Branching Out: Trees and Knowledge in Chaucer's "The Merchant's Tale" and "The Pardoner's Tale"

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Abstract: In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387–1400), the arboreal is imbued with symbolic and allegorical meaning. Used by Chaucer as rhetorical devices, the trees in "The Merchant's Tale" symbolize fertility, while the tree in "The Pardoner's Tale" symbolizes death. In both tales, the arboreal functions allegorically, representing the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. By using nature in this manner, Chaucer creates ambiguity in his work, complicating the idea of knowledge in both tales.

In *The Canterbury Tales* (1387–1400), Geoffrey Chaucer uses trees to make the common complex. Through exploration of the arboreal in "The Merchant's Tale" and "The Pardoner's Tale," it becomes clear that the trees hardly function as actual trees, as they are imbued with symbolic and allegorical meaning. In "The Merchant's Tale," trees are symbolic of fertility, while in "The Pardoner's Tale," trees are symbolic of death. The arboreal also functions allegorically in both tales, representing the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. This essay argues that trees are rhetorical devices employed by Chaucer to complicate notions of knowledge in the tales by subverting the traditional allegory of the biblical Fall and leaving the tales' characters in ambiguous situations.

The first appearance of the arboreal in "The Merchant's Tale" is found in Januarye's description of himself, which reveals the symbolic meaning of trees as representations of fertility:

"Thogh I be hoor, I fare as dooth a tree
That blosmeth er that fruit ywoxen bee;
And blosmy tree nis neither drye ne deed.
I feele me nowher hoor but on min heed;
Min herte and alle my limes been as grene
As laurer thurgh the yeer is for to sene." (1461–66)

In this passage, Januarye evokes the image of a tree to prove his virility and reproductive ability. He goes further than a simple comparison, becoming a tree himself: his "hoor" becomes the blossoms, and his "limes" become the branches of a laurel (1461, 1465). In this case, trees become symbolic of fertility. By transforming himself into an object of the natural world, Januarye appropriates nature to prove his virility. Becoming the tree, Januarye uses the "grene" of the laurel—connoting freshness and rebirth—to suggest his health and sexual productivity (1465). This idea is even reflected in the characters' names: "Januarye" is a month associated with winter and decay, whereas "May"—the name of his young wife—is a month associated with spring and new growth. Januarye's appropriation of nature makes his name ironic, as it reveals his concerns about his age and possible impotency. For Januarye, the main criteria he has for his future wife are her youth and her ability to "engendren him an heir" (1272). In the passage, "fruit" represents the child that Januarye has not yet had (1462). Therefore, it becomes apparent in "The Merchant's Tale" that trees are symbolic of fertility, used by Januarye as a means of conceptualizing his reproductive abilities.

Januarye's desire for an offspring is explored by Alcuin Blamires, who suggests that Januarye's obsession with fertility shows his desire to "develop his genealogical tree" (Blamires 113). Considering Januarye's view that "leveful procreacioun" is the reason for taking a wife, and his explicit worry that his "heritage sholde falle" if he does not have a child, Blamires's argument has merit (Chaucer, "Merchant's Tale" 1448, 1439). In addition, the fruit produced by the trees has a multitude of meanings. When Januarye contemplates taking a wife, he claims that a wife would be the "fruit of his tresor" (1270). In this case, "fruit" means the

most important part, since Januarye believes a young wife is a "glorious thing" for a man to have in old age (1270, 1268). However, later in the tale, when Januarye describes himself as a tree, "fruit" refers to a potential offspring (1462). If we consider the latter, the ending of the tale becomes more complicated.

May claims that she has an "appetit" for the pears, which could be read as May's yearning for a child (2336). Blamires suggests that May might want to conceive with Damian so that she can prove her agency by defiling Januarye's lineage (115). However, the inclusion of "womman in my plit" implies the possibility that May could already be with child—her cravings being the result of pregnancy (Chaucer, "Merchant's Tale" 2335). Carol Falvo Heffernan contributes to this debate, revealing the possibility that May might regard the pears as a form of contraception, since they were used by early doctors as a form of birth control (Heffernan 31). If we consider the contraceptive quality of the pears, then May's desire for the pears is not because she is pregnant or wants a child but because she wants to prevent conception with Januarye and Damian. In addition, Heffernan adds that Chaucer may have chosen the pear tree because pears "resemble female breasts" and "male genitalia" (31). Therefore, May's desire for the fruit would be her lust for Damian's physical body. With the tale ending with Januarye stroking May's "wombe," the question of whether May is pregnant arises, and if so, who the father may be (2414). The ambiguity of the fruit's meaning leaves the ending up for interpretation and increases the gravity of the scandalous climax.

While trees in "The Merchant's Tale" are symbolic of fertility, the oak tree in "The Pardoner's Tale" is symbolic of death. When the rioters decide to find and kill Death, an "olde man" (Chaucer, "Pardoner's Tale" 714) gives them Death's location:

> To finde deeth, turn up this croked wey,
> For in that grove I lafte hym, by my fey,
> Under a tree, and ther he wole abide;
> Nat for youre boost he wole him nothing hide.

> Se ye that ook? Right ther ye shal him finde. (761–65)

Carolyn P. Collette argues that Chaucer's attention to the exact location of the tree suggests that he "intends his audience to recall … that the oak tree evokes quite particular Biblical and exegetical connotations" (39). To support her argument, Collette cites examples from the Old Testament, revealing the connection between oak trees and sites of death and burial: Deborah, Saul, and Saul's son are all buried under oak trees (40). Collette's argument works with the plot of the tale as the rioters all end up dying beneath the oak tree. While I agree with her interpretation, I also believe that the meaning of the oak tree can be taken a step further—the oak tree not only being a place of death but also symbolizing death itself. Death in "The Pardoner's Tale" is personified. The rioters regard death as a "privee theef" who killed their friend with a "spere" (675, 677); therefore, the rioters believe that "Deeth" has the ability to be "sleen" (699). When the old man says, "se ye that ook? Right ther ye shal him finde," the expectation of the reader is that Death will be a person, waiting for the rioters under the tree (765). However, when the rioters arrive at their destination, the oak tree is the only living entity the rioters encounter. Thus, the oak tree in "The Pardoner's Tale" is Death's closest representative on Earth.

When we consider the moral of "The Pardoner's Tale," the symbolic nature of trees in Chaucer's text becomes even more apparent. The Pardoner declares that the theme of his story is "*Radix malorum est Cupiditas*," meaning "greed is the root of all evil" (426). Taking this theme into account, the actual "roots" of the oak tree become greed, making the tree itself "evil." This idea becomes increasingly important when we consider "The Merchant's Tale." When debating the pros and cons of marriage, Januarye consults Justinus and Placebo. In his musings, Januarye wonders about the inability to have "parfite blisses" (1638) both on earth and in heaven and includes the following thought: "For thogh he kepe him fro the sinnes sevene, / And eek from every branche of thilke tree" (1640–41). The inclusion of these lines adds an-

other layer to the arboreal in "The Merchant's Tale," as trees now become associated with sin. When we consider the fact that the pear tree ends up being the site of May's adultery, it becomes clear that trees in Chaucer's tales hardly function as actual trees and are imbued with symbolism.

In addition to their symbolic use, Chaucer also employs the arboreal in his tales allegorically. The trees in the "The Merchant's Tale" and "The Pardoner's Tale" are representative of the Tree of Knowledge from the Garden of Eden. In "The Merchant's Tale," the allegory of the Fall is quite evident: the final interaction between Januarye, May, and Damian occurs in an actual "gardin, walled al with stoon" (2029). If read allegorically, Damian becomes the serpent, luring May towards the "pirie" (2217); May becomes Eve, as she "longeth" for the tree's fruit; and Januarye becomes Adam, whose spiritual fall is the result of his wife's temptation (2332). In addition, there are multiple allusions to Eden throughout the tale: wedlock, wifehood, and May herself are all compared to "paradis" (1265, 1332, 1822).

Although it is less explicit than in "The Merchant's Tale," the oak tree in "The Pardoner's Tale" also represents the Tree of Knowledge. The Pardoner alludes to the fall of Adam in his tale's prologue and describes how Adam is "out cast to wo and peine" after eating from the tree (511). Adam's plight is comparable to the rioters' situation, as their encounter with the oak tree also brings them "wo and peine": the youngest rioter is "slain" by the other two rioters, who are poisoned (881). Furthermore, it should also be noted that when Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, one of their punishments is the loss of their immortality (*Holy Bible*, Gen. 2). In "The Pardoner's Tale," the rioters are immediately punished with death, a fulfillment of the biblical promise of human mortality.

Ultimately, the result of Chaucer's use of trees in "The Merchant's Tale" and "The Pardoner's Tale" is the complication of knowledge. Since the trees allegorically represent the Tree of Knowledge, the characters who encounter the trees should gain insight they did not already have. However, in both tales, the allegory of the Fall is subverted. In Genesis

3, the serpent claims that by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam's and Eve's "eyes will be opened" and they will "be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3.4). Januarye, who has gone blind, is given the gift of sight from Pluto. His eyes are "opened," yet he does not end up believing what he sees. Even though Januarye watches May commit adultery in a tree, she is able to convince him that he "han som glimsinge, and no parfit sighte" (2383). Unlike Adam, Januarye disregards the knowledge he gained by having his eyes opened in order to preserve the sanctity of his marriage. If we consider the symbolism of the trees in "The Merchant's Tale," the knowledge that is complicated is not only that of good and evil but is also the characters' knowledge of the future. The symbolism of the tree and its fruit puts the characters in an ambiguous situation: it is unclear whether May is pregnant, and if she is, the father could be either Januarye or Damian.

Similarly to "The Merchant's Tale," the concept of knowledge is also complicated in "The Pardoner's Tale." The rioters go to the oak tree so that they can find and kill Death; however, as soon as they arrive at their destination, they become distracted by "florins fine of gold" (770). The rioters, already sinners at the beginning of the tale, immediately forget their purpose and become murderous. Like Januarye, they do not learn a lesson. The death of the rioters is similar to Januarye's spiritual undoing: the characters do not acquire the knowledge of good and evil. What should be noted about "The Pardoner's Tale" is that this lack of knowledge does not only apply to the characters within the tale but also can be applied to the tale-teller himself. The Pardoner preaches "nothing but for coveitise," and his tale is overtly moralistic, warning against the corrupting nature of greed (424). However, even though greed is the focus of his teachings, the Pardoner is one of the most prolific sinners in the group of pilgrims. Selling false relics in order to make a living, the Pardoner admits to the pilgrims the truth about his occupation. It becomes clear that the Pardoner is aware of his spiritual shortcomings, yet he has no intention of changing his ways. Like Januarye, the Pardoner chooses a

path of self-deceit. He deliberately remains ignorant so that he can continue his profession, which is similar to Januarye's acceptance of May's lies so that he can continue to regard her as the "fruit of his tresor" (1270).

Trees in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* are charged with symbolic and allegorical meaning; they are not treated as actual trees but are used as rhetorical devices, complicating the tales' morals and plot. In "The Merchant's Tale," trees symbolize fertility, and in "The Pardoner's Tale," trees symbolize death. The arboreal also functions allegorically in both tales, representing the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden. By employing nature in this manner, Chaucer subverts the allegory of the Fall, creating ambiguity and dimension within the tales. In "The Merchant's Tale," Januarye disregards the information he learns by having his eyes opened in order to remain ignorant of May's adultery. When we consider the symbolic nature of the trees, the characters' understanding of the future is complicated by May's potential pregnancy. In "The Pardoner's Tale," the rioters fail to learn the knowledge of good and evil—a shortcoming that extends to the Pardoner himself.

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