mary Schroeder puts it, "Every fantasy, every thing that has before been metaphorical in the tale becomes literal in the garden."² Januarie's concept of the sanctity of marriage--the husband is the only one who enjoys the wife and he does so with the sanction of the church--is illustrated by the wall around

the garden. The wall describes the kind of chastity he expects in marriage. The garden belongs to him alone and only he has the privilege of enjoying it. He assumes that May, too, belongs to him alone and only he shall have the enjoyment of her--marriage means possession of a wife.

The wall also insures privacy in the marriage. No one else will see and no one else will enter at the gate because, Januarie supposes, no one else will possess a key. He supposes the key is the exclusive privilege of the husband. His wife, like his garden, is only a piece of property to be used--whether merely for earthly pleasure or as an assurance of immunity from damnation for his lust. Though the narrator gives no hint of any infidelity, or any plan for infidelity, on Januarie's part, one must remember the old knight's promiscuity in the past--

And folwed ay his bodily delyt
On wommen, ther as was his appetyt,
As doon thise fooles that been seculeer.
(E. 1249-51)

--and there is nothing to suggest that Januarie has ever considered his own responsibility in keeping the marriage chaste.

Another boon Januarie hopes to be granted through the church's sanction of his marriage is a legitimate heir. He likens himself to a tree "that blosmeth er that fruyt ywoxen bee; . . . Myn herte and alle my lymes been as grene/ as laurer through the yeer is for to sene." (E. 1462, 1465-66) Suddenly, at sixty years of age, Januarie is ready to accept responsibilities he had shunned before. Now he is saying:

"For I wol be, certeyn, a wedded man,
And that anoon in al the haste I kan.

.
I dote nat, I woot the cause why
Men sholde wedde, and forthermoore woot I,
Ther speketh many a man of mariage
That woot nomoore of it than woot my page,
For which causes man sholde take a wyf.
If he ne may nat lyven chaast his lyf,
Take hym a wyf with greet devocioun,
By cause of leveful procreacioun
Of children, to th'onour of God above,
And nat oonly for paramour or love;
And for they sholde leccherye eschue,
And yelde hir dette whan that it is due;"

(E. 1405-6, 1441-52)

Such a statement might have been impressive and convincing had it not followed his explanation for desiring a young wife:

"But certeynly, a yong thyng may men gye,
Right as men may warm wex with handes plye.
Wherefore I sey yow pleyndly, in a clause,
I wol noon oold wyf han right for this cause.
For if so were I hadde swich myschaunce,
That I in hire ne koude han no plesaunce,
Thanne sholde I lede my lyf in avoutrye,
And go streight to the devel, whan I dye.
Ne children wholde I none upon hire geten;
Yet were me levere houndes had me eten,
Than that myn heritage sholde falle
In straunge hand, and this I telle yow alle."

(E. 1429-40)

From the beginning it is apparent that Januarie's motives are all selfish. His selfishness is apparent enough in this rationalization for his wanting an heir. No doubt he is equally motivated by a desire for such a positive proof of his virility.

Januarie's paradise on earth is the perfect place for lelight and the indulgence of sensual desires. Here Januarie attempts those "thynges which that were not doon abedde" (E. 2051-41). Here is a garden which is unsurpassed in beauty--a fit place for fairies as the Merchant describes it:

"So fair a gardyn woot I nowher noon.
For, out of doute, I verrailly suppose
That he that wroot the Romance of the Rose
Ne koude of it the beautee wel devyse;
Ne Priapus ne mighte nat suffise,
Though he be god of gardyns, for to telle
The beautee of the gardyn and the welle,
That stood under a laurer alwey grene.
Ful ofte time he Pluto and his queene,
Proserpina, and all hire fayerye,
Disporten hem and maken melodye
Aboute that welle, and daunced, as men tolde.
(E. 2030-41)

Januarie is indeed a most fortunate man in possessing the only key to such a garden. He expects to enjoy the same sort of fortune through the sensual satisfaction licensed by marriage. Such are Januarie's notions about his garden.

The action of the tale, as narrated by the Merchant, points out the irony in the vision of Januarie's garden. The marriage is not chaste. Damian gains entrance into the garden in spite of Januarie's precautions when May, who was to be as malleable as warm wax in Januarie's hands, molds warm wax for her own purposes and provides for a duplicate of what once was Januarie's singular key. Januarie's hold on the tree trunk does not, as he intended it to do, serve as a protection from being cuckolded but as an aid to the destruction of the chastity of the marriage.

The setting for the main action also contributes to the irony of the tale. In considering the garden's qualities of beauty which had so comforted and delighted Januarie, the reader is reminded again of the parallel with Januarie's idea of married love. Just as so much of the natural world's essential appeal (and therein its beauty) is lost in the artifice and confinement imposed by the enclosed garden, love's possibilities are limited

by Januarie's understanding. The garden with its neatly plotted "allees" is beautiful, yet limited to its function of providing only sensuous pleasure and the protection of seclusion. Though these are not undesirable uses to which nature might be put, they are essentially selfish ones. A main reason for Januarie's choosing to marry is his hope for the sensuous pleasure and protection it might give him. A marriage which is based on so selfishly limited expectations can offer little more.

The garden, meant to offer privacy, offers instead a discovery of the brittleness of his dreams--a discovery he chooses to ignore. Rather than a scene of sensual delight, the garden has become a scene for disappointment--a disclosure Januarie chooses to ignore. Rather than providing Januarie with further opportunity to beget an heir, the garden provides May with an opportunity to take advantage of Januarie's credulity. In narrating the tale, the Merchant has handled the portrayal of his characters and their setting, his ordering of events, and his notation of significant details and judicial remarks in such a way that the differences between Januarie's comprehension of the situation and actual circumstances is immediately obvious to the audience. These elements all contribute to the dramatic irony in the tale.³

The audience is enabled to see the perversion of the marriage ideal in Januarie's conception of his garden. The evidences of perversion are those same features of the garden in which Januarie delights so much. Schroeder notes that "Januarie's silver key unlocks the gate to a self-enclosed world,

built by his self-enclosed mind, in which he can be in actuality what he otherwise only imagines himself to be."⁴ The wall of the garden not only serves to keep May chaste, but also works to limit the bonds of marriage to a sexual slavery. The marriage does not have large enough boundaries to allow for anything more than physical intimacy in the relationship. Though Januarie has earlier compared himself to a "laurer," the "laurer alwey grene" in his garden does not really represent his continued virility but rather his failure to mature emotionally and spiritually.

Januarie clearly does not expect any more from his marriage than permission to indulge himself and in the end he gets less than that. He has cherished the hope that matrimony's license to indulge sensuality will save him the wages of his earlier sins of promiscuity. And he is not sure even of that. He worries that his share of bliss will be all used up while he is yet on earth. He never suspects that marriage could give him insight into a closer relationship with and better understanding of God. He refuses to recognize May's feint of pregnancy for what it is and even is ready to overlook the more likely conclusion that if May really were pregnant, it would be with Damian's child and not his own. Januarie is blind; but the audience sees.

Familiarity with the traditions of gardens and garden imagery in literature enables the audience to perceive even more. A knowledge of models available to Chaucer for imitation and emulation offers an opportunity for better understanding of the pattern of meaning in the tale. Two especially helpful

sources of this knowledge are D. W. Robertson's article "The Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Literary Gardens"⁵ and the book by Derek Pearsall and Elisabeth Salter, Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World.⁶ A brief history of model gardens and the concepts which each represents follows below. This summary will establish the background for a discussion of specific meanings of the Merchant's Tale.

Pearsall and Salter suggest that the real walled orchards and gardens upon which medieval ideal gardens were modelled were the Persian gardens to which Western Europeans were introduced during the Crusades. Pearsall and Salter find the walled garden playing "a significant part" in Persian poetry, decorative arts, and courtly rituals as well. It is most interesting to note that the Persian garden of art and literature managed to successfully blend natural growth and artifact, fact and invention, secular passion and spiritual aspiration. "It was the hortus conclusus which early became the specific and dominant version of the paradise of profane as well as divine love."⁷

These antithetical concepts simultaneously embodied in the Oriental gardens of art and literature became the basis for establishing the paradox of meaning in the garden art and literature of the Christian West. The hortus conclusus image, originally used to represent spiritual chastity, was generally adopted as representative of the earthly paradise of profane love.

Most of the imagery of elements within the enclosed garden, however, was taken from descriptions of gardens in sacred literature. Sacred Hebrew literature, which is part of the

heritage of the Christian tradition, contains the original garden models. Chaucer could have expected his medieval audience to be familiar with the biblical account of the Garden of Eden. This garden, the scene of the creation of man, was an actual heaven on earth because Adam and Eve had complete communion with God. Eden was the garden of perfection in innocence. There Adam and Eve shared perfect, unblemished happiness--until Eve committed the sin of pride in desiring to become like God. The serpent, knowing that man's pride was his weakness, coaxed Eve into eating of the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Once the love bond between man and God was violated by man's rebellion and disobedience, the pair was **exiled** from Eden. Adam and Eve no longer enjoyed the paradise of complete communion with the Creator, but were forced to leave the garden and work for their livelihood outside. In medieval literature and art, attempts to imitate that original garden represented man's attempts to create a Paradise of his own. Such attempts might be interpreted either as man's desire to know God's love more fully or as man's foolish attempt to know a heaven here on earth without God. Either attempt is based on a love made profane because it is misplaced. In the Merchant's Tale Januarie's love is of this nature.

Another garden from Hebrew literature is that in the story of Susannah and the Elders which appears in Daniel xiii (from the Apocrypha). Looking to this story for the introduction of a model for the garden in Chaucer's Merchant's Tale, Alfred Kellogg suggests three possible sources of the story Chaucer

might have known: the text itself, a popular fourteenth century poem, and pictorial representation.⁸ In writing the Merchant's Tale, Chaucer might have had in mind Susannah's garden because it provided the prototype for the representation of chastity as an enclosed garden. Both this story and the Merchant's Tale are about a lust which leads aged men to misunderstand the meaning of the wall enclosing the garden.

A third selection from biblical literature, the Song of Songs, provided sensual imagery which was later adopted by many garden poets. Pearsall and Salter explain that the Song of Songs text could provide material not only for the biblical exegete or religious poet but also for the medieval secular poet. In emphasizing the pervasiveness of the spiritual meanings of the Song of Songs, Pearsall and Salter note:

In spite of the seeming self-sufficiency of paradisaical existence as it is presented in many a secular garden of love, there are probably few medieval poets who do not use the words "Paradise on earth" without some feeling for the ironies implicit in such a use.⁹

Though they used the imagery to describe secular gardens and profane love, they could not forget its origin in sacred literature. Their awareness of the reversal is often apparent in the ambiguity of their themes.¹⁰

James I. Wimsatt discusses specifically some goliardic verse, the Carmina Burana, which did use the Song of Songs text in secular poetry. Goliardic verse, named for the wandering scholar-poets to whom it has been traditionally attributed, was one of the most popular and vigorous verse forms in medieval European poetry and was characterized by satire against the

established church and a devotion to the Horatian theme of carpe diem. The Carmina Burana is the most notable collection of Latin goliardic lyrics.¹¹ Wimsatt says that the Song of Songs was sometimes alluded to or quoted for a decorative or humorous effect and at other times was openly parodied in the Carmina Burana. He is quick to assure us, however, that "There is a limit to their profanation of Canticles; they seldom, perhaps never, employed it in an attempt to idealize or spiritualize their carnal passions. Their humor knew few bounds, it seems, but their romantic notions were strictly limited."¹²

The vernacular poets of Western Europe, however, were generally even more cautious in their use of the Song of Songs text than these Latin poets. Yet Wimsatt finds an exception to this in Chaucer's Merchant's and Miller's Tales. Chaucer, he points out, used the Song of Songs for comic effect several times.

These three gardens, the Garden of Eden, the enclosed garden in Susannah and the Elders, and the garden imagery in the Song of Songs, become models, then, for more secular gardens in the literature of the Middle Ages. Robertson discusses the traditional meanings in various features of gardens. Beginning with Migne's De fructibus carnis et spiritus, Robertson explains the development of the tree symbolism in literature which was established by the time Chaucer wrote the Canterbury Tales. He describes two manuscript illustrations among the works of Hugh of St. Victor, one of the evil tree and one of the good tree. While the good tree is rooted in humilitas and crowned with caritas, the evil tree is rooted in superbia and crowned with

luxuria. The good tree is associated with Jerusalem, the celestial city, implying virtue and spiritual peace; the evil tree is identified with Babylon, implying evil and confusion. In the De civitate Dei, St. Augustine explains that these two cities spring from two different kinds of love: charity and cupidity.¹³ Which of these cities will be the destination of an individual is determined by the kind of love which rules him. Christian love is the source of peace and leads to life with God. All kinds of covetousness, and lust especially, are the source of all sin and lead to the ultimate Babylon of damnation.

Robertson goes on to note that since the word for "love" could be used to mean both "charity" and "cupidity" it allowed enormous possibilities for literary word-play. He even suggests that this fact may be responsible for the preoccupation with "love" in medieval literature. Since the evil tree suggests cupidity, it is a reflection of man's fall--a popular theme in literature.¹⁴

Other garden features, the wells and streams, are often given the same qualities as the trees they water. The stream which flows by the Tree of Life represents the Water of Life interpreted to be baptism, true doctrine, charity, or the Holy Spirit. The well of stream watering the evil tree would similarly represent temporal water such as that offered by the Samaritan woman at the well. The garden as a whole often represents the Church, the individual Christian, or the New Jerusalem (heaven).

Robertson notes specific gardens in secular literature which employ these same garden features for the same meanings. Some of these are the garden and pool (Grendel's mere) created by the Beowulf poet; the garden described by one of Andreas Capellanus' characters in De arte honeste amandi; the setting for Chrétien's Cliges; and, of course, the garden of the Roman de la Rose by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun.

In Jean de Meun's conclusion to Guillaume de Lorris' Roman de la Rose, Genius describes the contrast between the two types of gardens--one is the garden in which they are standing which is tended by the god of carnal love and the other is the park which is tended by the true gardener, the God who is spiritual love:

"If anyone wanted to draw a comparison between the lovely square garden, closed with the little barred wicket, where this lover saw the carol where Diversion dances with his people, and this fair park that I am describing [the walled enclosure of the Good Shepherd], as wondrously fair as one could wish it, he would make a very great mistake if he did not draw the comparison as one would between a fable and the truth. Anyone who was inside this park or who only cast his eye within would care to swear safely that the garden was nothing in comparison with this enclosure."¹⁵

The wall of the garden the Dreamer has visited is designed to keep out unwanted persons such as Hatred, Felony, and Villainy, whereas the park is protected from Hell and the Devils and all limitations of worldly expectations. The Dreamer gains entrance to the garden as soon as he desires it above all else--an example of misplaced love. Idleness is the attendant who opens the door to the garden. (Busyness would soon have destroyed the Dreamer's desire to be within.) The Dreamer is led to the

fountain and pool beside which Narcissus died of self-love. The Dreamer manages to escape Narcissus' fate, but instead directs his desire toward the Rose--another kind of idolatry. Genius explains that the way to gain entrance to the park is simply to **follow** the path of the Lamb. Genius promises that the fountain at the center of the park is the fountain from which the real Water of Life flows. The tree which stands beside this fountain is an olive tree far taller than the pine in the garden. It is significant that this sermon preached by Genius was much applauded but subsequently ignored by the characters in the Roman.

Knowledge of these traditions of garden imagery makes specific references and allusions in the Merchant's Tale much more meaningful and significant to the reader. I think that the ironies of the tale are most pronounced by the specific references and allusions to traditional gardens and their meanings.

The early reference to Adam's bliss in Eden (E. 1325-1336) serves to emphasize Januarie's own misunderstanding of that happiness. Januarie credits Adam's comfort and solace to the creation of Eve, while the true source of the contentment was the complete communion with God possible in Adam's original state of innocence. While the Garden of Eden is the scene of innocent and pure sexual love, Januarie's garden is the scene for the satisfaction of sheer lust. In Eden, man had communion with God before his first disobedience. In his garden, Januarie is separated from communion with God. Though he supposes he has managed to secure both, Januarie has chosen

earthly happiness over the assurance of heaven. Appropriately, Kenneth Bleeth calls Januarie's garden a "mock Eden in the image of his own lustful fantasies."¹⁶

Bleeth also suggests that May's sinfulness too is significantly realized in her parallel with Eve. May's feigned desire for fruit, calculated to allow for the chance to join Damian in the physical act which signals the failure of the marriage relationship, parallels Eve's desire for the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Eve's tasting of the forbidden fruit was likewise a physical act which betrayed an impure heart. Both May and Eve were prompted by rebellious hearts. Eve rebelled against God's authority, May against the authority assumed by Januarie.

Bleeth explains the parallels between another corresponding set of events in both the Garden of Eden and Januarie's garden in this way:

The standard tropological account of the Fall equates Eve's eating of the fruit and subsequent presentation of it to Adam with the seduction of the higher reason by the pars inferior, an inversion of the harmonious "marriage"¹⁷ of reason and sensuality which should exist within the soul.

When Januarie stoops to help May climb on his back and then into the tree, he acts out an image of his "topsy-turvy" union. Though Januarie remembers that the Garden of Eden was once a paradise on earth, he forgets that it was also the scene of man's fall from innocence and that the fall was precipitated by a misdirection of love.

The garden in the story of Susannah and the Elders is a model for most of the topographical elements of Januarie's

garden. One of the possible sources Kellogg mentioned, the Middle-English alliterative-stanzaic poem variously entitled Susannah, Seemly Susan, or Epistill of Sute Susane, emphasized that the garden was an orchard. Other details showing a close parallel to the garden in the Merchant's Tale are references to a "pirie tree," the garden being arranged in "allees," a fountain, and a laurel-shaded well. (D.W. Robertson points out that the ever-green laurel is symbolic of man's perennial fall.¹⁸) Manuscript illustrations from ninth and fourteenth centuries showing Susannah and the Elders in an enclosed garden are similar to representations of the Song of Songs text in that both are walled gardens with a fountain, trees, and a door or gate.¹⁹

After noting some traditional links between the garden in Susannah and the Elders and the Garden of Eden also, Kellogg suggests an interpretation of the parallels between the story of Susannah and the Merchant's Tale:

The rankling self-disgust which the Merchant's brief matrimonial experience has engendered within him demands that his surrogate in the tale, old January, be made to²⁰ look, amongst other things, as disgusting as possible.

Though the tropographical features of Januarie's garden are most similar to those of the garden of Susannah, and though there are many parallels between the two stories, the Merchant neither implies nor explicitly notes these similarities. That the allusions to this garden are absent and allusions to the Garden of Eden are present is evidence that the Merchant's own attitude toward his characters, his tale, and himself is handled very

subtly by Chaucer. To mention the story of Susannah and the Elders would allow the narrator's hearers to draw conclusions about his own situation and his reasons for telling his tale. By allowing the audience to draw the parallels on their own, Chaucer avoids having to make his character seem either painfully conscious or incredibly insensible of his own likeness to the Elders. This way the Merchant is able to maintain his seeming indifference to his tale.

With the allusion to the Song of Songs, however, Chaucer allows the Merchant to betray himself in the telling of his tale. As author or as narrator of the whole of the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer could have exposed the Merchant in his General Prologue or in the Merchant's Prologue. But instead he allows the Merchant to expose himself in his abuse of Januarie. One of the more obvious ways the Merchant shows Januarie's perversity is in the song he sings to May when he awakens in the morning of the day they visit the garden. Januarie's aube closely parallels a passage from the Song of Songs. Januarie has misapplied the imagery he borrows from the Song of Songs, highlighting his misconception about the love relationship. The text of relevant portions of the Song of Songs is as follows:

My beloved speaks and says to me;
 "Arise, my love, my fair one,
 and come away;
 for lo, the winter is past,
 the rain is over and gone."

 How sweet is your love, my sister, my bride!
 how much better is your love than wine,
 and the fragrance of your oils than any spice!

A garden locked is my sister, my bride,
 a garden locked, a fountain sealed.
 Your shoots are an orchard of pomegranates
 with all choicest fruit,
 henna with nard,
 nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon,
 with all trees of frankincense,
 myrrh and aloes,
 with all chief spices--

(ii. 10-11; iv. 10, 12-14)
 Revised Standard Version

Compare that with Januarie's love-song:

"Rys up, my wyf, my love, my lady free!
 The turtles voys is herd, my dowve sweete;
 The winter is goon with alle his reynes weete.
 Com forth now, with thyne eyen columbyn!
 How fairer been thy brestes than is wyn!
 The gardyn is enclosed al aboute;
 Com forth, my white spouse! out of doute
 Thou hast me wounded in myn herte, O wyf!
 No spot of thee ne knew I al my lyf.
 Com forth, and lat us taken oure disport;
 I cheese thee for my wyf and my comfort."
 (E. 2138-2148).

The Merchant calls these "lewed words" (E. 2149). If he is calling Januarie's misquotation crude, then there is no mistaking that he despises Januarie's lasciviousness and has gone so far as to drop his mask of indifference. Or he may be unintentionally revealing his own failure to recognize the scriptural echo, which means that he does not completely grasp all the implications of his tale. The first is the more likely since the Merchant makes other apparently knowledgeable references and allusions to certain authorities (E. 1294, 1362-1374, 1376, 1377). At all events, he is at the same time voicing the age-old objection to the explicitly sexual nature of the Song of Songs.

Medieval biblical scholars found it difficult to accept the book for its literal meaning. So, there are three full-scale allegorical readings of the Song of Songs which had wide acceptance among Christian theologians of the early centuries. The ecclesiological reading equated the bride with the Church and the bridegroom with Christ. The mystical understanding interpreted the bride as the individual soul in perfect relation to the bridegroom Christ (or God). The view of Origen, prominent among these mystics, is summarized by Friedrich Ohly; "The individual Christian sees the marriage drama as expressing the mystery of love between Christ and His Church, and he assimilates the drama to a personal experience in which his own soul is raised to discourse with God."²¹ The Marian interpretation read the Song of Songs as an allegory of the relationships of the blessed virgin Mary (the bride) and Christ (the bridegroom). This interpretation influenced the largest body of literature in the Middle Ages. Wimsatt notes that often parts of the Song of Songs are used in literature based on the legend of Mary's assumption.²²

The Song of Songs is the standard against which the characters of the Merchant's Tale and their situation are measured. The contrast emphasizes how profane Januarie's song is. If Chaucer expected his readers to have in mind the ecclesiological reading of the Song of Songs, he used the allusions in the aube to emphasize Januarie's sheer lust as compared to Christ's all-consuming, all-encompassing love for his Church. Christ gave up his life for his bride, the Church.

Januarie marries with the hope of ensuring his chance at Heaven and eternal life by legitimizing his passions. Christ was selfless; Januarie is selfish.

Those who held the mystical interpretation of the Song of Songs would have understood Chaucer's allusion as an indication of Januarie's misplaced devotion. His soul is not in the right relationship with Christ. May has become Januarie's idol, displacing Christ from the position of worship which belongs to only Him. This makes Januarie's desire for May adulterous. Rather than ensuring his chance at Heaven, May has caused him to commit the sins of covetousness, idolatry, and adultery.

If based on the Marian interpretation of the Song of Songs, the allusion immediately suggests the differences between the May of the tale and the virgin Mary (often referred to by the epithet "May"). As Wimsatt says, "The ironic disparity between the lovers and Christ and Mary is heightened by each detail of the parallels that are implicitly drawn. Every echo of Canticles emphasizes the contrast between the carnal reality portrayed in the tales and the spiritual ideal that was found to be expressed in the Bible."²³ The allusion to the Song of Songs highlights the extent of Januarie's perversion.

An allusion to another garden suggests the reason for Januarie's perversion. The narrator's comparison of his garden to the garden of the Roman de la Rose points to the over-emphasis on satisfaction of carnal desires as the cause of Januarie's confusion of values. Describing Januarie's garden as much

more beautiful is not a real compliment to him. Chaucer's audience should have remembered that the beauty of that garden described by Guillaume de Lorris in the Roman had been shown in Jean de Meun's continuation to be a transitory beauty.²⁴

Two lines after this allusion to the Roman de la Rose (E. 2035), Januarie refers to Priapus as the "god of gardyns," Priapus conventionally serves as an exemplum of frustrated and self-deluded lust.²⁵ The reference to this obscene deity as a god of gardens gives the reader a hint of the purpose for this particular garden in the Merchant's Tale.

The one final thread which remains to be traced in the weave of the Merchant's Tale is Chaucer's adaptation of the pear-tree episode. This, the main event of the tale, is based on a popular fabliau. The pear tree is, of course, the typical evil tree I explained earlier. Chaucer's own special adaptations of the fabliau to his tale are the use of Pluto and Proserpina and the reference to Priapus.

In his article, "The Image of Pluto and Proserpina in the Merchant's Tale," Mortimer Donovan²⁶ notes the appropriateness of Chaucer's choice of Pluto and Proserpina as the intervening deities in the pear-tree episode. Other versions of the fabliau used God and Christ, King Solomon and Bathsheba, or others. Donovan sees a number of parallels between this couple and Januarie and May. Both men seek marriage for the same reasons: offspring and solace. Each has two brothers to whom he appeals for help. The brides are a contrast to the aged lovers. Both Proserpina and May are young and attractive. Proserpina suggests

the fertility, new life and hope in May while Pluto suggests the decay and death in Januarie.

A study of the Merchant's Tale reveals these several perspectives on the use of the garden: it functions as a concrete expression of abstract qualities in the characters; and it functions as a background to the tale which can reflect the events in the narrative with all the ironies therein implied. Januarie anticipates being able to translate the features he has built in his garden into identical features in his marriage. He wants a marriage which guarantees uninterrupted satiation of his lust with the franchise of legitimate marriage. Every one of those physical features of his garden, like features of other gardens in literature, could have been put to a good purpose and could have become "honeste thynges" (E. 2028) indeed. But Januarie's covetousness has turned everything ugly.

Though each of these perspectives on the garden varies, the over-all design of the patterns before them is the same. Each discovers the same theme: misdirection and misunderstanding of the true nature of love leads to folly. In addition to sharing the Merchant's scorn for Januarie's blindness to the real state of his marriage, the reader recognizes Januarie's more serious blindness to spiritual reality.

The garden, because it can represent the opposition between good and evil, love of God and love of self, purity and perversion, is an ideal background for illustrating the story of the consequences of one man's blindness. The audience has seen and understood May's adventure with Damian in the pear tree. Januarie

refuses to see even after his physical sight is restored by Pluto's intervention.

Though the Merchant's Tale is not the most pleasant of the tales told on the way to Canterbury, an inquiry into the sense of the tale is among the most pleasing and rewarding of pursuits. But perhaps the greatest pleasure is reserved for the reader who, in his search for patterns which make up the design of meaning, continues to focus and refocus--never quite satisfied with a slightly blurred vision.

Notes

¹This and all subsequent quotations from the text of the Merchant's Tale are taken from F. N. Robinson's The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer. 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1957).

²Mary C. Schroeder, "Fantasy in the Merchant's Tale," Criticism, 12 (1970), 172.

³Germaine Dempster, Dramatic Irony in Chaucer (1932; rpt. New York: Humanities Press, 1959), p. 251. Dempster formulates a definition of and discusses Chaucer's use of dramatic irony.

⁴Schroeder, p. 172.

⁵D. W. Robertson, Jr., "The Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Gardens: A Topical Approach through Symbolism and Allegory," Speculum, 26 (1951), 24-49.

⁶Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World (Toronto: Univ. Toronto Press, 1973).

⁷Pearsall and Salter, Landscapes, p. 76.

⁸Alfred Kellogg, "Susannah and the Merchant's Tale," Speculum, 35 (1960), 175-79.

⁹Pearsall and Salter, pp. 80-81.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, edited by Alex Preminger (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), p. 324.

¹²James I. Wimsatt, "Chaucer and the Canticle of Canticles," Chaucer the Love Poet, ed. Jerome Mitchell and William Provost (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1973).

¹³Robertson cites Augustine's explanation on p. 27 of his article.

¹⁴For a more complete discussion, see Robertson, pp. 27-28.

¹⁵Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, The Romance of the Rose, trans. Charles Dahlberg (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 323.

¹⁶Kenneth Bleeth, "The Image of Paradise in the Merchant's Tale," in The Learned and the Lewed, ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974) p. 52.

¹⁷Bleeth, p. 54.

¹⁸Robertson, "Doctrine of Charity in Medieval Gardens," p. 28.

¹⁹Kellogg, "Susannah and the Merchant's Tale," p. 277.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Friedrich Ohly, Hohelied-Studien (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1958), p. 21. Quoted by Wimsatt on p. 67.

²²A more detailed discussion of this background material can be found in Wimsatt, pp. 86-88.

²³Wimsatt, p. 86.

²⁴Pearsall and Salter, p. 83-93.

²⁵Bleeth, p. 51.

²⁶Mortimer J. Donovan, "The Image of Pluto and Proserpina in the Merchant's Tale," Philological Quarterly, 31 (1957), 49-60.

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THE GARDEN IN THE MERCHANT'S TALE

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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In the Merchant's Tale Chaucer dramatized the theme of the misunderstanding and misdirection of love by using an enclosed garden for the setting of the tale's chief episode. The enclosed garden functions as a metaphor of Januarie's misconception of love and marriage.

Though any sensitive reader is able to see the serious intent behind Chaucer's adaptation of a popular fabliau, a knowledge of the traditions of gardens and garden imagery in literature gives an audience a closer view of the patterning of meanings in the tale. Such a knowledge allows the audience to examine the specific references and allusions to other enclosed gardens in literature. It is in these allusions that the ironies of the tale are most apparent.

Januarie's garden is viewed from two perspectives in the tale: Januarie's misconceptions and the narrator's (Merchant's) description. The tension created by the differences in these two perspectives produces the irony of the tale and provides the audience with a third perspective: Januarie's garden is a perversion of the marriage ideal and as such is an appropriate setting because its features embody and represent all the ironies implicit in the tale.