



May in January's Tree: Genealogical Configuration in the *Merchant's Tale*

BY ALCUIN BLAMIRES

The episode of copulation between May and Damyan in a fruit tree at the end of the *Merchant's Tale* has by no means been neglected by critics, though they have often been reduced to coyness in writing of it. For instance, they soften the brazenness of sex in a tree with periphrases, writing obliquely of "arboreal activity" and "arboreal exploits."¹ Other beguiling euphemisms in print include "treetop tryst" and "coitus *al fresco*."² Indeed, something about the episode encourages conspicuous academic witticism—as in the self-conscious doubles entendres in the titles of a brace of articles in the early 1970s. The first (by Emerson Brown, Jr.) insinuated that Damyan does not have time to reach ejaculation with May (or rather, to "bring his arboreal activity with May to a completely satisfactory conclusion"). The alleged *coitus interruptus* appears in Brown's title under the punning guise of "Hortus Inconclusus." A response to Brown by Peter Beidler, not to be outdone, resolutely reinstates what Beidler's own article title calls "The Climax in the *Merchant's Tale*."³ Perhaps Chaucer may be said to have started all this by having May refer to her coupling with Damyan as a "struggle with a man upon a tree" (IV 2374).⁴

I should like to thank colleagues (especially Ros Allen) who offered comments on a version of this paper given at the New Chaucer Society's International Congress, University of Swansea, 2008.

1. Respectively, Emerson Brown, Jr., "Hortus Inconclusus: The Significance of Priapus and Pyramus and Thisbe in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 4 (1969): 31–40, at 34; and Carol A. Everest, "Sight and Sexual Performance in the *Merchant's Tale*," in Peter G. Beidler, ed., *Masculinities in Chaucer* (Cambridge, U.K., 1998), 91–103, at 94.

2. Christine Rose, "Woman's 'Pryvete,' May, and the Privy: Fissures in the Narrative Voice in the *Merchant's Tale*, 1944–86," *Chaucer Yearbook* 4 (1997): 61–77, at 72, 76.

3. Peter G. Beidler, "The Climax in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 6 (1971): 38–43.

4. All quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1987).

THE CHAUCER REVIEW, VOL. 45, NO. 1, 2010.

Copyright © 2010 The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA.

One might well feel that enough has been written in Chaucer criticism about that “struggle,” and about symbolic trees and sexual “fruition” in the tale.⁵ Yet I believe there is still room to consider an aspect of the episode that has, perhaps, been staring us in the face during several decades of discussion, without being acknowledged. Specifically, pondering January’s pear tree as a site for sexual coupling, should we be thinking also of a genealogical tree? And if so, how might we reflect on the genealogical space that Damyan and May appropriate when they climb into it?

To substantiate the suggestion that the horizon of expectation for the episode should include the concept of the family tree, it might be helpful briefly to recall salient allusions to that concept in medieval literature. Two examples should suffice. One is William Langland’s panoptic idea of a tree that is simultaneously many kinds of tree, in *Piers Plowman* B, Passus 16. It is a fruit tree, variously pear or apple; it is the tree of knowledge in Eden; and a tree growing in the human heart whose fruit is charity, protected from the biting winds of the devil’s attack by the power of the Trinity. Yet it is also a tree of three sexual options for humanity—marriage, continent widowhood, and virginity.⁶ When the dreamer asks to taste an apple and Piers shakes the tree, what rains down (in one of Langland’s boldly imaginative transitions) is nothing less than a mass genealogy of pre-Redemption humanity, a veritable “hoard” of human fruit for the devil to gather up, from Adam to Abraham to Samuel to John the Baptist.⁷ The family tree of the whole of humankind under the Old Law is, as it were, systematically stripped of offspring, pending the Crucifixion.

Elsewhere, family tree symbolism enters into a narrative of domestic drama that takes us particularly close to the specific genealogical imagination deployed by Chaucer. I am thinking of the twelfth-century lai of *Le Fresne* by Marie de France, a short narrative that subsequently became available in a Middle English rendering. Here the plot hinges on a noblewoman’s envious

5. See, for example, Bruce Rosenberg, “The ‘Cherry-Tree Carol’ and the *Merchant’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 5 (1971): 264–76; Kenneth A. Bleeth, “The Image of Paradise in the *Merchant’s Tale*,” in Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974), 45–60, esp. 51–54; Karl P. Wentersdorf, “Imagery, Structure, and Theme in Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale*,” in Leigh A. Arrathoon, ed., *Chaucer and the Craft of Fiction* (Rochester, Mich., 1986), 35–62, at 44–45, 49–54.

6. William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Complete Edition of the B-Text*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt (London, 1978), B.16.4–85.

7. See esp. *Piers Plowman* B.16.79–84: “For ever as thei dropped adoun the devel was redy,/And gadrede hem alle togideres, bothe grete and smale—/Adam and Abraham and Ysaye the prophete,/ Sampson and Samuel, and Seint Johan the Baptist;/Bar hem forth boldely—no body hym letted—/ And made of holy men his hoord in *Limbo Inferni*.” The word “hoord” is used of fruit in *MilT*, I 3262.

calumnation of a neighbor who has borne twin sons. Alleging that a twin birth implies impregnation by two men, the noblewoman thereby tries to cast doubt on the pedigree of the mother's boys. This is the trigger for a story intensely focused on legitimate family pedigree. When the calumniator goes on to bear twin girls herself, she feels potentially trapped in self-defamation. (Her situation is the worse, perhaps, in that she tacitly anticipates a social stigma for producing double daughters as against the more desirable objective of male offspring.⁸) One infant girl is therefore removed and abandoned close to an abbey, though not without some precautionary tokens of her aristocratic birth. She is placed in a luxuriant ash tree ("un fresne") with "many boughs," a tree that "branched out into four forks" ("En quatre fors estait quarre").⁹ That is, seemingly having lost the protection of her genealogical family, the nameless foundling comes temporarily under the protection of an alternative "tree" until, found there cradled among those enigmatic forks, she is named "Fresne" by her abbey foster caregivers (lines 228–30).

Fresne subsequently becomes the acknowledged mistress of an unmarried lord, Gurun; but she remains handicapped by her lack of known lineage. Gurun's subjects urge him to take a suitable noble wife, produce a legitimate heir to inherit his land, and renounce Fresne. There is an eligible aristocratic heiress nearby called La Codre (Hazel [line 335]), more suitable (they say) for marriage and procreation because the hazel tree is prolific in nuts, whereas ash trees do not bear fruit: "Freisne ne portë unke frui" (line 340). Codre will of course turn out to be Fresne's twin sister. The supplanting of Fresne by, it is assumed, a woman of superior pedigree is only prevented by virtue of one of her natal recognition tokens, a piece of brocade that was once given to the twin girls' mother by their father (lines 123–26, 420–26). This reassertion of paternal lineage, a proof positive of parentage in an age innocent of DNA testing, serves to cancel out the negative reading of the foundling's association with the ash tree.

8. That is a probable implication of a fulfillment of the curse pronounced upon her by women of the country in the Middle English version: for they "bisought God . . . / That yif hye ever ani child schuld abide / A wers aventour hir schuld betide" (*Lay le Freine*, lines 79, 81–82), in Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury, eds., *The Middle English Breton Lays* (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1995), 61–87, at 70.

9. *Le Fresne*, lines 165–69, from Marie de France, *Lais*, ed. Alfred Ewert (Oxford, 1978), from which all further quotations are taken; trans. Glyn S. Burgess and Keith Busby, *The Lais of Marie de France* (Harmondsworth, 1986), 63. While the Middle English version retains the detail that the ash is "wele ybowed," it loses the careful specificity of the four forks, substituting a more naturalistic suggestion that the ash has a hollow in which to cradle the infant (*Lay le Freine*, lines 173–78, 215). Such changes are noted and discussed by A. C. Spearing, "Marie de France and Her Middle English Adapters," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 12 (1990): 117–56, at 132. The genealogical symbolism explored in my reading of Marie may have eluded the Middle English translator.

We remember that the tree that secured Fresne's survival was luxuriant, full of boughs, and in particular according to Marie's lai, it forked into four branches. This configuration could be read in at least two ways to symbolize the family tree to which the foundling belongs. The four forks might, as Milena Mikhailova has suggested, represent the four members of the family (parents and twin daughters) from which she is being evicted even as she is placed in the tree.¹⁰ But the optimism of that thought is offset by the problem that the girl, losing her natal genealogy, also thereby acquires a taint of infertility. That is, she will be unable to contribute legitimate "fruit" in a marriage commensurate with her real status.¹¹ On the other hand, proleptically, the four forks could be construed instead as signifying the eventual double marriages made by the twin sisters; for Fresne finally marries Gurun, and her twin will be provided with another husband.¹² The symbolic tree is a riddle at the centre of the lai. It manages to figure the continuity of lineage and heredity even at the moment when that continuity is ostensibly broken.¹³

What is unusual about this lai is that Marie has considered the imperiling of the genealogical line from the point of view of its *female* participants. In the evolution of medieval genealogy, the dominance of a patrilineal agnatic mode (tracing lineage back through the male line, and focused on the male succession to lordship and land) meant that quite commonly fewer women were identified by name, or even by kin status, in cases where pedigrees of ancestry were compiled. As David Herlihy puts it, "from the central Middle Ages," that is, from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there came to be superimposed on a previously "bilineal" genealogical system a new agnatic system which "increasingly favored the interests of a single son, usually the eldest." This system can be termed "patrilineage." Its agnatic character is

10. Milena Mikhailova asks, "Les quatre 'furs' de son branchage ne remplacent-ils pas les quatres membres de sa famille dont elle a été exclue et l'ombre qu'ils font – la protection familiale?" (Surely the four "forks" into which the ash branches stand for the four members of the family from which [Fresne] has been excluded; and the shade supplied by the branches stands for familial protection?) (*Le Présent de Marie* [Paris, 1996], 121–37, at 124).

11. See Mikhailova, *Le Présent de Marie*, 125, 126, and also her suggestion that Fresne "apparaît coupée de toute généalogie, en arrière comme en avant. La continuité héréditaire est interrompue" (appears to be cut off from all genealogy, whether backwards or forwards. Hereditary continuity is interrupted) (128). Lee Ramsey notes that Fresne is in effect barren in the sense that even if she becomes pregnant, which is Gurun's expectation when he takes her from the abbey, she cannot provide him with a legitimate heir (*Chivalric Romances: Popular Literature in Medieval England* [Bloomington, 1983], 114).

12. This interpretation seems to me more likely than Spearing's suggestion that the four forks represent the two sets of twins from the different mothers ("Middle English Adapters," 124, 132).

13. Spearing notes how the ash is an example of Marie's deployment of complex focal images, and he fleetingly suggests that "perhaps the tree, like a family tree, suggests the important idea of heredity" ("Middle English Adapters," 132).

“shown by its exclusion of daughters and their offspring from the lineage. It is marked by solidarity among males, who are linked to each other by descent from a common patrilineal ancestor.”¹⁴

Georges Duby similarly points out that in twelfth-century evidence, “women on both sides of the ancestry did not carry the same weight [as men] nor had they the same significance.” Women who married into the maternal line, and daughters who married out of the maternal line, were often treated as secondary, though the identities of women who brought with them conspicuous social status might be recorded with greater attentiveness and respect.¹⁵ Duby sums up the vertical, patrilineal understanding of genealogy prominent in the central Middle Ages; it was a model in which the eldest son took over the household within a lineage whose history “could be displayed in the form of a tree rooted in the person of the founding father from whom came all the power and glory of the race.”¹⁶ Readers of Chaucer’s *Clerk’s Tale* will be familiar with the patrilineal presumption since it is seen in classic form in the comments of Marquis Walter when he is restoring to Griselda the children he took from her. “This is thy doghter,” he says, referring to the girl whom she has supposed to be his new wife; and “that oother”—the son whom she bore—“Shal be myn heir, as I have ay disposed” (IV 1065–67). The possessive pronouns tell their own story. The nobleman thinks of the daughter simply as hers. The son is “myn heir,” the object of his familial plans.

Marie’s *Le Fresne*, albeit two centuries earlier, is a little unusual in challenging such an emphasis by concentrating on the retrieval of the female line. Although we remain very aware that Fresne’s natal origin is primarily of importance in relation to her marital prospects and the legitimacy of any children she bears to Gurun, the pivotal episode where she is positioned in the boughs of the tree seems to me to be distinctly *assertive*. It asserts her right to genealogical position; it resists the marginalization of females within the genealogical line.¹⁷ What I would now like to ask is whether there might

14. David Herlihy, “The Making of the Medieval Family: Symmetry, Structure, and Sentiment,” in Carol Neel, ed., *Medieval Families: Perspective on Marriage, Households, and Children* (Toronto, 2004), 192–213, at 198–201.

15. Georges Duby, “The Structure of Kinship and Nobility: Northern France in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries,” in his *The Chivalrous Society*, trans. Cynthia Postan (Berkeley, 1980), 134–48, at 140–41. David Herlihy remarks on the agnatic line of descent as “a kind of fellowship of males”; a daughter is a “marginal member of her father’s lineage,” her children leaving that lineage to pass to her husband’s line (*Medieval Households* [Cambridge, Mass., 1985], 82).

16. Duby, “The Structure of Kinship,” 147.

17. *Le Fresne* therefore manifests the general principle seen in Marie’s work by Regula Evitt: “Marie revises traditionally masculine conventions . . . with an unusually nuanced understanding of what it is to view courtly culture from the perspective of the displaced” (“When Echo Speaks: Marie de France and the Poetics of Remembrance,” in Monica Brzezinski Potkay and Regula Meyer

be scope for an analogous genealogical interpretation when we turn to that “climax” in the branches in the *Merchant's Tale*.

The vocabulary of tree trunk or stem (*stok*), of branching, and fruition, had been entrenched in cultural perception of genealogy. It was reinforced by biblical authority. One such authority was the concept of the upward flowering from its root in Jesse of a line of descendants leading to the birth of Jesus: the “Jesse tree.”¹⁸ (However, it should be remembered that unlike Jesse trees, medieval genealogies of royal and other lineages were organized as “downward”-reaching schemata, with figures or names given in roundels that imitated hanging vegetation or fruit abstractly, if at all.¹⁹) Another biblical authority is a passage in the book of Wisdom that condemns children born through adultery as having shallow roots, brittle branches, and bearing bitter fruit.²⁰

Chaucer makes occasional reference in his writings to the “stok” or stem from which lineage develops. In the *Knight's Tale* Arcite reflects on being debased from his position as a scion of the “verray ligne” descended from Cadmus, “the stok roial” (I 1551). Genealogical “branches” figure explicitly in Chaucer's writing only once, in a quotation from Dante in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* (III 1128). But offspring as “fruit” is entirely commonplace for him, no less than for other medieval writers, as when Demophon is introduced in the *Legend of Phyllis* as “wiked fruit” from the “wiked tre” of his father Theseus (LGW, F 2394–2400).²¹

Evitt, eds., *Minding the Body: Women and Literature in the Middle Ages, 800–1500* [New York, 1997], 77–101, at 79).

18. The Tree of Jesse derived from a conflation of the genealogy of Christ given at the start of Matthew's gospel with exegesis of Isaiah 11:1, “And there shall come forth a rod [*virga*] out of the root [*de radice*] of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root”—the rod or *virga* being interpreted as the Virgin Mary, descendant of King David (of the house of Jesse), the flower being her child Jesus. See Arthur Watson, *The Early Iconography of the Tree of Jesse* (London, 1934); and Pamela Sheingorn, “Appropriating the Holy Kinship: Gender and Family History,” in Neel, ed., *Medieval Families*, 273–301, at 274–75.

19. Such genealogies are exemplified by the Chaworth Roll (English, ca. 1320, private collection) tracing the royal succession back from Edward II to Egbert. Emile Mâle reports that genealogical trees were sometimes represented “over the fireplace in a feudal castle” (*The Gothic Image* [New York, 1958], 165).

20. The passage in Sapientia (4:3–5) is translated in a discussion of the Sixth Commandment in *Dives and Pauper*, Vol. 1, Pt. 2, ed. Priscilla Barnum, EETS o.s. 280 (Oxford, 1980), 63: “childryn born in auouterye schul zeuyn non depe rotys ne settyn non stable ground but þei schul alwey ben in tempest of tribulacion, her branchys schul brekyn & her rotys ben pluckyd up, þe fruth of hem schal ben unprofytale”

21. Here there is a conflation of heredity with a famous verse in Matthew, 7:16–17, “Ye shall know them by their fruits . . . every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit,” though the fruits Matthew here speaks of are the works of false prophets. For “stok,” see, for example, Chaucer's *Gent* (“The firste stok, fader of gentillesse” [1]) and compare an exposition of the “lines” of consanguinity in *Jacob's Well*, ed. Arthur Brandeis, EETS o.s. 115 (London, 1900), 49: “In ony of þise thre lynes afore-seyd, go to þe stok, pat is, fadyr

However, nowhere does the metaphor of the genealogical tree, its fruit, and the motif of heredity more insistently haunt Chaucer's writing than in the *Merchant's Tale*. I need not dwell on the enigmatic speaker's sarcastic remarks about how a man old and "hoor" (IV 1269) should take a young wife who will be herself the "fruyt" (IV 1270) of his wealth (a neat twist to the trope there); a wife on whom "he myghte engendren hym an heir" (IV 1272). January expresses his own desire for a fertile young wife on whom to beget children, lest his "heritage sholde falle/In straunge hand" (IV 1439–40). In this, he rehearses an anxiety that, while commonplace in the Middle Ages, may have been affecting a plague-conscious generation with special force. The same "bisy drede" (IV 134) is a concern of the subjects of Marquis Walter in the *Clerk's Tale*—their nightmare scenario is lest his "lyne sholde slake" (IV 137) if he dies without issue and a "straunge successour" (IV 138) take over his "heritage" (IV 139).²² Indeed, extinction of the bloodline remained a major problem throughout the Middle Ages even for the baronial families that sought hardest to avoid it, as historians of the family and the nobility point out. McFarlane long ago noted "the failure of most [noble] families to breed," in the sense of successfully rearing adult male offspring to continue the line. Mortality rates were such that a lineage's survival "was always in the balance and only a tiny handful managed to hang on in the male line from one century to another."²³ A significant proportion of "noble" families were dying out within a few generations during the period 1300–1450 from which McFarlane gathers his chief evidence. The consolidation, then erosion of one such English dynasty, the Cobhams, has been carefully charted by Nigel Saul.²⁴

or modyr, & noubre nozt hem, but þe first persone þat comyth of þat stok is þe first degree." For "branches," see the old woman in *WBT*, quoting Dante: "Ful selde up riseth by his branches smale/ Prowesse of man" (III 1128–29). For "fruit," see "fairer fruyt bitwene hem sholde falle" (IV 990), "the actes and . . . fruyt of mariage" (III 114), and *Rom*, 4819–27.

22. The anxiety of Marquis Walter's subjects was already there in Petrarch's version of the Griselda story; see Thomas J. Farrell and Amy W. Goodwin, "The Clerk's Tale," in Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel, eds., *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, U.K., 2002, 2005), 1:101–67, at 112–13.

23. K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford, 1973), 78; and see his careful analysis of evidence for "Extinction and Recruitment," 186–94. Frances Gies and Joseph Gies draw on McFarlane's work in their incisive summary of the short-lived nature of medieval lineage (*Marriage and Family in the Middle Ages* [New York, 1987], chap. 9, "The Aristocratic Lineage: Perils of Primogeniture," 142–76).

24. Nigel Saul interprets the lavish program of monument-making by the third Lord Cobham (d. 1408) at the end of the fourteenth century partly as a memorial consciously erected against looming dynastic extinction because he had no surviving son (*Death, Art and Memory in Medieval England. The Cobham Family and their Monuments, 1300–1500* [Oxford, 2001], 236–41).

January needs no exhortation to marry and beget heirs. He gloatingly rehearses the first “cause” (IV 1441) of marriage, the “leueful procreacioun” (IV 1448) of offspring. Then comes his eye-catching boast that his limbs feel to him “stark and suffisaunt” (IV 1458) for marital action, as evergreen as the laurel. Making a grotesquely conceited joke that his white hair is like spring blossom on a tree, presaging fruit (IV 1461–62), this old knight disturbingly draws attention to his obsession with sexual propagation so as to develop his genealogical tree while also (as many have pointed out) preparing readers for the focus in the denouement on tree and fruit. He thrusts his supposed potency before us: a “blosmy tree nys neither drye ne deed” (IV 1463). The tale leaves us in no doubt of his conjoined preoccupation with bloodline and heirs, “tree” and “fruit.”

For January, the prospect of marriage to May means an exclusive appropriation of her sexuality that will maximize his pleasure and guarantee his bloodline. He “thanked God that he myghte han hire al,/That no wight his blisse parten shal” (IV 1629–30). The reader has already heard Justinus opine otherwise—that even the youngest husband will be lucky “To han his wyf allone” (IV 1561). There are subtler hints of an ever-present threat of disruption of the patrilineal line, since the tale’s mock-encomium on wives refers us to Rebecca for her cleverness in securing her husband Isaac’s ritual blessing for their younger son Jacob instead of the elder son Esau for whom the blessing was intended (IV 1362–65).²⁵ In any case, a sexual interloper is visible from day one of the marriage because Squire Damyan becomes immediately besotted with May on seeing her at her wedding. The narrator perceives here, and loudly excoriates, a threat situated in the very heart of the household—a “hoomly” enemy (IV 1785, 1792–94).²⁶ Damyan is immediately and melodramatically suspected as having the potential to infiltrate even the marital bedclothes: “O perilous fyr, that in the bedstraw bredeth!” (IV 1783). David Wright’s translation, “O perilous fire, breeding in the bedding,” sustains the insidious procreative pun in “bredeth.”²⁷

These heightened exclamations of horror at intimate treachery partly mock and partly echo January’s obsession with exclusivity. That obsession is pathetically enhanced when he goes blind and becomes filled with jealous

25. Gen. 27:1–40; Wentersdorf, “Imagery, Structure, and Theme,” 37–38; and Emerson Brown, Jr., “Biblical Women in the Merchant’s Tale: Feminism, Anti-Feminism, and Beyond,” *Viator* 5 (1974): 389–98.

26. The “familiar enemy” was a topos to which Chaucer’s attention was perhaps drawn when he translated Boethius (“what pestilence is more myghty for to anoye a wyght than a famylier enemy?” [*Bo*, 3.pr5.68–70]): but *MerT* seems to invest it with special domestic intensity.

27. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. David Wright (Oxford, 1986).

apprehension that May might now indulge in some sexual adventure (“falle in som folye” [IV 2074]). If only she will be loyal to him, he whines, his entire heritage will be hers. By this point, of course, Damyan is hidden in January’s private garden, and ready at May’s beckoning to climb into a pear tree “charged . . . with fruyt” (IV 2211) for a rendezvous. What the “fruyt” symbolizes is complex, and in fact Chaucer is prepared to be unusually promiscuous in symbolic suggestion here. The fruit is ostensibly real fruit such as a pregnant woman might crave—so May implies, to her possessive and heir-hungry husband. At the same time, the fruit is either Damyan himself, or Damyan’s phallus, or sexual fruition, or the child that might result from sex with Damyan. Again, if we remember that May herself was first projected to be the “fruit” of an old man’s wealth, she herself might strike us in another sense as the fruit that Damyan is about to pluck.²⁸

Many have thought that the fruit is, allegorically, the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, desired and tasted at the Fall. Without eliminating that possible allusion, we should reckon with an equally enticing and logical implication in the fruit-tree episode: that it is a dramatization (almost a personification allegory) of bad heredity within the family tree. The participants in the subversion of the knight’s genealogical tree are almost diagrammatically contained in their respective places. As Pluto says of Damyan, “Lo, where he sit, the lechour, in the tree!” (IV 2257). January holds the trunk of the tree while May climbs up on his shoulder. His embracing the tree is not, as David Aers once suggested, “a grotesquely apt masturbatory gesture.”²⁹ He embraces it partly because this is May’s ruse to deflect his jealousy, since no one else can climb up while he embraces the trunk: “vouche sauf . . . /The pyrie inwith youre armes for to take,/For wel I woot that ye mystruste me,” she says (IV 2341–43). But he embraces it partly also because this action figures his anxiety to *be* the sole “stok” or stem of the lineage he fancies himself to be fathering. May meanwhile hoists herself aloft by grabbing a branch (“a twiste” [IV 2349]). This, the moment of prospective intercourse with and possible impregnation by Damyan, is the moment when she most dangerously seizes her place in January’s family tree, because Damyan is the

28. A precedent for complex use of the fruit metaphor, implying any or all of reciprocated love, sexual fruition, and the woman’s body, is in the Proem to *Il Filostrato*, where the narrator speaks of drawing from his mistress’s eyes no less pleasure than Troilo gained from the amorous fruit (“amoroso frutto”) that Fortune granted him from Criseida; see B. A. Windeatt, ed., *Troilus and Criseyde: A New Edition of “The Book of Troilus”* (London, 1984), 77–79, at 79.

29. David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination* (London, 1980), 158. Also strained is A. C. Spearing’s idea that January’s taking of the trunk in his arms is “a parody of marital embrace” (*The Medieval Poet as Voyeur* [Cambridge, U.K., 1993], 174).

intimate foe who would breed in January's bedding. He is secreted in that tree to defile the lineage.

Whether the tale means us to deduce that May becomes pregnant in this moment is a question that has exercised not a few critics.³⁰ One way or another the episode does seem to me to be laden with auguries of such fruition. Among them, critics might need to remind themselves that orchard trees, because of the techniques of grafting associated with propagating them, offered a means of speaking metaphorically about sexual escapades and impregnation. This usage is apparent from the lyric "I Have a Newe Garden," in which a girl desires a graft from the speaker's "pere-jonet" tree. After he obliges, in more ways than one, the lyric ends with quibbles about the name, or perhaps the paternity, of the baby she subsequently carries.³¹

The *Merchant's Tale* leaves us with a wicked pun on conception ringing in our ears, as May reproaches January for misjudging what he has seen in the tree: "He that mysconceyveth, he mysdemeth" (IV 2410).³² But, amidst the magnificent encompassing cynicism of this denouement, how are we to respond to the genealogical representation that I have outlined? Clearly the episode has enacted the flaws and contaminations that might be detected in a genealogy if spouses were not so disposed not to see them. Perhaps it is enough to contemplate what Marie Borroff calls the "silent retribution" wrought against January—that May is anticipated by the reader to be pregnant (if not now, then later) with a "straunge" heir, an interloper's child,

30. In a seminal article Milton Miller proposed that May produces through Damyan the heir desired by January ("The Heir in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Philological Quarterly* 29 [1950]: 437–40). Elizabeth Simmons-O'Neill subsequently speaks for many critics when she comments on May "presumably producing an heir other than January's own child as a result of her tryst in the tree" ("Love in Hell: The Role of Pluto and Proserpine in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 51 [1990]: 389–407, at 394). Carol Everest puts the case from medieval physiological science that May could not conceive with January in the absence of release of female "seed" in orgasm, but would be thought to conceive with Damyan ("Paradys or Helle': Pleasure and Procreation in Chaucer's 'Merchant's Tale,'" in Muriel Whitaker, ed., *Sovereign Lady: Essays on Women in Middle English Literature* [New York, 1995], 63–84). An interpolation in *MerT* demonstrates that the narrative was assumed by at least one early reader to point to pregnancy: "It was no wonder though her bely swelle/The smok on his [Damyan's] brest lay so theche"; see Rosalind Field, "Superfluous Ribaldry: Spurious Lines in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 28 (1994): 351–67. Nevertheless, M. Teresa Tavormina urges that "the delicate question of whether May has conceived by Damian or not appears to be irresolvable" in her notes to *The Riverside Chaucer*, 889.

31. See Thomas G. Duncan, ed., *Medieval English Lyrics 1200–1400* (Harmondsworth, 1995), 171, 247; and Maxwell Luria and Richard L. Hoffman, eds., *Middle English Lyrics* (New York, 1974), 77–78. I remain unconvinced by Carol Heffernan's learned suggestion that the pear tree is chosen because pears were prescribed for contraception ("Contraception and the Pear Tree Episode of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 94 [1995]: 31–41).

32. While the *Riverside* gloss insists on the abstract meaning 'misapprehends,' or 'misunderstands,' for "mysconceyveth," May's use of the verb surely insinuates that her husband's misjudgment is tied up with his inappropriateness as a mate with whom to conceive.

the worst fate that January could imagine for his heritage (IV 1437–40).³³ But, having reflected earlier on the gendered genealogical implications of Fresne's sojourn in the ash tree, I wonder if we can go further with the pear tree episode, too?

May, in one perspective, is a desperate but brazen hussy, lying through her teeth to achieve momentary extramarital satisfaction with her admirer and contemptuously brushing aside January's genealogical possessiveness, in a comprehensively corrosive atmosphere. In another perspective, she is a woman of modest status, of "smal degree" (IV 1625), who has been married to a repulsively egotistical, sensualist old knight to conceive his lineage. Taking what opportunity there is with both hands, she stakes a vigorous claim in her pompous husband's family tree, and organizes there the prospect of offspring from a more attractive source; albeit a source that will "disparage" her blood and "contaminate" January's line. In the event, January, despite trying stoopingly to hold on to the tree trunk, will not constitute the sole "stok" of any line of heirs she supplies. Moreover she speaks down to him from "his" tree which she has now made hers, dictating in what terms he should understand her situation in it. Is there, then, a hint of a transitional moment here, a glimpse of a transition from a patrilineal to a matrilineal focus?

That speculation gains some oblique support from the fact that it is during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that the substantially patrilineal model of the Tree of Jesse—which traces a lineage through a male line of kings and patriarchs to Christ—is increasingly complemented by, perhaps even challenged by, an alternative model of the "Holy Kinship." This presents a female genealogy, tracing Christ's lineage back to his grandmother Saint Anne.³⁴ Such a development might encourage us to think again about what May means by her inspired representation of herself as struggling with a man upon a tree (IV 2374) as a remedy for her husband's blindness. We naturally read her joke in terms of her sex act with Damyan.³⁵ But what

33. Marie Borroff, "Silent Retribution in Chaucer: The *Merchant's Tale*, the *Reeve's Tale*, and the *Pardoner's Tale*," in her *Traditions and Renewals: Chaucer, the 'Gawain'-Poet, and Beyond* (New Haven, 2003), 50–70, esp. 50–60.

34. See Sheingorn, "Appropriating the Holy Kinship." However, in a paper entitled "The Upward Movement of the Holy Kinship in the Queen Mary Psalter" given at the "Peregrinations: Art and Architecture in the Middle Ages" colloquium, Courtauld Institute (2006), Mellie Naydenova cautions that the "Holy Kinship" tree juxtaposed with the Jesse tree in the fourteenth-century *Queen Mary Psalter* actually gives particular prominence to the five Apostles it incorporates, who were supposed to be children of the Virgin's half-sisters.

35. As Holly A. Crocker notes, May succeeds in finding a formula that will translate her threatening sexual activity into wifely compliance with her husband's need for a cure ("Performative Passivity and Fantasies of Masculinity in the *Merchant's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 38 [2003]: 178–98).

if it punningly expresses also the “struggle” with men made necessary for women by the masculine hierarchies that constructed and dominated family history? Among the other insights to which January and men like him are blind, perhaps the inhospitality of aristocratic genealogical traditions to the wishes and status of women in their families is no small factor.³⁶

Goldsmiths University of London
New Cross, London
(*A.Blamires@gold.ac.uk*)

36. Chaucer’s adaptation of the social status of the protagonists in the tale, according to Simmons-O’Neill, suggests “the need for change in both class and marriage relations, and the larger political and religious institutions which they mirror” (“Love in Hell” 393).

Copyright of Chaucer Review is the property of Pennsylvania State University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.