

‘The cunning wife/fruit tree’ syndrome: Chaucer’s *The Merchant’s Tale* and seven Arabic stories

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Abstract In using a feminist archetypal approach, this essay is intended to shed some light on specific archetypal patterns in Chaucer’s *The Merchant’s Tale* and seven Arabic tales. This essay argues that there are some primordial, universal and recurrent archetypes which connect those texts together. In so doing, this essay investigates how those archetypes (i.e. tree, garden, billet-doux, key) are associated with the cunning wife archetype, which can be encapsulated as “*uxor callida* Complex.” This hybrid archetype is, so to speak, pollinated by a cluster of archetypes. Notable among those archetypes is the tree archetype which remains the sine qua non of that hybrid archetype, making up into what might be phrased as “the cunning wife/fruit tree” syndrome. This study aims at tracing their roots to religious texts and mythology. This archetypal collating of those narratives offers deep insights into the dynamics of the collective unconsciousness of the two cultures that produce those tales. By way of concluding, it can be suggested that the tales incorporating those archetypes are modifications, if not translations, of an underlying ur-myth that has its allure in English and Arabic cultures.

Keywords Archetype · Cunning · Hortus conclusus · Pear · Sycamore · Palm · Tree

Introduction

Writers in the field of Orientalism such as Said (1978) and Bhabha (1990, 1994), among others, place more emphasis on different types of the West/East encounter. In focusing on a textual encounter in Chaucer’s *The Merchant’s Tale* and seven Arabic narratives, this paper argues that there are intersections between Western and

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Oriental cultures in terms of beliefs, attitudes, myths and archetypes. Without paying attention to those archetypes, writers involved in identifying the sources of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* have not agreed on a definite source. In particular, critics are still unable to give a clear-cut answer to which text Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale* has drawn on. This makes the quest for one particular source endless. Some critics have compared Chaucer's story with similar narratives in different languages such as French, Latin, Italian, Indian, Persian, Turkish and Arabic. There are some analogues with a plethora of texts, especially fabliaux. The 'Pear Tree' story was known in the Middle Ages. In the twelfth century, two similar tales were attributed to Marie de France. In the thirteenth century, Guèrin wrote a fabliau named "The Priest who Peeked." A fable about a blind man and a pear tree was commonly attributed to "Aesop." Bryan and Dempster (1958) suggest that Chaucer might have known Novellino and the Latin fable of Adolphus (p. 341). Calabrese (1990) similarly mentions that Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale* has been influenced by the *Romance of the Rose*. Calabrese (1990) in detail studies some important thematic and structural links—some of which are themes of "faulty judgment, fantasy, illusion, false seeming, and spiritual blindness" (p. 262). Both works are typical of allegory, deal with euphemism, and end with sexual scenes. Percy (2000) emphasizes that critics are unable to explain how Chaucer incorporates fabliau materials into *The Canterbury Tales*. Percy (2000) explores the characteristics of the continental versions of *Le Cuvier* and suggests that Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale* has been derived from this insular fabliau. According to Percy, *The Merchant's Tale*, which is set in an aristocratic environment, and is identified with fable literature, deals, *inter alia*, with marriage, and ends with a struggle between January and May under a pear tree.

Thompson (2005), in emphasizing the difficulty of identifying the exact source of Chaucer's text, examines nine stories related to Chaucer's narrative with respect to three main motives: advice on marriage; description of aged husband and young wife; and episode of the pear tree (pp. 479–480). Latin versions which include the story of a blind husband cuckolded by his wife in a pear tree had become popular in Europe by the fifteenth century. Those Latin versions also include the involvement of two gods, or goddesses which intervene in the narrative. Thompson (2005) points out that this type is found in William Caxton's translation of Aesopian fables: *The book of the subtly historyes and fables of Esope* (1484). Furthermore, Thompson (2005) suggests that Chaucer might have been acquainted with the Italian novella for there are some fragments of January's character which appear in Boccaccio's *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* (1341–1342) and *Decameron* II, 10 (1350). With respect to the pear tree story, Boccaccio's pear tree narrative, in *Decameron* VII, 9, shows some parallels with Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale*. An early version of the story is found in "illibro di novelle e di be'parlare gentile" (*The Book of Speaking Well and Courteously*) (Thompson 2005, p. 484). The *Novellino* version, where God and St Peter intervene, and a Latin fable, where classical gods intervene in the action, were the only nearest versions to Chaucer's time (Thompson 2005, p. 484). Thompson further suggests that Chaucer has added five important elements. He creates January as a named Lombard merchant with amorous history, develops January as a *senex amans*, uses Pluto and Proserpine instead of God and St Peter

and/or Jupiter and Venus, sympathizes with May as a victim of her amorous *senex*, and makes May tell her husband that she is struggling with Damian in order to restore January's sight (Thompson 2005, pp. 485–486).

While arguing that Chaucer's narrative draws on Matthew of Vendome's *Comedia Lidie*, Heffernan (2003a) suggests that the pear tree story, the use of mythological associations for the major characters, Chaucer's inversion of Vendome's negative passage on marriage and wives, and therewith Chaucer's retention of Vendome's polyptoton indicate that Chaucer might have had first-hand knowledge of Vendome's *Comedia Lidie* (p. 159). It is, furthermore, argued that Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale* has a strong affinity with the Bible. Kellogg (1960) examines the nexus between *The Merchant's Tale*, the *Song of the Songs* and "Susannah and the Two Elders." Besserman (1998), in following Kellogg, identifies sixty Biblical allusions in *The Merchant's Tale*, concerning every major character in the story, including the pagan gods, Pluto and Proserpina, and the narrator.

Critics shed some light on Chaucer's involvement in Oriental literatures. It is believed that Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* might have been inspired by Arabic literature, especially *The Arabian Nights*. Metlitzki (1977), for instance, argues that Chaucer might have been introduced to *Disciplina Clericalis*, a Latin translation of some Oriental stories (pp. 19–26). Schofield (1906), moreover, points out: "The matter of the Orient is well exemplified by Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*, which is probably based on an Arabian story that the Moors bore to Spain" (p. 304). Schofield (1906) suggests that "many tales popular in the West originated in the East. Three at least of the *Canterbury Tales* are oriental in character: the Pardoner's account of the three rioters directed by Death to a hidden supply of gold [...] the Merchant's pear-tree story, and that of the Manciple, concerning Phoebus and the speaking crow" (p. 321). Like Schofield, Thompson (2005) emphasizes that there are many similar Oriental tales focusing on cunning women and wives' trickery. These tales might have been transmitted to Europe through Spain (p. 480). Braddy, in "The Genre of Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*," argues that Chaucer was following an Oriental mode especially the Canacee-falcon episode. Braddy adds that the "Tale of Taj al-Muluk and Princess Dunya" is the source of the episode of the peregrine falcon lamenting its desertion by a male companion.¹ Marzolph et al. (2004) argue that Chaucer might have been inspired by stories found in *The Arabian Nights*. His *The Squire's Tale* is similar to Ebony Horse. Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale* has parallels with *The Merchant's Tale* and *the Two Sharpers* and with *The Tale of the Three Men and Our Lord Isa*. *The Merchant's Tale* has a precursor in *The Tale of the Simpleton Husband* (1) and (2). In the same vein, Irwin (2005) argues, "The influence of Arabic literature on medieval European literature was not confined to Spain. Motifs and plots which look as though they must have been taken from stories in Arabic have been identified in twelfth- and thirteenth-century fabliaux" (pp. 95–96). With respect to Chaucer, Irwin (2005) suggests that Chaucer's *Squire's Tale* has parallels with Ebony Horse by Adenet Le Rio's Cleomades. The episode in which Princess Canacee eavesdrops on a female falcon must derive from "The Tale of Taj al-Muluk and the Princess Dunya" in *The Arabian Nights* (possibly via Pierre

¹ For more discussions on this article, see Heffernan (2003b, pp. 66–83).

de Provence et la belle Maguelonne). As regards *The Merchant's Tale*, it has a precursor in *The Tale of the Simpleton Husband* in *The Arabian Nights* (Irwin 2005, p. 96).

By the same token, Clouston (1888), for instance, argues that woman's wiles cycle of fictions which was originally from the East became popular in Europe in consequence of the Crusades (p. 343). In listing some of the analogues of the pear tree story in Eastern cultures, Clouston (1888) refers to some Indo-Persian, Turkish, Arabic versions without explaining the links between them and Chaucer's story. "The Brahman who Learned the Fifth Veda" (The Indo-Persian Analogue of *The Merchant's Tale*) narrates the story of a young woman who cuckolded her husband under a date-tree in an orchard (Clouston 1888, pp. 343–350). The Turkish version of *The Merchant's Tale* narrates the story of a young woman who decided to betray her husband with a leman under a great tree (Clouston 1888, pp. 351–352). The Arabic version of the story narrates the story of a young man who loved a beautiful woman who deceived her husband under a nameless tree. "The Officious Father-in-Law" deals with a shopkeeper's wife who loved a young man whom she asked to await her under a tree in her courtyard. When her father-in-law discovered her with a man under a tree, he took off her ankle-rings. She asked her lover to leave, then asked her husband to flirt with her under the same tree. After he woke up, she told him that her father-in-law came and took off her ankle-rings (Clouston 1888, pp. 355–358). "Sinhalese Story of Woman's Wiles" tells the story of a woman who played around in her husband's house (Clouston, pp. 358–363). "Queen Ysode and Sir Tristrem" is a story about Queen Ysode, who betrayed her husband, King Mark, under a tree with her lover, Tristrem (Clouston, pp. 363).

In taking another direction from those studies which deal with Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale* in comparison with other narratives in different languages, this study does not argue that Chaucer's narrative has drawn on Arabic narratives, but rather it examines specific archetypes in those Arabic narratives in comparison with Chaucer's story in order to draw readers' attention to the contact zone between the West and the East—a zone that has been ignored by critics as suggested above. In so doing, this essay compiles an inventory of similar Arabic narratives—most of which are probably unknown to Western readers. In using a feminist archetypal approach, this essay is intended, in particular, to shed some light on specific archetypal patterns in cross-cultural narratives: namely Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale* and seven Arabic tales. This essay argues that some archetypes such as tree, garden, billet-doux, and key are conflated implicitly into the cunning wife, which can be encapsulated as "*uxor callida* Complex." This study aims at tracing their roots to religious texts and mythology. This archetypal collating of those narratives offers deep insights into the dynamics of the collective unconsciousness of the two cultures that produce those tales. In this study Arabic narratives, predating the publication of Chaucer's story, are classified into the pear tree story, the sycamore tree story, the palm tree story, and the nameless tree story. Every section begins with a synopsis of every tale, highlighting significant connections with the episode of the pear tree in Chaucer's story. In so doing, the essay contextualizes those tales by exploring the denotations and the mythical evocations of those archetypes in order to identify their interconnectedness with Chaucer's story. More importantly, this

essay underscores the universality of those archetypes, the (misogynic) attitudes toward women's cunning, and the cross-cultural aspects of those texts.

As a point of departure, it is imperative to shed some light on archetypal criticism which establishes new directions in Intertextuality, Orientalism, and Comparative Studies. Such a critical approach assists in unraveling some beliefs and attitudes that both Western and Arabic cultures have in common. A prominent archetypal critic is Carl Jung Gustav, who believes that archetypes are the same on an unconscious level across individuals, societies and cultures because they are the components of the collective unconsciousness (Goldberg 2010, pp. 8–9). In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Jung (1959) points out that archetypes may appear across cultures that have had no contact with each other, and across individuals who have never come across those archetypes (p. 6). Further, archetypes, he emphasizes, are the first original prototypes from which other motifs (characters, narrative patterns, etc.) are derived (Jung 1959, pp. 6–7). In paraphrasing Jung, Pearson (1989) emphasizes that archetypes, in being universal, transcend cultures and time (p. xxvi) because of the universality of the unconscious which transcends the persona (Jung 1959, p. 3).

Primordial, universal, and recurrent archetypes, ingrained in collective unconsciousness, are used in all literatures in a way that transcends time and cultures. As Wheelwright et al. (1960) state, archetypes are:

those which carry the same or very similar meanings for a large portion, if not all, of mankind. It is a discoverable fact that certain symbols, such as the sky father and earth mother, light, blood, up-down, the axis of a wheel, and others, recur again and again in cultures so remote from one another in space and time that there is no likelihood of any historical influence and casual connecting among them (p. 111).

Archetypes appear in stories as characters, motifs, or images. Frye (2005) defines archetypes as “element(s) in a work of literature, whether a character, an image, a narrative formula, or an idea, which can be assimilated to a larger unifying category” (“Blake's Treatment of the Archetypes” (p. 203)). According to Frye (2002), studying archetypes is fundamental in comparative studies for it is “a unit of a work of literary art, which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience” (p. 184).

The shadow, the anima, the animus, the persona—these are some of the most important Jungian archetypes. The shadow is the dark component of the conscious self, and the dangerous aspect of one's personality. According to Jung (1953), “everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is [...] man has also a shadow side to his nature which is not made up of small weaknesses and blemishes, but possesses a positively demonical impetus” (pp. 214–215). He (1953) further explains the nature of the shadow:

If the repressed tendencies – the shadow, as I call them – were decidedly evil, there would be no problem whatever. But the shadow is merely somewhat inferior, primitive, unadapted, and awkward; not wholly bad. It even contains

inferior, childish, or primitive qualities which would in a way vitalize and embellish human existence, but ‘it is not done’ (pp. 216).

The anima is the man’s image of a woman, the animus the woman’s image of a man. Jung (1959) gives the anima a feminine role in the male psyche and the animus a male role in the female psyche. He (1959) explains, “although it seems as if the whole of our unconscious psychic life could be ascribed to the anima, she is yet only one archetype among many. Therefore, she is not characteristic of the unconscious in its entirety. She is only one of its two aspects. This is shown by the very fact of her femininity” (p. 27). He (1959) views it as “the soul which is the living thing in man, that which lives of itself and causes life” (p. 26). He (1959) explains the features of the anima as follows:

The anima is not the soul in the dogmatic sense, not an anima rationalis, which is a philosophical conception, but a natural archetype that satisfactorily sums up all the statements of the unconscious, of the primitive mind, of the history of language and religion. It is a factor in the proper sense of the word. Man cannot make it; on the contrary, it is always the a priori element in his moods, reactions, impulses and whatever else is spontaneous in psychic life. It is something that lives of itself, that makes us live; it is a life behind consciousness that cannot be completely integrated with it, but from which, on the contrary, consciousness arises (p. 27).

The pear tree story

Arabic literature is replete with explicit references to the pear tree archetype which are similar, in many ways, to those in Chaucer’s narrative.² One might instance “The Devout Woman and the Two Wicked Elders,”³ which is included in *The Arabian Nights* (Burton 1897, vol. 4, pp. 60–61), and Al-Zamakhshari’s *Rabi’ al-abrar wa nosoos al-akhbar* (English: *The spring of the pious and the texts of news*) (1992, vol. 3, pp. 425–426).⁴ It is narrated that two elders tried to tempt a pious woman who entered the garden to make ablution. Because she resisted their temptation, they decided to accuse her of fornication, so they opened the garden gate and started crying.⁵ When the folks gathered from all places, those two men

² A similar story to Chaucer’s *The Merchant’s Tale* is found in Alfonse’s *Disciplina Clericalis* (1919), which is a translation of oriental literature. In Alfonse’s “The Blind Man Deceived by his Wife,” a blind and jealous husband was cuckolded by his fair wife, who asked him to walk in the garden and then to climb the pear tree to gather some fairy fruits. She took advantage of the blindness of her husband by making love with a young man. In order to make the husband discover the true nature of his wife, Jupiter and Venus intervened in restoring his sight. Like the pear tree in Chaucer’s story, the pear tree in Alfonse’s story is associated with sexuality and fornication. It is possible that this story was translated from Arabic literature, but it is so difficult to identify the source text of this story in Arabic literature (pp. 9–10).

³ It is believed that this story is originally Biblical, namely deriving from Book of Daniel, Chapter 13. See Staley (2012), especially pp. 177–226, and Kellogg (1960).

⁴ The slight differences between these versions are of no significance.

⁵ In *The Spring of The Pious*, the name of the Israeli woman is Sawsan.

claimed that they found the woman *in flagrante delicto* with a young man. Before the people started to stone her, Daniel (an Israeli prophet), who asked them not to do so before he judged between them, summoned the two old men separately, and asked each one where exactly that woman sinned in the garden. The first man answered that she sinned under a pear tree in the eastern side, whereas the other answered that she sinned under an apple tree in the western side of the garden.⁶ Because of those two different testimonies, Daniel decided that the elders were liars, and, thus, the woman was not guilty.

Dissimilar though the plot is, one might recognize some common archetypes that also recur in Chaucer's story: the woman, the *hortus conclusus*, the pear tree, and the intervening prophet. The Arabic narrative and Chaucer's text display two contradictory types of the woman archetype: the mother archetype and the cunning wife archetype. In the Arabic narrative, the woman who resisted temptation shares common features with the mother archetype in sharp contrast to May, who represents the cunning wife archetype. With respect to those behavioral differences between the pious woman and May, it is reasonable to suggest that May is the pious woman's shadow, which is in line with Jung's definition of the shadow: "as 'negative' side of the personality, the sum of all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide, together with the insufficiently developed functions and contents of the personal unconsciousness" (as cited in Zweig and Abrams 1991, p. 3).

In spite of the differences concerning woman archetypes discussed above, both narratives share the *hortus conclusus* archetype which is a manifestation of the woman archetype. The walled garden, in both texts, is the place where a woman was desired by men, and where May betrayed January, and the virtuous woman (May's shadow) was wrongly accused of fornication because she resisted the temptation of the two garden keepers. Because it is in that inaccessible garden that adultery was planned to happen, it is obviously reasonable to suggest that the garden, full of fruits that symbolize fertility and pleasures of life, might be identified with femininity. More to the point, this type of *hortus conclusus* symbolizes man's repressed anima and his determination to cut off his wife from the surrounding environment (but of course to no avail) as a result of his jealousy—a mantra that recurs four times. January, similarly, thought that May was his anima, so he decided to keep her inside his *hortus conclusus* as an act of repressing his anima.

At this point, it is important to note that, in both narratives, the pear tree archetype, which is, so to speak, focalized, is identified with the woman archetype. Fumo (2002) argues that the tale's pear tree symbolizes a cross that reveals the characters' sin. In addition, it might be argued that the pear tree has other evocations. May met Damian between its branches, and the virtuous woman is accused of meeting a nameless man under it. Chaucer's pear tree was charged with fresh green leaves among which Damian sat (p. 277), and small green fruit which May desired to eat, otherwise she might die (pp. 274, 277).⁷ This tree with its leaves

⁶ In German and Dutch, "comparing apples with pears" means comparing similarities that are different.

⁷ All references to Chaucer's *The Merchant's Tale* are from Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1951). Nevill Coghill (Trans.). London: Penguin.

and fruits can be interpreted as a symbol of the erotic and fertility. In Damian's eyes, the tree and its fruits symbolize May and her tempting body; to May, the tree is identified with Damian, whom she desired. In this sense, Damian realized that May was his anima; May realized that Damian was her animus. To January, it stands for May, and its small green fruits for children he desired. When he saw May *in flagrante delicto* with Damian, his response is described as the mother who weeps over the loss of her baby—a weeping that manifests his repressed anima:

He gave a roaring cry, as might be heard,
From stricken mothers when their babies die.
'Help! Out upon you!' He began to cry.
'Strong Madam Strumpet! 'What are you up to there?' (p. 386).

One might wonder if the evocations of the pear tree in the Arabic narrative are the same. As argued above, the pear tree along with its leaves and fruits is symbolic of the woman and her tempting body. The narrator of the Arabic story did not describe the tree, so it is unsurprisingly reasonable to foreground that this leafless and fruitless tree becomes symbolic of the pious woman who resisted sexual temptation. This symbolic (of course traditional) way of portraying woman as a pear tree and her tempting body as its delicious fruits permeates Arabic literature. This is the case with the story of "Ali Nur Al-Din and Miriam the Girdle-Girl," (Burton 1897, vol. 7, pp. 1–99), when the merchant's sons saw pear trees in a garden, they recalled the following verses:

With thee that Pear agree, whose hue a-morn * Is hue of hapless lover yellow
pale;
Like virgin cloistered strait in strong Haram * Whose face like racing steed
outstrips the veil (Burton, 1897, Vol. 7, p. 6).

In the same vein, Ibn Barqash (as cited in Abshihi, n. d.) says,

The taste of a pear enchanted me
Like the taste of honey wax imbued with rose water.
Delicious it was when served
Like the breasts and waists of brown women (p. 197).⁸

Those verses portray a woman as an object of desire by linking her tempting organs with a pear, which is portrayed as womb-like (Tucker 2003, p. 109). At this point, one might realize how and why the pear tree archetype, in the two cultures, underlines lust, sexuality and adultery.

In the light of what has been explained above, it is significant to examine the denotations of the term 'pear' in both Arabic and English in order to find out if there is a relationship between the narratives and their motifs. The Arabic equivalent of a pear is *kummathra*, *injas*, or *ijjas*, and a pear tree is *shajarat al-kummathra*, *shajarat injas*, or *shajarat ijjas*. According to Ibn Manthoor (n. d.), *kamtharatu*, derived from *kummathra*, means overlapping of things, and *kummathra*, called by the public *ijjas*,

⁸ Translation is my own.

is a kind of fruit (vol. 5, p. 152).⁹ This Arabic sense of overlapping is very much related to the optical illusion motif that dominates the narrative.

Before turning to the sycamore tree archetype, it is essential to foreground that Thompson (2005), among other critics, argues that Deity Intervention is a motif found only in non-Oriental versions (pp. 485–486). However, “The Tale of the Pious Woman and the Two Wicked Elders” is similar furthermore to Chaucer’s narrative in terms of the savior who appeared as a goddess or a prophet. This savior archetype intervenes as a saintly power which helps the woman (apart from her vice or virtue) overcome the obstacles that man throws in her way. After Apollo restored his sight, January was persuaded by May’s laconic repartee: Proserpina enabled her to cleverly persuade him that she did so in order to restore his sight.¹⁰ In the Arabic tale, Daniel intervened in the nick of time to confirm that the woman was not guilty because the elders’ laconic repartees were different and not convincing.

The sycamore tree story

Like the pear tree archetype, the sycamore tree archetype, which figures prominently in Arabic literature, highlights the cunning and evil of the young wife. For instance, “Tale of the Simpleton Husband” tells the story of a noodle husband, deceived by his beautiful wife, who fell in love with a young man. The young man asked her to allow him to make merry with her in the presence of her husband. In the tent, she dug a hole where her lover could hide. When her husband came back, she asked him to climb up the sycamore tree to bring some figs for her to eat. Afterwards, her lover started to dally with her. When her husband saw her *in flagrante delicto* with a young man, he cried aloud, and quickly came down, but he did not find him because he hid himself in the hole. When he asked her about him, she arose, swarmed up the trunk, sat upon one of the branches, and accused her husband of sodomy. Her husband denied what his wife said, and thought that this place was full of jinn (Burton 1897, vol. 11, pp. 239–241).

It is obvious that this story equivocally intersects with, yet diverges from, Chaucer’s story. Both narratives use the tree archetype, which is associated latently with the cunning wife archetype—each one in its unique way. As argued above, the pear tree archetype in Chaucer’s text is identified with May and her shadow, Damian. May’s confrontation with Damian acts as her confrontation with her animus. Damian completed her. Through being with him, she achieved self-awareness and self-actualization. This similitude implies that the source from which these archetypes are taken is the same. Apart from some transformations and mutations that each archetype has gone through, the tree archetype (both the pear and the sycamore) establishes a tripartite relationship between woman, Satan, and snake, and represents an eternal triangle, whose parts are a jealous husband, his

⁹ Al-Jawhari suggests that the words, *ijjas* or *injas*, are not originally Arabic (as cited in Ibn Manthoor, n. d., vol. 5, p. 152).

¹⁰ For more details, see Simmons-O’Neill (1990, pp. 361, 362).

unfaithful wife, and her lover who is a catalyst for crisis that threatens the union of the two mates.

At this stage, it is imperative to examine how that tripartite relationship and the eternal triangle are represented in the Arabic narrative. From a linguistic perspective, *hamatah* (English: a sycamore tree) derived from the verb root, *hamata*, which means peeled and broke into smaller pieces (Ibn Manthoor, n. d., vol. 7, p. 276),¹¹ is a tall tree with small leaves and abundant fruits which grows in Yemen (Abu Hanifa as cited in Ibn Manthoor, vol. 7, p. 277). Its evocative collocations offer insights into the bond between woman, Satan, and snake. For instance, in *Hamatatu Al-qalb* (English: the bottom of the heart), *hamatah* is used here as a symbol of the beloved (Ibn Manthoor, n. d., vol. 7, p. 277). On a mythical plane, it is also associated with snakes, jinns and evil in Arabic culture as it grows where snakes and jinn like to live (Al-Azhari as cited in Ibn Manthoor, n. d., vol. 7, p. 277), and, thus, it is identified traditionally with Shaitan (English: Satan) (Al-zabidi 1980, vol. 19, p. 211; Ibn Manthoor, n. d., vol. 7, p. 277). Al-Azhari affirms that *Shaitanu Al-Hamatah* (English: Satan of the Sycamore tree), symbolic of cunning (As cited in Ibn Manthoor, n. d., vol. 7, p. 277), is interpreted as the snake of the sycamore tree because snakes on the whole like to live near this tree (Al-zabidi 1980, vol. 19, p. 211; Ibn Manthoor, n. d., vol. 7, p. 277). Needless to say, portraying someone as *Shaitanu Al-Hamatah* emphasizes his/her cunning and shrewdness. In describing woman as *Shaitan al-Hamatah* with horns, Al-Rajiz likens her to a horned snake in order to accentuate her evil and cunning (as cited in Ibn Manthoor, n. d., vol. 7, p. 277).

This identification of woman with a snake, lexically highlighted in Arabic, is in unison with the Biblical story of Eve and the snake. The names, *Hawaa'* (English: Eve) and *hayyah* (English: snake) are derived from the Arabic term '*hayah*' (English: life) (Al-zabidi 2001, vol. 37, p. 517; Ibn Manthoor, n. d., vol. 14, p. 220). The snake, which is one of the longest living reptiles, usually renews its skin in the hope to live longer (Ibn Manthoor, n. d., vol. 14, p. 220). Accordingly, it is feasible to suggest that the sycamore tree archetype implies that the sycamore tree, the cunning wife and her lover are identified respectively with the forbidden tree, Eve and the snake. This symbolism of Satan, snake and *hamatah* has its echo in the Biblical story of Satan, who appeared in the form of a snake, and the tree of life. The snake is associated with deception (Gen. 3:4–5 and 3:22) and with Satan (Psalm 91:13). In the Garden of Eden, it lured Eve to eat the forbidden fruit in order to be immortal regardless of God's warning. After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they were banished. In *The Merchant's Tale*, Chaucer explicitly portrays Damian as a snake in January's bosom: "O odder in the bosom, false of hue/So sly, so homely-seeming" (p. 371). Based on this similarity between the evocations of *hamatah*, the Biblical story of the snake, and Chaucer's portrayal of Damian as a snake, it is possible to suggest that, in Biblical terms, Damian and the Arab lover, the cunning

¹¹ The sycamore tree is also translated as *shajarat al-jummaiz*. According to Ibn Manthoor (n.d., vol. 5, p. 324), *Al-jummaiz* (which usually grow in the Levant) is a tall tree, whose red and sweet fruits are called figs.

wife, and the cuckolded husband are adapted versions of Satan, who disguised as a snake, Eve and Adam, respectively.

In addition to the associations explained above, it is significant to pay attention to the cultural and psychological associations of the fruits of the sycamore tree in the Arabic narrative. *Teen al-hamatah* (English: figs) are very sweet. In the Arabic narrative, the woman who craved for *teen* (English: figs) asked her husband to bring her some. Considering that there is no reference at all to children, her craving might be interpreted as follows. The wife's fruit craving might be interpreted as a reflection of her unconscious obsession with children whom she desired to have—an obsession which might be released in dreams: eating figs in dreams is a symbol of having children (Bin Sirin 1999, p. 355, 2002, p. 78). In so doing, she perhaps intended to remind her husband of his infertility, and, thus, of his failure as the husband who could not satisfy her feelings of motherhood. However, craving for *teen*, which might be also interpreted in Arabic as '*wiham*,' or '*waham*', is one of the major symptoms of pregnancy according to Ibn Manthoor (n. d., vol. 12, pp. 630–631). If this is reasonable, she used it as a cunning strategy to deceive her husband who viewed this strong desire for *teen* as an indication of her pregnancy which they had been awaiting for a long period of time. One may further add that figs in Arabic literature have sexual connotations. For instance, both Ibn Khafajah and Kashajim describe black figs as breasts of black young females; Majd Al-Din Osaman Bin Monqith portrays figs as breasts of virgins (as cited in Al-Azdi, n. d., pp. 117, 118). No matter which interpretation is more convincing for the reader, it is interesting to suggest that, in the Arabic narrative, *hamatah* stands for the lover and the cunning wife, and its *teen* might refer to children or sexuality.

The palm tree story

Like the sycamore tree archetype, the palm-tree archetype is linked with the cunning wife archetype as the shadow of the mother archetype. In Ibn Al-Jawzi's *Akhbar Al-Athkiyaa* (*News of the Intelligent*),¹² (2003), there is an untitled story about a married woman in love with a young man who wanted to enjoy her body in the presence of her husband. After climbing a tall palm-tree to pick up some craved dates, she accused her husband of flirting with a woman in her presence. In denying this, he climbed the same tree after he asked her to get down. When her husband really saw her *in flagrante delicto* with a strange man, he thought what he saw was not real and told her that everyone climbing this tree would see what she saw (Ibn Al-Jawzi 2003, p. 146). This synopsis shows more connections with Chaucer's cunning wife archetype. In both narratives, it is the wife who ascended the tree to pluck some fruits: May plucked some pears, the Arab woman some palm-dates. In so doing, she may have implied her pregnancy, or reminded her husband of his sterility as partly argued above. In the case of the Arabic narrative, this equivocally established a relationship between pregnancy and palm-dates which has its echo in the collective unconsciousness. Palm-dates in dreams symbolize children (Bin Sirin

¹² Abu Al-Faraj Abd Al-Rahman Bin Abi Al-Hasan Al-Bikri (circa 1114–1203).

1999, p. 370). However, the wife's ascent of the tree in both narratives might symbolize her search for her animus, represented by her lover, who could satisfy her in lieu of her husband, or for a new lifestyle because of her dissatisfaction with her marital life. Accordingly, her ascent as a cunning strategy enabled her to confront her animus. When discovered, she rationalized her cheating as a successful defense mechanism. The Arab woman planned to cunningly deceive her husband optically who, without doubt, believed that what he saw was illusionary. May did not think of optically deceiving January, who (because of his blindness) could not see her *in flagrante delicto*, but she did so verbally by telling him that she craved for pears. When his sight was unexpectedly restored, she cleverly persuaded him that she did so in order to restore his sight. Apparently, the Arab woman cunningly surpassed May in that she, unlike May, was aware of her husband's ability to see her *in flagrante delicto*, yet she planned to optically deceive him by accusing him first of flirting with a woman.

It is also significant to suggest that both narratives refer to two different tree archetypes—the pear tree and the palm-date tree—in order to allude to some Biblical and Quranic stories: every tale in its unique way. The Arabic narrative refers implicitly to Maryam (English: Mary). The date-palm tree which the woman climbed and whose dates she desired evoked the story of the palm-date tree under which Maryam sat and ate dates, as is narrated in *The Quran (Surah Maryam 19)*:

And the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm-tree. She said: "Would that I had died before this, and had been forgotten and out of sight!" (23) Then (the babe "Jesus" or Gabriel) cried unto her from below her, saying: "Grieve not! Your Lord has provided a water stream under you;" (24) "And shake the trunk of palm-tree towards you, it will let fall fresh ripe-dates upon you." (25) "So eat and drink and be glad, and if you see any human being, say: 'Verily! I have vowed a fast unto the Most Beneficent (Allah) so I shall not speak to any human being this day (Al-Hilali and Muhsin Khan 1994, p. 467).

These verses tell the story of Maryam, who was accused of adultery. It is narrated that Jesus asked her to shake the date-palm tree and then to eat the dates which would fall down in order to alleviate pains of childbirth. The significance of this Quranic version of Maryam under a palm tree represents her purity, devotion, and faithfulness, and classifies her as the mother archetype. This mother archetype, which manifests itself in the collective unconsciousness, is released in dreams. This bond between the mother archetype and the palm tree archetype recurs in dreams. Dreaming of this tree, which is a symbol of fertility, devotion, and purity, is interpreted as an honest, devoted and pure woman (Bin Sirin 1999, p. 370). In taking into account this symbolism, one might suggest that the narrator of the Arabic narrative might implicitly present the cunning wife as the shadow of Maryam. Like the Arabic narrative, Chaucer's text portrays May as the shadow of Mary by using two possible strategies: phonetic similitude between the two names, and Chaucer's three allusions to Mary (pp. 359, 374, 380).

The nameless tree story

Similar archetypes are steeped in other Arabic tales, which narrate how a young wife cuckolded her husband under a nameless tree. There are three stories, included in *The Arabian Nights*, which link with Chaucer’s story—two of which exhibit the wife’s cuckolding of her *senex amans* under an unidentified tree in a garden. “The Tale of the Simpleton’s Husband” narrates the story of a noodle and rich husband cuckolded by his beautiful wife who was in love with a handsome youth who asked her to satisfy him in the presence of her husband. In response, she asked her husband to take her to a garden where she pitched her tent beside a tall (nameless) tree, made a hole in which she hid her lover and planned to climb the tree in order to accuse her husband of dallying with a woman before her eyes. He denied his wife’s accusation, climbed the tree, and saw her with a strange man. He accused her of unfaithfulness. Each one climbed the same tree three times, in every time she enjoyed the company of her lover. Finally, her husband asked her to leave the place, which was full of jinn as he thought (Burton 1897, vol. 11, pp. 239–241). Similarly, “The Page who Feigned to Know the Speech of Birds” tells the story of a rich man who asked his wife to go to the garden to amuse herself. Their page heard them, and stole into the garden at night where he put meat under one tree, wine under another, and fruits under a third. While they were walking, a crow croaked three times. He interpreted the three croaks as requests to eat and drink what he hid under the trees. When finally it croaked a fourth time, he told her that it wanted him to enjoy her under that tree. She happily allowed him to do so. When her husband caught her *in flagrante delicto*, she told him that she fell off the tree and asked him to take her back home (Burton 1897, vol. 5, pp. 81–83).

What these Arabic narratives have in common with Chaucer’s tale is the garden archetype. The garden (whether the *locus amoenus* or the *hortus conclusus*) is considered as a setting for and symbol of love encounters and female cunning. It is in this *locus amoenus* that a wife, in cuckolding her *senex amans*, lost her purity and innocence. Unlike that *locus amoenus*, Chaucer’s *hortus conclusus* (pp. 377–379, 381) is the abyss into which May and Damian were plunged. Earlier in Chaucer’s text, the cunning wife archetype is identified ironically with paradise: “Fast in the arms of January lay/ His mate, his paradise, his fresh young May” (p. 372). It is possible to suggest that this identification might present May as a Medieval version of Eve. However, May was unable to describe her life with her husband as either paradise or hell (p. 376). This ambivalent attitude towards her life, and towards January’s *hortus conclusus* is the first step she took to revolt against her husband by cheating on him inside his enclosed garden. Chaucer’s enclosed garden furthermore resonates in “The King’s Son and the Merchant’s wife,” where a jealous husband, who had a very beautiful wife, built her a solitary pavilion with strong locked doors and walled its garden. He invariably locked the doors and hung their keys around his neck. While the King’s son was walking near the pavilion, he saw the merchant’s wife, and was smitten with amazement at her charming beauty. He wrote her a love letter, which he threw in the garden and to which she responded by writing a love letter. Afterwards, he threw her a key which she needed later on. He was kept in a chest, sent to the merchant to keep in his house for a while, and the merchant asked the porters to keep it in one of his store-closets. When the merchant

left his house, his wife unlocked it with the key the King's son gave to her earlier. After they spent together seven days, her husband came back and saw the King's son in his house, and, thus, swore that he would never marry again (Burton 1897, vol. 5, pp. 79–81).

The main function of the enclosed garden is to cut off the merchant's wife from the surrounding world after he left his house because he was determined to keep his wife pure. For this reason, one might suggest that the walled garden, which might be interpreted as a symbol of woman in the unconsciousness, is in line with Bin Sirin, who stresses that a garden in dreams symbolizes a woman (p. 348). The walled garden, like a woman, is expected to be the source of security, comfort and pleasure; it can be opened only by a key that the husband keeps with him whenever he leaves his wife in the house, and, thus, this key archetype surfaces as a symbol of wife's honor. In this sense, the woman, it can be said, is seen as a casket that can be opened and closed by a key. Nevertheless, the *billet-doux* a lover sends to an isolated wife is the means that surpasses the key that the husband takes with him by enhancing communication between those two lovers.

However, the Arabic narratives lexically surpass Chaucer's text in that Arabic equivalents of garden and tree are more evocative. They establish a strong relation between cunning, femininity and dispute. The Arabic word '*bustan*' (English: garden) is associated lexically with cunning (Arabic: *makr*). The Arabic collocation (*makru al-bustani*) means irrigating the garden, and *Al-bustanu mamkoorun* means an irrigated garden (Al-zabidi 1974, vol. 14, p. 148; Ibn Manthoor, n. d., vol. 5, pp. 183, 184). By implication, it can be said that the process of irrigating a garden is seen as having an affair with a woman, and, thus, this irrigated garden becomes a symbol of an easily tempted woman. By the same token, *shajarah* (English: a tree) means overlapping twigs and leaves. The Arabic noun, *makr* (English: deception) is also a tree. *Imra'atun mamkoorah* means a beautiful woman with beautiful and long legs; *makrah* means a tree and a woman's beautiful long leg (Al-zabidi 1974, vol. 14, p. 148; Ibn Manthoor, n. d., vol. 5, p. 184). With respect to disagreement on a specific thing, *Ishtajara Al-Qawmu* and *Shajara bayna al-Qawmi* mean people did not agree on a specific issue (Al-zabidi 1973, vol. 12, pp. 139–140; Ibn Manthoor, n. d., vol. 4, p. 396). In the two Arabic narratives and Chaucer's story, the husband and the wife did not agree on what they saw, although the husband in the Arabic narratives thought what he saw was illusionary.

As argued above, the cunning wife archetype and the tree archetype are inseparable. If one considers that relationship between woman and tree, it is not surprising to note that Arabs believe in the relationship between woman's faithfulness and a tree. In this sense, Ibn Al-Jawzi (1991) narrates that when an Arab leaves his house, he ties a thread around a stem or a branch of a tree near his house. After he returns, he looks at the thread. If it remains tied, it denotes his wife's faithfulness. If the thread is untied, he believes that his wife has cheated on him. In addition, *shajarah* is an ambivalent symbol of evil and good woman. This symbolism also highlights her fertility and sexuality. Tofail Al-Ghanwi (as cited in Ibn AL-Jawzi 1991, p. 126) says, "Women are trees, giving us bitter fruits, some of which are yet edible/ When women warn against evil, it definitely appears."¹³

¹³ Translation is my own.

Those symbols are also found in *The Quran*, (*Surah Ibrahim*, 14: 24–26) where human behaviors are likened to a tree: good behaviors are like a fruitful tree, whereas bad behaviors like an evil tree. A woman whose evil deed correlates undoubtedly with an evil tree becomes a version of Eve. Cuckolding the husband in this way may become an echo of the original sin, and the tree that recurs in different stories is associated with adultery, taboo, sin, and, above all, curse.

Conclusion

By way of concluding, it is significant to iterate that this essay explores the common archetypes that abound in seven Arabic tales and Chaucer's narrative. Those archetypes, which prove to be universal, primordial and recurrent, embody the universality of the cunning beautiful wife, married to an old, and naïve husband who is far from representing her animus. The essay argues that the cunning wife archetype, in being, so to speak, pollinated by a cluster of archetypes, becomes a hybrid archetype. Notable among those archetypes is the tree archetype which remains the *sine qua non* of that hybrid archetype, making up into what might be phrased as "the Cunning Wife/Fruit Tree" syndrome. In the light of what has been examined above, it can be suggested that there is an underlying ur-myth, on which those narratives have build regardless of minor mutations and translations they have gone through. Finally, and most importantly, taking into account those interpretations, and evocations, associated with the primordial, universal and recurrent cunning wife archetype, one might describe this archetype as "*uxor callida* Complex," a complex that calls for further research to be conducted by writers in the fields of Orientalism, postcolonial studies, comparative literature, among others.

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