

“The Gardyn is Enclosed Al Aboute”:¹ The Inversion of Exclusivity in the *Merchant’s Tale*

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This essay argues that the Merchant’s Tale uses images of figurative and literal enclosure to suggest the irony of January’s regarding himself master of his young wife, May. Though the old man creates figurative and literal enclosures around his wife in order to keep her to himself in an unreasonable manner, the crafty young woman, aided by her young paramour, Damyan, eventually places the old man in a figurative enclosure, leading her to keep the keeper, in a comedic inversion of the unequal dichotomy of husband/wife and master/servant. Like and unlike January, who is unreasonable—due to hubris and delusion—and who loses control, Chaucer the pilgrim-narrator willingly relinquishes control of the narrative and thereby maintains moderate control. Chaucer the pilgrim-narrator illustrates this reasonable relinquishment by moving out of the static portrayals of pilgrims within the General Prologue—which he narrates—and into tales the pilgrims themselves narrate, in addition to engaging in dramatic episodes with other pilgrims—including Chaucer the pilgrim-narrator, who has relinquished enough control to become a participant in the drama.

PHYSICAL enclosures within the *Canterbury Tales* help produce some of the most dramatic plot developments within the collection. Whether the tale is comedic or semi-tragic, walls within the physical space of that particular tale dictate to a large degree what course of action characters take in order to attempt to achieve their desires. The *Canterbury Tales* metaphorically introduces enclosures within the *General Prologue*, wherein lie static descriptions of the pilgrims—

¹ All citations from the *Canterbury Tales* are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). They will be noted parenthetically within the text by tale number and line.

almost as if the pilgrim-narrator is describing a series of stained-glass portraits within a cathedral. In this series, the characters are passive and only exist on the page as series of descriptions that allow the pilgrim-narrator to depict them without the pilgrims themselves doing or saying anything to generate meaning. The beginning of the tale-telling contest, conversely, allows the characters to break out of their static portraits and provide meaning through storytelling and interactions with other characters, thus producing at least the illusion of individual agency on the parts of the characters. Moreover, numerous tales told by pilgrims contain characters assuming agency and breaking through literal and figurative enclosures. A particularly intriguing example of a tale that displays the manipulation of enclosures is the Merchant's, in which Damyan and May achieve their erotic desires by destroying the exclusivity of January's garden. This irruption into supposedly exclusive space functions as an admonition against excessive control to the pilgrims and the reader, even if the comedic inversion depicts immorality on the part of the young people. Their immorality highlights the negative consequences of excessive control on the part of an ostensible authority figure. Unlike the narrator, who willingly frees the pilgrims from the *General Prologue*, certain characters are unwilling to relinquish their control and suffer for their presumption and unreasonable desires.

The *Merchant's Prologue* introduces images of enclosure to suggest the dynamic that will occur between January, May, and Damyan during the course of the fabliau-like tale, which will end in the cuckolding of old January and the successful verbal escape of May and Damyan from January's valid accusations of fornication against them. The Merchant-narrator, complaining of his marriage, states that "Were I unbounden, also mote I thee, / I wolde nevere eft comen in the snare" (IV 1226–27). The dichotomy of "unbounden" and "snare" is clear. The Merchant-narrator, likening himself to a hunted animal, desires to be free of the trap in which marriage to his supposedly shrewish wife has placed him. However, the tale's action will illustrate the paradoxical notion of outside and inside, freedom and servitude, thus suggesting that the dichotomy is never so clear-cut and that awareness of this fluid distinction is vitally important for—paradoxically again—keeping the desired *in* and the undesired *out*, despite the fluid nature of the demarcation between included and excluded.

The tale proper begins with the Merchant-narrator describing the old Lombard knight, January, who desires a young bride rather than an old one for a variety of reasons. Even during these early stages of the tale,

images of enclosure occur in the words of January and other characters who discuss the proposition of marriage with each other. For example, the Merchant-narrator, describing January's desire for a wife, states that the old knight prays to God in order to "lyve under that hooly bond / With which that first God man and womman bond" (IV 1261–62). He continues and very soon adds to the imagery of enclosure by stating that "wedlock is so esy and so clene, / That in this world it is a paradys" (IV 1264–65). "Bond" suggests the strong connection between man and wife, while "paradys" suggests an enclosed, exclusive garden of perfection and pleasure, certainly alluding to Eden—which for a time, according to Genesis, was a perfect place. January imagines his marriage "bond" making a figurative paradise for himself and perhaps his wife, enclosing them in an emotionally perfect space, secure from rancor or loneliness. January then states that "a wyf [is] the fruyt of his tresor" (IV 1270). This comment complicates January's argument for marital bliss because he metaphorically transforms his wife into a passive object, a "tresor," which he can and will presumably possess, enjoy, and control. In fact, his "claims to masculine authority," whose converse is "feminine passivity," contribute to his notions of future happiness.² He argues for marital bliss that appears to center upon himself as a controlling agent of an objectified woman, whom he must protect and enclose—and enjoy.

January subsequently extends his argument regarding freedom and captivity by stating "That bachelers have often payne and wo" (IV 1278) because they live

"In libertee and under noon arreest;
Ther as a wedded man in his estaat
Lyveth a lyf blisful and ordinaat
Under this yok of mariage ybounde."
(IV 1282–85)

January's statement is paradoxical, for the "yok" of marriage grants "libertee" from the "payne and wo" that free, unmarried men experience. He declares that a married man is not a beast of burden, an image that the "yok" brings to mind. January's paradoxical declaration foreshadows his marital situation in the future, which will feature ironic, gendered configurations regarding freedom and liberty. Even when January paraphrases Theophrastus, in a refutation of the latter's argument,

² Holly A. Crocker, "Performative Passivity and Masculine Fantasies in the *MERCHANT'S Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 38 (2003): 178, accessed April 27, 2009. <http://www.muse.jhu.edu>.

images of enclosure point ironically to the final outcome of January's desire. For example he states, following Theophrastus, that

Thy verray freendes, or a trewe knave,
 Wol kepe thee bet than she that waiteth ay
 After thy good and hath doon many a day.
 (IV 1302-4)

Specifically, the word "kepe," which will occur repeatedly in related contexts, suggests in these lines a metaphorical enclosure of friendship, aid, and security, which friends and servants will offer—to a much greater degree than a wife. The word also suggests its synonym—the noun *keep*, which refers to an enclosed, protected space, usually deep within the protective walls of a castle. By extension, January's garden is a kind of keep, but one that allows the "knave," Damyan—with May's aid—to enter and destroy his exclusive sexual privilege with May—"bound" to him in matrimony.

January makes his hope and belief metaphorically explicit when he soon afterward states that a wife is a man's "paradys terrestre" (IV 1332). The tale will later make this metaphor into a symbol of January's views regarding women and marriage, though the literal garden ironically suggests that his marriage to May is not paradisiacal after all, as nothing on this postlapsarian earth is. The tale certainly points out January's hubris—along with his multifaceted blindness. January continues to highlight the importance of the theme of enclosure by stating that a wife "kepeth his good" (IV 1343) in the "blisful ordre of wedlok precious" (IV 1347), and how the wise mother Rebecca of Genesis "Boond the kydes skyn aboute his nekke" (IV 1364)—about her son Jacob's neck in order to steal the inheritance from his brother. This last word suggesting enclosure—"Boond"—is particularly intriguing since it involves deception and since January uses the biblical example to praise women in general—not just wives—thus illustrating his general naiveté regarding human nature and the nature of his wife.

Words suggesting enclosure continue to tumble from January's mouth: "kepere" (IV 1380); "kepe" (IV 1382); and "knyt" (IV 1391). In these instances, January uses them positively as he praises wives and women in general. The word "knyt," especially, which he uses to describe the unity between husband and wife, points out the confidence January has in the marriage state: the "paradys terrestre" where no harm can come to the married man. The marriage state, in his words, knits the couple together into a self-enclosed space, which one can imagine literally as an embrace.

Following January's praise of marriage, Placebo and Justinus, January's "bretheren" (IV 1475), argue about the validity of marriage. Placebo, after fulsomely supporting January's praise of marriage, gives way to Justinus, who suggests the dangers of marriage. Early in his argument, he states that

Senek, amonges othere words wyse,
Seith that a man oghte hym right wel avyse
To whom he yeveth his lond or his catel.

(IV 1523–25)

Justinus, quoting Seneca, states that a man should consider carefully the recipient of his property and goods. In fact, goods—"catel"—is the most important word in this passage, for January will consider May his "catel" without considering her character. He will not be giving away his "catel" willingly but will give her away sexually, initially without his knowledge—and certainly without his consent. January will consider May entirely in the enclosure of marriage within the literal enclosure of his locked garden. Despite Justinus's cautionary words against marriage, January "concluded . . . / . . . ech oother mannes wit so badde" (IV 1607–8) that he now sits firmly in "his fantasye" (IV 1610). The etymological meaning of "concluded" is "closed to a great degree." Again, the imagery of enclosure persists in the tale and illustrates how January is "closed" in "his fantasye." The old man, who believes himself in control of his wife and of his marriage—the agent of his happiness—is in fact a passive element, one that will be enclosed in literal and figurative blindness and enclosed within the deceptions and traps of others.

January, however, still has doubts regarding a certain aspect of his coming marriage. He states that

no man han parfite blisses two —
. . . in erthe and eek in hevene.
. . . though he kepe hym fro the synnes sevene[.]

(IV 1638–40)

The old man, nearing (he hopes) "hevene," cannot envision having bliss on earth as well, even if he keeps himself from all of the seven deadly sins. Thus, in the potential "parfit felicitee" (IV 1642) of his planned marriage, he is

agast now in myn age
That I shal lede now so myrie a lyf,
So delicat, withouten wo and stryf,
That I shal have myn hevene in erthe heere.

(IV 1644–47)

January believes that his earthly paradise of marriage disqualifies him from heaven's bliss, since "that verray hevене is boght so deere / With tribulacion and greet penaunce" (IV 1648–49). The irony, however, is that, according to Justinus, "Paraunter she may be youre purgatorie! / She may be Goddes meene and Goddes whippe" (IV 1670–71). January's wife may be the means by which January enters heaven easily, as his marriage may be no earthly and thus temporary paradise but a "purgatorie," whereby he may suffer in this life in order to earn bliss in heaven. Justinus concludes his advice by stating that January must, in addition to moderating his lusts even in marriage, "kepe yow eek from oother synne" (IV 1681). The word "kepe" again suggests an enclosed space where January can keep sin outside or beyond his experience. January's subsequent activities in his literally walled garden will prove ironic, and the old man's overconfidence in the impregnability of his literal and figurative enclosures will prove to his detriment and the illicit delight of others.

When January finally marries May he "is ravysshed in a traunce" (IV 1750). January becomes a passive element in this dynamic, whereby May's beauty takes away his full agency and full discernment. In fact, January becomes a "kept" man even as

he gan hire to manace
That he that nyght in armes wolde hire streyne
Harder than evere Parys dide Eleyne.
(IV 1752–54)

The irony is clear in that May will control January through her youthful attractiveness. His Troy will fall to her control and her deception primarily in the form of squire Damyan, his "hoomly foo" (IV 1792). In another twist of irony the agent of cuckolding will come from within the supposedly safe space—January's home.

After January does marry May, he tells "his privee freendes" (IV 1813)—those companions enclosed in his wall of trust—that he wants to be alone with his young bride in order to consummate his nuptial bond with her. So "Men drynken and the travers drawe anon. / The bryde was broght abedde as stille as stoon" (IV 1817–18). January has the "travers," a "curtain (dividing the room)"³ drawn, further enclosing May⁴ within private, matrimonial space, even as he places her in the enclosed space of the literal marriage bed that will provide primarily for

³ Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 161.

⁴ May is "stille as stoon" in anticipation of January's less than adequate love-making. When they rise the next morning, "She preyseth nat his pleyng worth a bene" (IV 1854).

his own pleasure. After the priest blesses the bed (IV 1819), everyone leaves the room, and the old man "hath faste in armes take / His fresshe May, his paradys" (IV 1821–22). In these lines, we can see January holding his paradise—May—"faste" or tightly. May has metaphorically become his garden, which he encloses within his old arms. In preparation for their consummation, January subsequently states that "In trewe wedlock coupled be we tweye, / And blessed be the yok that we been inne" (IV 1836–37). As they are "coupled" in matrimony, he believes the bond to be a "blessed . . . yok." The metaphor of the marriage bond becomes one involving beasts of burden, perhaps an ox, appropriate for January, whom Damyan will figuratively emasculate as he cuckolds the old knight. However, May is no passive beast, even as she "Heeld hire chambre unto the fourthe day" (IV 1860). We can look upon May as holding her own space, her chamber, a foreshadowing of her power over January during the subsequent events involving her, the old man, and Damyan, who now enters the tale.

The young servant, after seeing the young bride, now lusts after her. To initially express some of his frustrated desire, he "prively a penner gan he borwe, / And in a lettre wroot he al his sorwe" (IV 1879–80). Shortly he puts the privately written letter "in a purs" (IV 1883) and "leyde it at his herte" (IV 1884). The pining young man encloses the letter initially in a purse and then doubly encloses it by putting it next to his heart. January, noticing that Damyan does not come to attend him this day, states that "He is as wys, discreet, and as secree / As any man I woot of his degree" (IV 1909–10). The dramatic irony is clear, as January compliments the young man as "discreet" and "secree," thus able to keep secrets, enclose a truth, which Damyan is doing but only to explode January's privileged enclosure.

When May visits the apparently ailing young man, Damyan gives his letter "In secree" (IV 1937) to May, who takes the purse containing the letter and "inwith hir bosom hyd" (IV 1944). After she reads the love letter, she tears it up and casts it in the "privee" (IV 1954), thereby completing the enclosures she and Damyan have placed around this communication—a communication that will eventually enclose January. May returns to the old knight, ruminating upon Damyan's letter and his desire, and the narrator leaves them to have sex, wondering "wheither hire thought it paradys or helle" (IV 1964), echoing January's concerns about marriage but focusing it specifically on May's sexual experience with the old man and the possibly prison-like nature of it.

I have included and briefly interpreted these images to illustrate and

emphasize the tale's concern with literal and figurative enclosures. Even before the clearest symbol of enclosure within the tale, the Merchant-narrator, unwillingly or not, spitefully or not, highlights the delimited literal and figurative space through which these three characters think and move. As enclosures impose limits, they specifically impose a perimeter of possibility for these characters regarding mental activity or physical movement. Conversely, the owner or constructor of the wall enclosing the garden assumes a level of control over the enclosed space and the individuals who enter into this space. January is such an owner, a well-off knight who can afford to create circumscribed space and thus display his control over a small part of nature and comings and goings into and out of it by others:

He made a gardyn, walled al with stoon;
 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[.]

(IV 2029–33)

The tale at this point introduces a literal enclosure: a pleasure garden that January walls with stone. It is so beautiful that even Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, creators of the elaborate garden in the *Romance of the Rose*, could not describe it adequately. In fact:

Ne Priapus ne myghte nat suffice,
 Though he be god of gardyns, for to telle
 The beautee of the gardyn and the well
 That stood under a laurer alwey grene.

(IV 2034–37)

This further hyperbole is curious, as it associates Priapus, a phallic god, with the earthly paradise January has created. The association is simultaneously ironic, as old January certainly might not have the sexual powers of this ithyphallic deity and clearly indicative of January's desires regarding May's beauty in this *locus amoenus*. The explicit, narrative-enclosure-breaking mention of the *Romance of the Rose* also links May with the Rose but ironically foreshadows January's failure in his ultimate pursuit and containment of her.

Old January jealously keeps private the key to this private, containing place: "He baar alwey of silver a clyket, / With which, whan that hyme leste, he it unshette" (IV 2046–47). It is in January's power to open the gate to the garden—and conversely to lock it. January apparently

controls the flow of individuals and thus the flow of pleasure into the garden. However, January subsequently becomes literally blind and, to overcompensate for his lack of this most important sense, further restricts May's movements:

That neither in halle, n'yn noon oother hous,
Ne in noon oother place, neverthemo,
He nolde suffre hire for to ryde or go
But if that he had hond on hire always[.]

(IV 2088–91)

As physical blindness encloses January, so he even more tightly encloses May under his supervision, even as the Merchant-narrator has described her as “his paradys.”⁵ Thus he doubly surrounds her: first he conceives her “his paradys,” thus imagining her as enclosed and physically locking the garden in which he has sex with her; and second he becomes her ever-present (and one may imagine, unreasonable) body-guard in the anxiety of his blindness. Laura Howes states that “in Jean de Meun’s reinterpretation of Guillaume de Lorris’s Garden of Déduit, from a delightful pleasure park to a garden of sinful delights, a *hortus deliciarum*, Chaucer found a model for the garden’s dark side.”⁶ January’s body-guarding becomes a “dark,” enclosed figurative garden outside of his literal garden and surrounds May—his figuratively paradisiacal garden. The abundance of enclosure imagery signals that May has reached a point where she will not remain inside his garden(s), at least figuratively. Like a typically young, married woman from a fabliau, she deceives her old husband:

In warm wex [she] hath emprented the clyket
That Januarie bar of the smale wyket,
By which into his gardyn ofte he went[.]

(IV 2117–19)

May gives the impression of the key—the means of control and means of exit and entrance into January’s garden—to Damyan, the young man

⁵ Compare to the Song of Songs, where the male lover states, “My sister, my spouse, is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up” (4.12). Others have noted the parody in the tale inspired by the Song of Songs. For example, see Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (Boston: G. Allen & Unwin, 1985), at 204. All citations from the Bible (Douay-Rheims version) are from *The Unbound Bible*, accessed July 22, 2013. <http://www.unbound.biola.edu>.

⁶ Howes, *Chaucer’s Gardens and the Language of Convention* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), at 19.

who will help break January's unreasonable control in fabliau-like fashion and aid in figuratively enclosing the encloser.

The Merchant-narrator subsequently turns to the example of Pyramus and Thisbe to reinforce his point regarding the force of May and Damyan's mutual attraction:

By Piramus and Tesbee may men leere;
 Though they were kept ful longe streite overal,
 They been accorded, rownyng thurgh a wall[.]
 (IV 2128–30)

Pyramus and Thisbe are separated by a literal wall but find a chink in it whereby they might overcome their separation and achieve their desires or at least breach the total separation the wall enforces. Damyan also will overcome the enclosure—and the exclusion of himself—by counterfeiting a key, whose impression May has given him. Ironically, May will break out of the enclosure in which January has held her by entering into the literal garden January has constructed. In fact, “Thurgh eggyng of his wyf” (IV 2135), January enters the garden one day and calls for May to join him for “The gardyn is enclosed al about” (IV 2143). He implies that, since the garden is “enclosed,” they can have privacy in which to indulge in amorous play, though one has to wonder who really considers it fun. May agrees to enter the garden but not before signaling Damyan secretly to break the exclusivity of the enclosure by using a duplicate of January's key. After the young man enters, January “as blynd as is a stoon, / With Mayus in his hand, no wight mo” (IV 2156–57) enters with May “And clapte to [shut] the wyket sodeynly” (IV 2159). January physically completes the enclosure around May but, in fact, he is only enclosing himself within her and Damyan's power.

Immediately after he shuts the gate, he offers May “al [his] . . . heritage” (IV 2172) if she “Beth to [him] . . . trewe” (IV 2169). To seal the deal, he asks her “in covenant ye me kisse” (IV 2176). However, May does not kiss him. She will not reinforce the “covenant” that encloses her in a lie regarding her fidelity. She does mention the marriage “bond” (IV 2192) she has with January and rhetorically hopes for execution if January finds her “fals” (IV 2199). Subsequently, instead of honoring January's request with a kiss, she coughs as a signal for Damyan to make his move. Incredibly, at this moment, the Merchant-narrator turns to supernatural matters: Pluto and Proserpina, apparently present within the garden, witness the infidelity of May and Damyan's part in it. It is significant that Pluto, according to the mythological account, abducts

Proserpina from the upper world and encloses her for six months in the lower world, thus providing a precedent for January's enclosure of May, whose name connects her with Proserpina—Ceres's daughter—as a figure of youth, spring, and growth. January, whose name conjures images of the heart of winter and nature's death, corresponds to Pluto, the king of the dead. Pluto, as he encloses Proserpina within Hades for half of the year, does have a degree of power over her. However, his control is not total, as Proserpina demonstrates when she argues with her spouse as they observe the incipient cuckolding of January. She says, in response to Pluto's declaring he will renew the cuckolded January's sight, that

Though they be in any gilt ytake,
 With face boold they shulle hemself excuse,
 And bere hem down that wolden hem accuse.
 (IV 2268–70)

The word "ytake" suggests another enclosure in which May might find herself if Pluto restores January's physical sight. However, Proserpina flatly states that she will give May the power to successfully rebut her accuser. It makes sense for Proserpina, having been abducted by Pluto—but only for half of the year—to defend another woman partially in thrall to a husband imposing sovereignty upon his wife. She continues by stating that, although Solomon, according to Pluto, found women generally wicked, many "dwelle in Cristes hous; / With martir-dome they preved hire constance" (IV 2282–83). The comment is ironic, since May will not become a martyr to her fidelity to January and certainly will not prove her constancy. She will figuratively break out of the "hous" in which January has placed her.

Near the end of her defense, Proserpina reinforces May's contrast with January by continuing to attack the credibility of King Solomon:

"What though he made a temple, Goddes hous?
 What though he were riche and glorious?
 So made he eek a temple of false goddis.

 Pardee, as faire as ye his name emplastre,
 He was a lechour and an ydolastre[.]"
 (IV 2293–95; and 2297–98)

Solomon, though constructing the great temple in Jerusalem, "Goddes hous," also built another enclosure but a "temple of false goddis," which Pluto, according to Proserpina, encloses—"emplastre[s]" ("glosses

over")⁷—in words eliminating any blame for Solomon. One may compare January to Solomon, as both men, according to Proserpina (herself seized by Pluto and enclosed in Hades for six months), create false enclosures that project their own ideas concerning personal sovereignty over their wives.

January's sovereignty ends soon, however, as May uses the ruse of needing to climb into the pear tree for its fruit in order to copulate with Damyan. In fact, May uses January to physically reach the tree's branches: "He stoupeth down, and on his bak she stood, / And caughte hire by a twiste, and up she gooth" (IV 2348–49). Ironically, the old man "caughte" her, encloses her momentarily, so that she may escape his control and have extramarital sex with the young interloper in the open space of the pear tree as opposed to the enclosed space of the marriage bed. However, Pluto, watching, follows through with his threat to restore January's sight (and destroy another kind of enclosure) in order that the old man may witness May's adultery. After he cries out in dismay upon witnessing this, and May provides her bogus, pseudo-scientific rationale about restoring his sight by struggling with a man in a tree, he says, "Strugle? . . . Ye, algate in it wente!" (IV 2376) and subsequently, "He swyved thee" (IV 2378). January acknowledges the sexual penetration of May by Damyan.⁸ In doing so, he at least unconsciously acknowledges that the young man has penetrated his wall of marital privilege and accordingly, the wall of his garden. However, as Proserpina has given May the power of persuasion, the young wife responds by saying that "Ye maze, maze, goode sire" (IV 2387). The verb "maze," which Benson glosses as "are bewildered, dazed" (167), must bring to mind a labyrinth in which May will enclose the hapless and foolish old man, who imagines his sexual prowess is bull-like and had thought to entrap her. In this manner, May becomes a surrogate for Proserpina, who vicariously takes vengeance upon Pluto by allowing May to entrap the entrapper, in the manner of the "trickster-tricked" motif in which Christ, in the harrowing of hell cycle plays, "ties Satan to his throne in Hell, thus recalling and reversing Satan's eviction (while still Lucifer) from God's throne in Heaven."⁹ January is certainly not Satanic, but

⁷ Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 167.

⁸ Even if Damyan does not climax, the penetration of May is clear. See Emerson Brown, Jr.'s "Hortus Inconclusus: The Significance of Priapus and Pyramus and Thisbe in the *Merchant's Tale*" (*Chaucer Review* 4 [1969]: 31–40, accessed March 12, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25093105>), where he argues for the sexual frustration of January and Damyan.

⁹ Robert Hanning, "Parlous Play: Diabolic Comedy in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*," in *Chaucer's Humor: Critical Essays*, ed. Jean Jost (New York: Garland, 1994), 299.

similar to wife-enclosing Pluto—who is the Greco-Roman king of the underworld and thus akin to Satan as a dark lord of the dead. May, though, unlike Proserpina, appears to achieve her goals completely. As Christian Sheridan states, “[s]he has sex with Damian and is bound to January, but, the tale suggests, only because it suits her.”¹⁰

In fact, January becomes completely subservient to his wife. After her words place the old man in a “maze,” he states, “Now, dame . . . let al passe out of mynde” (IV 2390). The verb “passe,” though January uses it to denote his desire for May to forget his doubt, suggests that May has in fact passed out of January’s enclosure and his control in a figurative sense, as she has physically by climbing into the pear tree and into Damyan’s sexual embrace. Subsequently, even as January, though accepting of his wife’s explanation, continues to insist upon the verity of his witnessing her fornication, she counters with her own extended epigram:

a man that waketh out of his sleep,
He may not sodeynly wel taken keep
Upon a thyng, ne seen it parfitly,
Til that he be adawed verrailly.

(IV 2397–2400)

The verb “keep” again suggests the irony of January’s “keep[ing]” of May: his lack of understanding and his inability to maintain her physically—and thus sexually—within his grasp. It is May who encloses January even as

He kisseth hire and clippeth hire ful ofte,
And on hire wombe he stroketh hire ful softe,
And to his palays hoom he hath hire lad.

(IV 2413–15)

Benson defines “clippeth” as “embraces,”¹¹ which January does as he strokes the possible child gestating, enclosed in her womb—whose father (if May is pregnant) may very well be Damyan. It is no matter, for January is enclosed in his ignorant bliss and leads her back into his “palays,” another enclosure where one may imagine May and Damyan continue to enclose the old man in his figurative blindness.

In the *Epilogue* to the tale, the Merchant-narrator, remembering his

¹⁰ Sheridan, “May in the Marketplace: Commodification and Textuality in the *Merchant's Tale*,” *Studies in Philology* 102 (2005): 27–44, at 37, accessed April 27, 2009. <http://www.muse.jhu.edu>.

¹¹ Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 168.

own wife, states that “Me reweth soore I am unto hire teyd” (IV 2432). It is the Merchant-narrator, her husband, who is “teyd”—controlled—by his wife. His *Epilogue* encloses a tale about enclosure, which quite possibly alludes to the marital situation of the Merchant-narrator. The continual use of literal and figurative language within the tale concerning enclosure suggests the irony of January’s situation. May—and to a secondary degree, Damyan—control the prosperous old knight who builds a literal structure of enclosure—the garden—and who encloses his wife within the supposed purview of his authority after he becomes physically blind. In response May breaks out of the control in which January believes he holds her and, despite remaining his wife, very well might permanently live beyond his control. Additionally, if May is pregnant by Damyan, control of the old man’s estate will pass to the young adulterers’ progeny, thus eliminating January’s control of his future through his own biological child—who might never in fact exist—if May and Damyan continue copulating.

Thus Proserpina takes vengeance upon her abductor husband, Pluto, the god of the Dead, through May, whose very name conjures up images of spring and warm weather—which disappears for half of the year when Proserpina is in the underworld, due to her mother Ceres’s anger. One might imagine Proserpina saying to herself, “if I have to remain in the underworld for half the year, this young woman can be free for the whole year; another man will not trap another woman.” The tale highlights the eventual freedom of May and thralldom of January ironically—a comedic inversion—whereby May enjoys freedom and control in a garden meant to contain her and serve the desires of her supposed master—her husband. Though May and Damyan’s act is itself immoral, it suggests that the result of imposing unreasonable enclosures—instead of easing restraint, as the pilgrim-narrator does regarding the pilgrims subsequent to the *General Prologue*—will be a breaking of these enclosures, by whoever—moral or immoral—finds the inevitable chink in the literal or figurative paradise upon this earth.

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