

CONTRADICTIONS AND SELF-CONTRADICTIONS IN CHAUCER'S POETIC STRATEGY

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I

In their comments on the contribution that the *Merchant's Tale* makes to the theme of marriage in *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucerians remain perplexed by the internal contradictions of the poem and of its Prologue.¹ At the outset, the Merchant as speaker appears to bewail his condition as an aggrieved husband (IV. 1213-18), as he draws a contrast between the "paciencie" of Griselda and his wife's "passyng crueltee" (1225).² Thus, it might seem appropriate to identify a common dramatic purpose between the predicament of the teller, as an embittered spouse, and that of his major character Januarie, who comes also to know marital disappointment. However, it is also evident that the two speakers pursue quite different argumentative strategies:³ Januarie, at the close, is seemingly reconciled to May's deception in the pear-tree, but he is also the object of the Merchant's bitter sarcasm, which is supported by the Host's equally angry rejoinder (2420) on the wiles of women.

And yet, this approach by dramatic irony to the satiric representation of marriage, whereby Chaucer's method of composition stages a speaker's (or his own) attack on another's poetic perspective, does not resolve the poem's ambiguities. Indeed, the speakers contradict and deceive not only each other but themselves. As early as line 1251, the Merchant attacks Januarie as a foolish voluptuary, but in line 1267 launches into an encomium on marriage for voluptuous senescents that has puzzled not a few admirers of the tale.⁴ The Merchant is in fact the first speaker to invoke one of numerous authorities in the text (in this case, Theophrastus, at line 1294) to buttress his argument. Yet he cites him at length as an inset speaker (1296-1306) only to ridicule him in the following couplet. And, in the Merchant's subsequent appeal to the Adam and Eve exemplum (1325-29) as a precedent for Januarie's project, we have the first of numerous double-edged scriptural references that could easily contradict the very argument at hand.⁵ The momentum of poetic contradiction, and self-contradiction, is sustained in line 1455 as Januarie invokes the theme of chastity in marriage only to deny it for himself, in presumed echo of the Wife of Bath (III. 112).⁶ The exposition of his counsellors Placebo and Justinus is of necessity contradictory,⁷ but Placebo reverses himself by invoking Solomon's dictum on taking counsel (1486-90), only to reject it.⁸ Justinus's advice returns us to the theme of lamentation over marital sorrows, but Januarie's violent reaction to his brother's caution (1566-71) is echoed with greater poetic intensity during Proserpina's dispute with Pluto over Solomon's evaluation of feminine wit: "What rekketh me of your auctoritees?" (2276) asks the Underworld Queen, and we as readers may pursue a similar question. In a poem laden with authoritative allusions, variously construed (or ambiguously rendered), is there a standard of reference to which we could appeal to untangle the web of conflicting points of view in the narrative? That is, in a dramatic narration laden with deceptions, how shall we remark on a poetic truth at the close, as the assemblage of contradictory poetic perspectives on the marriage converges at the pear tree? If Januarie acquiesces in a sensual manner ("And on hire wombe he stroketh hire ful softe" [2414]) to his wife's infidelity, should we understand that the poem as a whole recommends (or condemns) the necessity of adultery and deception as a means to a marriage between youth and age? Is the bedroom scene with Januarie's "houndfyssh" skin (1825) and his subsequent appeal to the Canticle groom (2138) conceived to yield a portrait of marriage that is disgusting, and, if so, how does this square with Januarie's dramatic energy, the Merchant's bitterness, and, not least, Chaucer's poetic meaning? It would be tedious

to seek to negotiate every possible contradiction or irony in this elaborate composition, but its divergent poetic energies have attracted sufficient comment to justify a search for a method to resolve them beyond the resource of moral irony: it may well be true that Chaucer pursues a meaning quite other than his speaker's competitive interests, as discussants of marriage seeking to outwit each other in the telling of the tale, but, if their deceptive purposes work to disaccredit each other, and Chaucer ridicules them all, how shall we resolve these contradictions in a single poetic focus in the poem as a whole?

The distribution of poetic energy among disparate dramatic voices is a trademark of Chaucerian composition, and, apart from its satiric effect, it may generate a kind of moral intensity as we observe the anger of the Merchant's reaction to Januarie's impotent credulousness at the close of the tale. Perhaps we might refer to various levels of poetic exposition, or "poetic voices," as features of Chaucer's poetics that Barbara Nolan has recently attributed to the organization of the *General Prologue*, where "multiple voicings" (p. 155) find a precedent in the "dialogical self-dramatization" of Augustine's *Soliloquies* and Boethius's *Consolation*.⁹ But the Classical precedents of composition in the *Merchant's Tale* yield us a deeper understanding than have the speakers of Chaucer's approach to poetic truth and falsehood in fiction — to the truth, that is, that the poem seeks to convey about its apparent subject, which is happiness in marriage. Thus, the Merchant, presumably to buttress his poetic representation of Januarie's wedding, alludes, among other exempla, to Orpheus (1716), to the Muses' celebration of the marriage of Mercury and Philology (1732–35), and to the love of Pyramus and Thisbe (2125–28), in apparent sympathy for May's and Damyan's secret tryst.¹⁰ The most sustained exemplum is, of course, the Merchant's development of the legend of Pluto and Proserpina in the paradisaical garden of delights where Januarie would enclose his love, presumably as a blind victim of "unstable Fortune." At the high point of the famous scene, May assures Januarie of her fidelity:

"I prey to God that nevere dawe the day
That I ne sterve, as foule as womman may,
If evere I do unto my kyn that shame,
Or elles I empeyre so my name,
That I be fals. . . ." (2195–99)

However, she has already arranged for her assignation with Damyan hiding "under a bussh anon" (2155), and he is soon to climb into the pear-tree. At this point, with an astrological flourish, the Merchant cites his major "auctoritee":¹¹

Pluto, that is kyng of Fayerye,
 And many a lady in his compaignye,
 Folwyng his wyf, the queene Proserpyna,
 Which that he ravysshed out of [Ethna]
 Whil that she gadered floures in the mede —
 In Claudyan ye may the stories rede,
 How in his grisely carte he hire fette. . . . (2227-33)

While it is possible that there is a dramatic analogy between Pluto the rapist and Proserpina the victim, and Januarie and May, we should also remark on the incongruity of the analogy, since May is the perpetrator of an elaborate deception here, and certainly no innocent victim of male violence.¹² Whether Januarie's age and impotence can make him a likely reflection of Pluto's impulsion in the Latin texts is negotiable also. Characteristically, and in a style appropriate to Chaucer's dialectical irony, Pluto and Proserpina fall into a dispute over Solomon's womanizing.¹³ But, more important for the poem's paradoxical and comic texture, the two gods proceed to a deception as elaborate as May's: the whole scene of "throng" and "wrong" (2353-54) is conducted under the aegis of multiple illusions and denials that sustain the tale's thematic pattern of contradictory poetic expositions, whereby each speaker claims to interpret the larger argument of the tale. Thus, in abandoning his dispute with Proserpina, Pluto says that he will restore Januarie's sight (emphasis mine):

"I yeve it up! But sith I swoor myn ooth
 That I wolde graunten hym his sighte ageyn,
 My word shal stonde, I warne yow certeyn.
 I am a kyng; *it sit me noght to lye.*" (2312-15)

Proserpina, unabashed, will counter Pluto's claim to truth with what she takes to be an efficient deception. She prepares an answer for May, who says:

"Ye maze, maze, goode sire," quod she;
 "This thank have I for I have maad yow see.
 Allas," quod she, "that evere I was so kynde!" (2387-89)

May, of course, does not restore Januarie's sight, physical or spiritual. Yet Januarie confesses (emphasis mine):

"Com down, my lief, *and if I have myssayd,*
 God helpe me so, as I am yvele apayd." (2391-92)

In this concluding aggregate of poetic illusions, we may well argue for a botched thematic conclusion of misconceptions and misdeemings, as May

puts it (2410), though we cannot easily swallow the Merchant's own injunction ("Now, goode men, I pray yow to be glad" [2416]) as a satisfactory moral of the story. For the right and wrong here are intertwined in such a manner as to defy a simple moral lesson like the Host's misogynistic oversimplification in the Epilogue. For example, should we conclude that the Merchant's point is that the self-deception of senescent husbands in the face of the open adultery of young wives is the only possible solution to the marriage of youth and age? Let us, rather, appeal to a tradition of true and false fictions in the representation of the marriage of Pluto that may serve to orient some of these ambiguities in the direction of a more integrated interpretation of Chaucer's poetic strategies.

II

THE TRUE AND FALSE LATIN FICTION OF PLUTO AND PROSERPINA
AND THEIR IMPACT ON CHAUCER'S POETIC COMPOSITION

The direct appeal by the Merchant to Claudian's *De raptu Proserpinae* is a passing allusion to a standard school anthology.¹⁴ The teller no doubt intends by this exemplum to heighten the drama of May's infidelity in the garden, though by this point in the narrative we may also assume that the teller has lost control of its direction, which is caught between the divergent interests of the new speakers, who have a vitality of their own. Chaucer, on the other hand, has an integral poetic control of the allusion, for it refers to Claudian's own major literary model, the contest of the Muses and of the Pierides on Helicon in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* V. 250–678.¹⁵ In this passage we may observe a kind of dialectical irony at work, as Ovid pits one speaker against another in the poetic interpretation of his central theme comparing ephemeral and ideal love in marriage. We recall that this episode narrates for Minerva, in the Muse's report,¹⁶ Calliope's epyllion on the rape of Proserpina by Pluto, in poetic competition with the Gigantomachy of the Pierides. The latter claim to represent the overthrow and defeat of the Gods by the giant Typhoeus, as the Olympians concealed themselves in *deceitful shapes* ("narrat / Et se *mentitis* superos celasse *figuris* . . ." [325–26; emphasis mine]). But the Muse suggests that the Pieridan contestant attributes to the Giants a *false* glory ("*falsoque* in honore Gigantas / Ponit . . ." [319–20]) as she deprecates the deeds of the High Ones. At this point in the Muse's narration of the contest, we already have an inkling as to what is false about the Pierides' fiction, for in the previous frame Urania had commented on Pyreneus's attempted rape of the Nine Sisters (269–93) — that is, on the attempt of humanity to degrade the divinity of poetry

in the service of personal gratification. How, then, does Calliope's story of Proserpina's rape differ from the sacrilegious inspirations of the Pierides, so that Calliope should be granted a clear poetic victory by the nymphs (663-65)?

Ovid's collective poem is in fact laced with poetic contests that reveal part of his thematic purpose in the epic as a whole, which is to inquire into the right use (or the truth) of legendary material within a larger religious perspective suggesting the divinity of the poet's function, often abused by the partisan secular interests of conflicting dramatic voices.¹⁷ We shall seek to argue, moreover, that this feature of Ovid's composition in the *Metamorphoses* — that is, the dialectical treatment of legendary material — has a direct impact on Chaucer's mode of composition in the *Merchant's Tale*. For example, Calliope's son Orpheus,¹⁸ at the opening of his song in hell (*Metamorphoses* X), addresses a request of Pluto and Proserpina: if they were once joined by the power of love, they should heed his plea in the strings of his lyre, and forgive Eurydice's premature death. But Orpheus raises the possibility that the story of Proserpina's rape is a false one (emphasis mine):

*Famaque si veteris non est mentita rapinae,
Vos quoque iunxit Amor.* (28-29)

[And if the *story* of the rape of long ago is not a *lying* one, you too were joined by Love.]

Indeed, if we understand "Amor" here as physical love, we may immediately unmask Ovid's silent ridicule of his colleague's song, for Orpheus has applied the great powers of his lyre (which his creator appears to flatter in the ensuing lines) to a dubious end, that is, the securing of his physical needs as a lover.¹⁹ In the attempt, he fails: he looks back from the light of the upper world to lose Eurydice forever, and the subsequent panels of his narration in Book X, including the fetishism of Pygmalion, the incest of Myrrha, and the castration of Adonis suggest, in their interconnected theme, that Orpheus, as artist, has misapplied his poetic gifts in the rendering of love stories that attempt to realize their subject in terms of human experience, without regard to the Fates that are the proper subject of the song of the Muses, daughters of Memory and Zeus (Providence). And yet, Orpheus, in raising the possibility that the love story of Pluto and Proserpina is a false fiction, obviously claims for himself by implication the power to speak the truth in his fictions, but he fails. What, then, is the truth of Pluto's story?

If we return to the Muse's recounting of Calliope's victorious epyllion in Book V, we shall soon observe a similar contrast between the right and wrong use of legendary material — a contrast that has an impact on Chaucer's dialectical exposition: in the Latin text, the sacrilegious fable of the Giants' uprising narrated by the Pierides leads to their transformation into jangling magpies, as they have suggested that the gods can be overcome by natural forces, to be reduced to lying forms. Calliope, however, is at pains in her song to contrast a human portrait of love and marriage with a larger cosmic order beyond nature. She opens her narration by referring to the defeat of the Giants, and the subjugation of Typhoeus (348). Pluto, in viewing the Sicilian disorder covering the giant's body, is observed by Venus, who claims to expand her empire over the Underworld in ordering Cupid to pierce the heart of Dis (384), and wrest away Proserpina's virginity. The rape scene is handled with ferocious energy, as if to guarantee the power of Venus, but the bulk of the epyllion in fact concentrates on the mother's anxious search for the lost daughter, as Ceres gives up her agricultural office over the famished earth (477–86). On Arethusa's report, she discovers the truth of Proserpina's marriage, and, on her appeal to Jupiter, learns that she must submit to the will of the Fates (532). With the detail of the seven pomegranate seeds revealed by another jangling bird of ill omen (550), Jupiter, instrument of the Fates' superior will, is now the arbiter between the conflicting claims of fated sacramental marriage and the seasonal rhythm of nature: the year is divided between winter and summer to conciliate the needs of the husband and of the mother.

The "truth" of this fable is that Calliope has used the resources of poetry to depict the fulfilment of an order beyond the human experience of nature — the obverse, in other words, of Orpheus's poetic strategy in Book X, which is to apply the resources of poetry to his physical needs as a lover. As Orpheus fails to win the return of Eurydice to the natural realm, so, on the contrary, Calliope succeeds as victor over the Pierides's naturalistic poetics.²⁰ A significant feature, then, of Ovid's poetic handling of the divertimento on Pluto and Proserpina is an unstated comparison between two levels of art:²¹ on the one hand, the Pierides attempt to render as the proper subject of art the overthrow of a theological order, while, on the other, Calliope seeks to render the natural experience of life and death, or summer and winter, in the perspective of a higher order of knowledge reserved to the Fates' decree — precisely the object, in the analogous form of Providence, of Chaucer's central poetic vision of marriage in his poem.²²

Calliope's song reflects, then, a tradition of true and false in fiction examined also by Plato's speakers in the program of education set forth, for example, in *Republic* II. 376-83.²³ A similar concern with a cosmological order — as opposed to natural experience — as the proper object of the poet's use of legend pervades Claudian's unfinished *De raptu*, where we observe that the unexpected Proserpina prepares a cloth for her mother (I. 246-68) displaying an ordered world, but prophesying also her own rape (266-68).²⁴ In Book II, Proserpina's dress exhibits further cosmological themes (41-54), such as the birth of the sun and of the moon, but in Book III, 158, the aetiological decorations of her work at the loom are abandoned, after her rape, to the spider:

divinus perit ille labor, spatiumque relictum
audax sacrilego supplebat aranea textu. (157-58)

[The goddess's labours had come to naught, and what remained to be done, that the bold spider was finishing with her sacrilegious web [tr. Platnauer].]

With Claudian's explicit reference to Arachne's poetic defeat and her arachnid transformation by Athena in the *Metamorphoses* VI,²⁵ we recognize his major theme expressed in Jupiter's address to the Gods, to the effect that the rape fulfills a larger purpose of natural renewal in answer to the complaint of Nature:

tales cum saepe parentis
pertulerim questus, tandem clementior orbi
Chaonio statui gentes avertere victu:
atque adeo Cererem, quae nunc ignara malorum . . . (45-48)
per mare, per terras avido discurrere luctu
decretum, natae donec laetata repertae
indicio tribuat fruges. . . (50-52)

[Since I bore so often such complaints from the lips of mother Nature, at length I took pity on the world and decided to make man to cease from his oak-tree food; wherefore I have decreed that Ceres, who now, ignorant of her loss . . . should wander over sea and land in anxious grief, until, in her joy at finding the traces of her lost daughter, she grant man the gift of corn . . . [tr. Platnauer].]

At the heart of Claudian's theme, then, is a structural contrast in two levels of art between the drama of rape and desire perceived in human terms and the manner in which this drama fulfills the purpose of theological order expressed in the topical Golden Age promised by Pluto himself to Proserpina: "In Elysium, a richer age, a golden age has its home" (II. 285-86). Thus, if Ovid's Arachne had attempted on her loom to render the Gods

in bestial forms — that is, in false figures like those of the Pierides — we may leave Proserpina's embroidery of her rape to the spider in this scene of the *De raptu*, on the understanding that the Queen's marriage fulfils not a bestial lust but a true fiction of cosmic order like that of Athena in *Metamorphoses* VI.

We may now seek to argue that such a true fiction of cosmic or Providential order is the proper object of Chaucer's poetic interest in the *Merchant's Tale*. In fact, the poetic purposes of his major speakers are insufficient, for they are directed toward comic episodes of gratification and deception that trivialize, in a human order of knowing, the very function of marriage, and of its proper representation in Ovid and Claudian as the fulfilment of a sacramental order. This order would be evident also to Chaucer in the Song of Songs as a criptural epithalamium. On the other hand, his comic speakers make the error of Ovid's Pierides, which is to assume that poetry can dismiss a theological order, a point denied by Calliope, who transposes an episode of lust into a marriage governed by the Fates.

In a larger perspective, the theme of truth and falsehood in the fictions administered by the Muses would be evident to Chaucer from Boethius's *Consolation* I, prose 1, where the speaker invokes the Muses who encourage him in his song of grief, but whom Philosophy condemns as she approaches his bed:²⁶

And whan she saughe thise poetical Muses aprochen aboute my bed and enditynge wordes to my wepynges, . . . "Who," quod sche, "hath suffred aprochen to this sike man thise comune strompettis. . . ."

A more elaborate meditation on this passage allows Boccaccio, in his *Genealogy* XIV.20, to identify two kinds of poets and Muses:²⁷

[T]here are two kinds of poets — one worthy of praise and reverence . . . the other obscene and detestable. . . . Now the same distinction holds of the Muses, of which there is one genus but two species. For though they all enjoy the same power, and are governed by the same laws, yet the fruits of their labors are unlike, since one beareth sweet, the other bitter. . . . Philosophy later cites many a fragment of verse and poetic fable to soothe and console Boethius. So if these good Muses have a share in the healing art of Philosophy, they must be reputable perforce. (tr. Osgood)

A further remark on the right use of the Muses as it pertains to Ovid's Pluto and Proserpina appears in the *Ovide moralisé*. The author invokes the initial scene of the *Consolation* to describe the fate of those who, like the Pierides, would strive against the Nine Sisters:²⁸

| | |
|---------------------------------------|------|
| Qui contendent aus neuf puceles . . . | 2687 |
| Cestes sont trop foles et baudes. | 2702 |
| Cestes seult apeler ribaudes | |
| Philozophie apertement, | |
| Si le bons Boëces ne ment . . . | |
| Et vaudrent par desputoison | |
| Giter les fors de lor meson. | 2709 |

[Those who strive against the nine maids . . . they are too intemperate and are upstarts. These Philosophy has the custom of openly calling strumpets, if the good Boethius does not lie . . . And they merit, for their contention, to be dismissed from their home.]

III

RETROSPECT

In our survey of a tradition of poetics contrasting true and false uses of the fable of Pluto and Proserpina, we have sought to emphasize not so much the moral tenor of the rape itself, nor the symbolic meaning of character and image represented in moral terms in mythographic manuals. Rather, we study here the mode of representation of the Classical legend, in its ultimate object, which is Fate, and the quality of the speakers' claims to represent their — and their creator's — poetic purpose. In a tale as full of deception and illusion as the Merchant's (and its congeners in Fragments III-V of the Canterbury book), we may well look for an ironic purpose beyond the issue of a dramatic acceptance or rejection of a teller's argument. In the "truth" of the *Merchant's Tale*, more fundamental to Chaucer's poetic energy than moral irony is his dialectical opposition of the characters' contradictory views of the marriage they discuss in a poetic contest not unlike that of *Metamorphoses* V. That is, the dramatic contradictions of the tale may serve the moral purpose of satirizing the abuse of marriage, but, more imperatively for Chaucer's poetics, the contradiction reflect on a silent challenge by the author to his major speakers as they embark on their retelling of a traditional story. In this dialectical challenge, the ironic poetic suggestion Chaucer makes in the service of his poem's unity and truth is that a speaker's attempt to report in a genial and comic manner on the adaptation of a marriage fable to the purposes of deception and illusion, in a human order of knowing, is itself poetically incoherent — or illusory, if you will — like the work of the Pierides and of Arachne in their false fictions. In short, can a "true" fiction represent an epithalamium as the gratification of human purposes, in lust and guile?²⁹ The deceptions of Chaucer's tale are of course comic and dramatic, but they are also poetically ineffective,

as the true and false aspects of Januarie's and May's dubious union become entangled at the close. Thus, the "auctoritees" such as Ovid, Claudian, or Solomon, adduced or rejected by the speakers, can hardly serve their own deceptive argument, but point, rather, to Chaucer's search for a better poetic depiction of a legendary marriage than the trivial and bestial episode of "throng" and "wrong." Pluto, despite his claim ("it sit me noght to lye" [2315]), is a deceiver like the other speakers: in restoring Januarie's sight, Pluto does not grant the aggrieved *senex* an understanding of his abuse of marriage and of the Muse of Poetry. In turn, Januarie has no truth to speak, but acquiesces in May's deception as the only fit conclusion of his story — namely, that the function of the legend is to reveal that the poetics of marriage should secure an act of deception, or self-deception, for a human advantage that would nullify any other poetic level of representation, and notably that of a Providential order that Ovid had invoked in the Fates' decree.

And it is from the perspective of a dramatic interplay of poetic voices that the *Merchant's Tale* interlocks with other poetic representations of marriage in the Canterbury book: the Clerk, Walter, and Griselda compete in their poetic declamations on sovereignty and obedience, but the extremity of Walter's cruel claims and of Griselda's litany of humility makes suspect in turn the Clerk's terminal advice to us to find better guidance in the counsels of the Wife of Bath.³⁰ And as much as the Old Hag of that tale contradicts herself on the theme of nobility, poverty, and age in her pillow lecture to the knight, so, in the *Franklin's Tale*, the poetics of presumptive generosity are laced with deceptions in a drama of delusion between the extortionate astrologer, the seducing Aurelius, the hypocritical Dorigen, and the priggish Arveragus. Which dramatic voice can best capture the equation of sovereignty and marriage in these tales, or should that equation best be left to the Muse of Chaucer's supreme religious irony?³¹ In the narrator's "critical essay" at the close of the General Prologue (I. 725–46) (see n. 6 above), Chaucer seems to grapple with the notion of a poetic meaning beyond the power of language, such that he who would report a tale (731) may use one word or another (738), since the meaning of the poem is controlled by its figures and not its literal phrasing, like the parables that "Crist spak hymself ful brode in hooly writ . . ." (739). Elsewhere in the Canterbury headlinks (e.g., VII. 943–52), we learn that verbal differences in the four Gospels do not disguise the central "sentence" of the story they tell, for it is "al oon" (952). Thus, there is ample evidence in the Canterbury book of an ironic sensitivity on Chaucer's part to the misuse of language —

often accompanied by comic deceptions — in rendering a figurative meaning that is somehow single and imperative, despite the apparent diversity of expression and subject in the poem as a whole. Once again, in reporting a tale from legend, authority, or from a fellow pilgrim, a speaker

. . . may nat spare, althogh he were his brother;
He moot as well seye o word as another, (I. 738-38)

irrespective of a speech that is “plain” (727) or “rude” (734) in a short-witted (746) persona.³²

If we apply this dense critical passage, among others in the *Canterbury* headlinks and afterwords, to the *Merchant's Tale*, we observe that the narrative discord in the poem emerges from the persistent suspicion of each speaker that his interlocutors (as the “brother” of I. 737) have mismanaged the central figurative meaning of the marriage poem at hand. The illusions, deceptions, and contradictions occur, then, as part of a major strategy of poetics whereby Chaucer is able to alert us to the unspoken challenge he issues his speakers in their handling of legendary precedents and exempla. Since their use of language is constantly subject to implicit and explicit criticism in the dialectical disputes about truth and falsehood inside the tale — and between the tales themselves at the structural level in the book as a whole — we infer that the words spoken by the teller and his characters are often untrue. In the specific case of our tale, there is nothing “untrue” about a legendary marriage poem until it is engineered to represent its subject in a tangle of illusion and deception that we cannot easily resolve because, at bottom, the intent of our speakers to adapt a tale of sacramental marriage to their own sacrilegious interests remains a poetic impossibility. This impossibility Ovid represented by awarding a poetic victory to Calliope, dramatist of Fate and Providence, as she defeats the Pierides' poetics of irreligious naturalism, not unlike that of Chaucer's own speakers in our tale. And yet, from this impossibility emerges by irony another level of composition addressed to a mythic and sacramental poetic order like Ovid's in *Metamorphoses* V: here we observe that Pluto and Proserpina remain wedded in an imaginary world beyond death that acknowledges the power of nature (Ceres), transcended, however, in the Fates' decree that Jupiter cannot rescind. Obviously, it is this order of Platonic poetic representation beyond ephemeral change and human interest that motivates Ovid the poet and justifies his claim to immortality in the final lines of his masterwork (Book XV, 871-79), and that places his achievement quite beyond the poetic reach of the dialectic of opposing poetic motives pursued by his tellers in the multiple stories they have told. In this way, Chaucer's conception of the poetic

representation of sacramental marriage, as an ideal order, though hardly shared by his noisy and discordant narrators, is no doubt akin to Ovid's, as it outlines in the clear silence of wordless irony the ideal truth and unity of the Merchant's fable.

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NOTES

¹ For a critical appraisal of major issues in earlier scholarship, see Emerson Brown, Jr. "Chaucer, the Merchant and their Tale."

² Citations are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson.

³ The dramatic approach to the tale's bitter satiric tone reaches back, as Brown (n. 1) remarks (141), at least to Kittredge. But this approach emphasizes a difference in moral or ethical purpose between Chaucer and his speakers in the tale, whereas here I shall examine a divergent poetic strategy between author and speakers based on a Classical tradition of poetics revealed in the poem's allusions. A divergence in meaning between speaker and author can, obviously, be linked to the age-old critical interest in Chaucerian irony, recently reassessed in a heavily documented article by Joseph A. Dane. He distinguishes between "rhetorical" and "Romantic" irony, the first of which appeals to "an authority absent from the text" (119). On the other hand, "Romantic" irony would emphasize more the poetic process (e.g., in "creative consciousness" [121]). David Lawton has a recent discussion of the tellers as dramatic personae.

⁴ See, for example, Donald R. Benson. M. Teresa Tavormina, in her notes for the Riverside edition, suggests (884, col. A) a division of the tale into three parts concluding "with the deception story proper." But deception, and self-deception, permeate the whole poem from the Prologue onward, as I shall attempt to demonstrate.

⁵ Eve in this passage is likely to be remembered for her apple, while the Vulgate Genesis 2-5 does not address her age relative to Adam's, a point that Januarie forgets in his exposition of his project. The subsequent scriptural exempla of Rebecca, Judith, Abigail, and Esther (1362-74) have elicited much comment for the deceptions these "heroines" practised to achieve their ends. Further remarks in Emerson Brown, Jr., "Biblical Women in the Merchant's Tale," and Edmund Reiss, "Biblical Parody," in David L. Jeffrey.

⁶ There are other intriguing verbal echoes in the poem, such as the signature on "oother/brother" at 1453-54 and 1477-78, with "brother/oother" at 1689-90, which has a particular fascination for Chaucer illustrated in his much-studied comment on the kinship of word and deed ("cosyn to the dede" [I. 742]) in the teller's report: *CT* I. 737-38 and IX. 210, 221-22. For a development of Latin and French poetic precedents to Chaucer's expression see Marc M. Pelen, "The Manciple's 'Cosyn' to the 'Dede'."

⁷ In the French *débat* tradition, the argument to be marshalled often dominates the meaning of the exemplum. Thus, in Deschamps' *Miroir de Mariage*, Repertoire invokes for Franc Vouloir Solomon's caution against female entanglements (5642), while Folie invokes Solomon's uxoriousness (8619-35). Supplementary comment in Leslie J. Altman. The cultural connections between Chaucer and Deschamps have been re-examined by Roy J. Percy.

⁸ Justinus's allusion to the Wife of Bath (1685) as an able expositor of the dangers of marriage may perhaps be construed in this context to refer to the evident poetic contradictions of her tale (n. 31, below).

⁹ Nolan's attractive essay may be supplemented by Don A. Monson, who traces mediaeval conceptions of dialectical irony back to Plato's critique of myth and rhetoric described, for example, by René Schaefer.

¹⁰ For "Marcian," Chaucer has in mind the scene in Martianus Capella, *De nuptiis* §§210-13, where the Muses in Elysium join heroes and poets in celebration of the spouses' union. An English version is available in W.H. Stahl, 62.

¹¹ The scriptural and Classical allusions of the tale serve to strengthen in the speaker's mind the point he wishes to make. But we shall observe that this allusion has a poetic energy of its own that exceeds the Merchant's control, not to mention that of the inset speakers in the exemplum.

¹² The tone of the dialogue between the Underworld King and Queen is bantering and humorous throughout the divertimento, suggesting a well-adjusted marriage allowing an occasional light-hearted dispute. That Pluto and Proserpina should make such fun of the pear-tree episode is not the least of the puzzling features blending bitterness and humour in the tale as a whole. Substantial discussion of the digression often attempts to link the Classical spouses in their character or attitude with the predicament of Januarie and May: Mortimer J. Donovan, "The Image of Pluto," and Karl Wentersdorff, "Theme and Structure," with a reassessment by the same author in "Imagery, Structure and Theme in the *Merchant's Tale*," in Leigh A. Arrathoon. Marcia A. Dalbey refers to relevant mythographic interpretations in the *Ovide moralisé* and Berchorius's *Reductorium morale*. Perhaps the best explanation for the irruption of Pluto and Proserpina into Chaucer's tale is the link between Agape's narration of her marriage to a disgusting old man in Boccaccio's *Ameto* and the frequent use of Ovidian mythological allusions in this pastoral romance. Acrimonia, for example, praises Venus for lending her arms against Pluto, the ravisher of Proserpina (XXX, 20), while she identifies Typhoeus as "perfidious" (XXX, 14). In turn, Emilia characterizes the Pierides as "garrulous" (XXI, 3), as the Muses are claimed by Alceste, in her pastoral debate with Acaten, to be mistresses from whom she learnt her song (XIV, 116). Ameto himself identifies his nymph-instructors with the Muses (XLIV, 5). In all, Boccaccio's allusions to *Metamorphoses* V and VI illustrate his interest in comparing the nymphs' love-stories with poetic precedents that describe the legends of love. However, the curious blend of illicit sensuality and Christian moralism in the *Ameto* has elicited some critical hesitation. See, more recently, Robert Hollander, 72-77, and Gordon Poole. In this note I refer to chapter and paragraph number in the edition of A.E. Quaglio.

¹³ On this allusion in the poem see Douglas Wurtele, who concludes by rejecting Proserpina's attack on Solomon's reputed lechery and idolatry (484). Pluto and Proserpina in fact twist the content of each other's declamations, as Gwen Griffiths shows in her narratological emphasis on "textual reconstructions" by the divergent voices of the tale.

¹⁴ See Robert A. Pratt, for a discussion of Chaucer's knowledge of the *Liber Cato-nianus*, and, more recently, Mortimer J. Donovan, "Chaucer's Januarie and May."

¹⁵ We may assume Chaucer's direct familiarity with Ovid's text, suggested in the Man of Law's fear, expressed in his Prologue, of being likened to the jangling Pierides (II. 91-93):

Me were looth be likned, douteles,
To Muses that men clepe Pierides —
Metamorphosios woot what I mene. . . .

The nature of the contact that Chaucer has with Classical texts, mediated or not by vernacular adaptations, is often debated: a recent contribution is offered by Helen Cooper.

¹⁶ The goddess of wisdom is herself the victor in a poetic contest dealing with the proper function of legendary art in Book VI. 1-145. I cite from the text of Georges Lafaye. Renderings of Latin and French citations in this article are my own unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁷ An able discussion of this dimension of the poem is conducted by E.W. Leach, who expands on the remarkable insight of William S. Anderson in his review of Otis. Anderson advances the view that a broad aesthetic principle of the masterwork may be illustrated "in a number of stories where two kinds of art are being contrasted and judged" (102), as in the poetic contest of Books V and VI. Anderson denies Otis's theses that the poem's coherence can be based on its imagery, subject, or structure, to suggest that the coherence should rather be tested in the exposition of the legendary material at various literary levels. There has been active recent interest in Ovid's ironic appraisal of his narrators' interpretative abilities in the *Metamorphoses*: Fritz Graf suggests the Ovid "ironise discrètement: il désavoue cette attitude trop naïve et crédule de son propre narrateur" (67).

¹⁸ *Metamorphoses* X. 148. On the relationship of Orpheus to the foremost of the Muses, see Stephen Hinds, 135.

¹⁹ Orpheus's poetic predicament is not unlike that of the Merchant himself as an expositor of Januarie's marriage banquet, with his reference to Orpheus (1716). Thus, in Ovid, the story of Pluto and Proserpina illustrates not the physical power of Love, but, rather, the power of the Fates, as well shall observe in *Metamorphoses* V and in Claudian's text. On the other hand, the central poetic strategy of Orpheus, as narrator of Book X, is to make the Muse serve his conceptions of love, which are physical, rather than their sacramental analogue, governed by the Fates in an order of being beyond ephemeral change. William S. Anderson comments on Orpheus's "weirdly incompetent" poetic delivery (46) in "The Orpheus of Virgil and Ovid." I attempt an overall characterization of Ovid's dialectical religious irony in this passage in my *Latin Poetic Irony*, 44-47. A more ambivalent approach to the poetic aims of Ovid's characterization is developed by Charles Segal, 85-94.

²⁰ The nature and meaning of the poetic victory are further illustrated in *Metamorphoses* VI, with the spinning contest between Arachne and Minerva, to which Claudian alludes in the *De raptu*, as we shall observe.

²¹ The comparison is unstated, and hence ironic, because although Calliope wins the nymphs' approval, no clear comment on the victory is furnished. We have, rather, an inferential testing by Ovid of a speaker's power to handle a traditional legend to poetically weaker or stronger purposes, not unlike the particular ironic relationship of Chaucer's poetic meaning to the concerns of his dramatic speakers in the *Merchant's Tale*.

²² It is appropriate that Athena should be the witness to the report of Calliope's victory, for her own poetic triumph over Arachne in the following book (*Metamorphoses* VI) is achieved by a similar theological celebration transcending the natural order of change that cannot satisfy the personnel of the poem as a whole, human or divine. Ovid's own concern with true and false fictions is linked early in his career as a writer to his interest in the right use of the Muses' inspiration. In the *Ars Amatoria*, the speaker cites the venerable topic of Hesiod, *Theogony*, 27-28 (emphasis mine):

"We [the Muses] know how to speak many *false* things as though they were *true*; but we know, when we will, to utter *true* things." (tr. Evelyn-White)

In Ovid's rendition (*AA* I. 25-30) (emphasis mine):

Non ego, Phoebae, datas a te mihi *mentiar artes*,
 Nec nos aëriae voce monemur avis,
 Nec mihi sunt visae Clio Cliusque sorores
 Servanti pecudes vallibus, Ascra, tuis:
 Usus opus movet hoc: vati parete perito;
Vera canam: coeptis, mater Amoris, ades!

[I will not *falsely* claim that my *art* is thy gift, O Phoebus, nor am I taught by the voice of a bird of the air, neither did Clio and Clio's sisters appear to me while I kept flocks in thy vale, O Ascra [scene of Hesiod's vision]: experience inspires this work; give ear to an experienced bard; *true* will be my *song*: favour my enterprise, O mother of Love.] (tr. Mozley)

A dissatisfied failure on his own turf (*AA* II. 425-30), our "poet" of "truth" is the target of Ovid's silent ridicule, in that, as a dramatic speaker and an experienced lover, he attempts to deny the language of the Muses in the "inspiration" of his erotic conquests, which are the proper subject, he claims, of his poems. This is obviously a principal device of Ovid's elegiac satire that made a deep impression on Chaucer's own sense of dramatic and poetic irony. Further detailed comment on Ovid's achievement in Godo Lieberg. Our passage from *AA* I. 25-30 is applied to the Narrator's invocation to Clio, or history, in *Troilus* II. 8 by Winthrop Wetherbee, 152-53. At the close of his study, Wetherbee remarks (232-33) on the "truth" of poetry . . . in its fidelity to its own tradition and its capacity to reveal new meanings in the light of evolving historical and spiritual perspectives."

²³ The influence of Hesiod's famous topic on traditional concepts of true and false in fiction has recently been re-examined by Elizabeth Belfiore, who remarks that "Plato reads *Theogony* 27 as a claim made by Hesiod's Muses to create good *mythos* in the sense defined in Republic 2: stories concerning events about which we cannot know the truth but which are consistent with what we do know about the nature of the gods." The author shows (55-56) that the "truth" of the Muses' stories, in Plato's conception, is ultimately dependent not on language or eyewitness experience, but on "Zeus . . . the basis for truth in the world as well for justice." In drawing a connection between the superior knowledge of Memory, mother of the Muses, and of the Platonic *anamnesis* (recollection), as an ideal order of knowledge that is the proper function of the poet's art, Belfiore refers (56) to the work of J.-P. Vernant, with its chapter entitled "Aspects mythiques de la mémoire" (51-78).

²⁴ Simone Viarre remarks on the relationship of the two scenes in Ovid and Claudian, and on their influence revealed in the allegorical vestments of the heroines of Alain de Lille. We cite here from the text and translation in Claudian.

²⁵ The association is made in *The Commentary of Geoffrey of Vitry*, 94-95. See also the remarks of Terry Duffey.

²⁶ The relationship of poetic conception to moral teaching in Chaucer has been studied by Alfred David. A more ambitious survey is conducted by Wesley Trimpi, in his chapter entitled "Capellanus and Boccaccio: From Questione to Novella," 328-44. I cite here from Chaucer's rendering in the Riverside text, 398.

²⁷ Ed. Vincenzo Romano. Boccaccio, in Book XI. 2, follows Fulgentius, *Mitologiae* I. 5, in his characterization of the traditional functions of the Nine Muses. My citation is from Charles G. Osgood, 95-96. On this passage see Etienne Gilson, with a more general review of the meaning of authority and fiction in Boccaccio's text proposed by Thomas Hyde.

28 *Ovide moralisé*, vol. 2.

29 The theme of deception can also be assessed in the use of a single topic, such as the abuse, or "usury" of sign and language, as suggested by R.A. Shoaf, in his chapter entitled "The Merchant and the Parody of Creation," 185-209.

30 The interrelationship of the two tales has long intrigued their readers. See, more recently, John A. Alford, and Marc M. Pelen, "Irony in Boccaccio's *Decameron*."

31 An original approach to intertextuality in Chaucer's poem is illustrated by Paul B. Taylor. The self-contradiction of the Old Hag involves her rejection of her own argument on the merits of age and fidelity in a wife, as she claims at last to be "bothe fair [= young] and good [= faithful]" (III. 1241). The "maistrie" in this tale is as much a question of poetics and argument — that is of the degree of poetic control the speakers have over their material — as of social dominance.

32 I examine this passage at further length in my article cited in n. 6, above. The Parson's concern with those cited in Timothy who "weyven soothfastnesse, / And tellen fables and swich wrecchednesse" (X. 33-34) does not contradict the narrator's citation of Christ's parables as the justification for exemplary stories and figurative language, but refers more probably to the possible misuse of these in the stories that the Parson has heard with us along the way to Canterbury.

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