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The «laurer» and the «columbyn»: The Images of Frustrated Love in Chaucer's Merchant's Tale

Ingrid Semaan

«Rys up, my wyf, my love, my lady free» (1. 2138) - however it has been the literary scholars who have followed old January with much greater alacrity than his «fresshe May» into the literary and rhetorical world of the wedding chamber and the garden that Chaucer lets the Merchant create for the married couple. The scholars, in turn, especially those interested in sources, metaphor, analogy, and allusion have been richly rewarded by the study of The Merchant's Tale, this «dense mosaic of references, allusions, quotations», as G. G. Sedgewick has described it. Unifying the richly structured composition of this «mosaic» is the theme of frustrated love, a concern to which many of these «references, allusions, quotations» point.

One of the earlier critical concerns was to track down the analogues. It proved to be a fertile field; by now it has become a critical commonplace that one of the central motifs of Chaucer's tale--the blind man and the adulterous youth the pear-tree-cluster--is of Mid Eastern origin and can be found among the tales of the Disciplina Clericalis. This anthology of Eastern folklore--comprising East Indian, Byzantine, Persian, Arabian, and Hebrew materials--was compiled in Latin back in the twelfth century by Petrus Alfunsus. Alfunsus, originally a Jewish scholar born in Spain, converted to Christianity, and eventually emigrated to England where he became royal physician to King Henry I. He wrote the Disciplina while he resided in England. Alfonsi's collection of thirty-four tales is important as a bridge by which what is commonly called the literary «matter of Araby» in both form and content became a tradition that supplied vernacular medieaval Europen writers.

The critical discourse that has grown up around *The Merchant's Tale* is very rich indeed; the varied sources have been tracked down and catalogued and related to the different themes and concerns of the tale;\(^{(2)}\) and the student cannot but get the impression that the subject must have been exhausted. But then we are reminded by John P. McCall that «Chaucer never did anything simple», and that it is difficult for the reader to see all the twists and turns the master storyteller has hidden in his tale.\(^{(3)}\) Yet the critics, thorough though they have been, have not always realized the complexities of these «references, allusions, and quotations» and cross references. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the tale again, to see how the theme of frustrated love is reflected by these allusions, and to add to the critical discourse aspects of this tapestry or «mosaic» that Chaucer scholars so far have not pointed out.

During his two months of married life, Chaucer's Merchant, who tells the story of old January's lust and young May's adultery has come to know «weeping and walyng, care and oother sorwe» (l. 1213) and, like many a disgruntled lover and husband before him, has found his beloved and wife to be a «shrewe at al» (l. 1222) and his ideals of love and marriage shattered. Thus on his way to Canterbury, this sophisticated and worldly-wise pilgrim and authority on the darker aspects on the art of love and marriage tells a tale of blindness, deceit, treachery, and frustrated love.

He will not burden his fellow travelers with his problems; nevertheless the innocent Harry Bailey urges him on «syn ye so muchel knowen of that art» of love (l. 1241). The Merchant, this disenchanted tourist of «thise monthes two, and moore nat, pardee» (l. 1234) in the realm of love, feels that he has become an authority and is therefore entitled to generalize from his experience and pass judgement on matters pertaining to husbands, lovers, wives, and love, even of the divine variety. He obliges his audience with his jaundiced and distorted views on these subjects and gives himself the air that he knows all about these matters. Through the many learned allusions to classical and biblical lovers with which he illustrated his points, he suggests that he has quite exhausted the subject and has found his own conclusions borne out. He has discovered all the secrets about women, be they saints or sinners; he has read all about love, be it eros or agape. He has read, but the meaning of what he has read has escaped


him. By concentrating on the «letter of the biblical text» or the literary reading of classical myths, as transmitted basically by Ovid, that the Merchant has used as references, he has remained «blind to the higher meaning» hidden behind the word or the figure, and his air of authority becomes soon suspect. It was a commonplace for many medieval Christians—with the exception of the Merchants and Januarys of this world—as Emerson Brown has reminded us, that «the historical truth of biblical events was only one of several levels of meaning and was often not the predominant one»(4). The same is true about the writings of Ovid and the other popular mythographers of the day.

The Merchant cannot see beyond the literal word on the page which he comprehends through his perception that has been shaped by his own limited and jaundiced experience. His wife and his involvement with love have disappointed him—though he does not tell how this happened. Therefore, no matter what good and heroic qualities the lovers and love-situations to which he refers exemplify in their original context, in the Merchant’s mouth all of them take on a decidedly negative tone echoing his own «care and other sorrow» that he has encountered in the realms of love and marriage.

With his shrew for a wife, the Merchant has not enjoyed much fulfillment in love and marriage; it is then no wonder that he will not grant the lovers in his tale what he could not have himself.(5) This he makes amply clear through the choice of imagery and allusion. He sneers at the love of which January, May, and Damian are capable and will grant them little satisfaction. If they want to, they can always escape into blindness and erotic daydreams, activities of which especially January has much practice. We are given to understand that real satisfaction in love, be it spiritual or sensual, escapes them as is the case of so many of the lovers to which the well-read Merchant alludes.

He certainly has classical and biblical lore of love at his command; this the abundant allusions throughout the tale make clear; and he has woven them


(5) I do not wish to enter the debate among several Chaucerians on how much sexual gratification the Merchant allows the two lovers in the pear tree, but the pervasive pattern of allusions to frustrated love throughout the tale does suggest that they will not finish their activities—and neither will old January ever have an heir. For a sampling of the two opposite positions, see: Peter G. Beidler, «The Climax in the Merchant’s Tale», ChR, 6 (1971), pp. 38-43; and Emerson Brown, Jr., Hortus Inconclusus: The Significance of Priapus and Pyramus and Thisbe in the Merchant’s Tale, ChR, 4 (1970), pp. 31-40. The reference to the Greek lovers and the classical god of gardens, according to Brown, enhance one of the main themes of the tale, namely that of frustrated love.
together with the skill of an experienced and expert storyteller. This aspect of the tale has not escaped recent scholarly attention, yet this «dense mosaic», as the tale has been described, is much more comprehensive and intricate than has been suggested and underlines and enhances one of the major themes of the tale: no matter how carnal or romantic or spiritual love may be here on earth, when seen through the Merchant's limited vision, it will end invariably in frustration. But then the question arises: Is this the ultimate message of the tale as told not by the Merchant but by Chaucer himself? To this question we will address ourselves at the end of this study.

Readers of the tale have frequently objected to calling The Merchant's Tale a love story. It is a tale, even an anatomy, very much about love, however as it is understood and interpreted by the Merchant's sex-crazed imagination.

Long before he met and married May, the Merchant's sex-hungry «worthy knyght» has deceived and blinded himself to the true nature of marriage and a good wife. We first meet old January as he desperately tries to sanctify his erotic longings. He has decided that lechery is no longer a sin when it is practiced, as by Adam and Eve, in marriage, for «wedlok is so esy and so clenefThat in this world it is a paradys» (ll. 1264-5). To lend authority and sanctity to his lechery, he composes an epithalamium that he addresses to his image of the ideal wife, to the Virgin May, to the Old Testament, and to the tradition of the Church (ll. 362-1374). The biblical heroines he sees there recommended-Rebecca, Judith, Abigail, and Queen Esther-exemplify to him, as they did to the Church Fathers and the medieval Church, wifely faithfulness and obedience. They are to «delyver» him «out of wo» and lead him to bliss and his marital paradise.

He could not have chosen better guardians. Perhaps January, the merchant from «Pavye» in «Lumbardye», remembered the experiences of his compatriot Dante from Florence who had seen the ladies Rebecca, Sara, and Judith in the Celestial Rose very close to the Virgin Mary (Paradiso, Canto XXXII, ll. 7-10); perhaps he remembered that all of them in their youth were among the most beautiful women of their time, a point which would certainly enhance January's daydreams. It was common knowledge in the Middle Ages that Abigail, for instance, had inspired lust in the minds of countless generations of young and old Januaries.(6) The Church Fathers, who had resisted the temptations of the

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flesh, had interpreted the «beauty» of all these ladies in bono and had recommended them as models to brides and wives alike, and therefore had included them in the marriage service. In the iconography of the medieval Church, «these four women were primitive, universal, and constant types of Deliverance»(7), we are told. On the spiritual level, the ultimate way of reading a sacred text, these Old Testament ladies had delivered their people out of bondage and therefore foreshadowed and typified the Virgin Mary, the Church, even Christ himself. That they would «deliver» their menfolk and their people in God's grand scheme-and consequently him as well from his private predicament-January must have heard often during divine services.

But when he himself turns to sacred script and tradition to elevate his base longings through the heroic deeds of his patronesses, all he can recall is that on the literal level of meaning is their involvement with falsehood, deceit, treachery, and frustrated love. Rebecca, Judith, Abigail, and Esther did deliver their people-only their lovers and husbands paid the price for these heroic deeds. The Merchant could read their respective stories himself in the Old Testament and the Apocrypha, that venerated treasure-house of stories and subjects for the medieval artist, or he could see them depicted on church walls and stained-glass windows. They were heroines to the medieval Christian imagination; nevertheless they were also human and thus were not perfect. The Merchant is very much aware of this fact. Their negative qualities certainly rankle in his mind as he implores the saintly ladies and addresses them as if they were the shrew that is his wife. So he remembers that Rebecca, the Mother of Israel, cheated her husband; Esther, through the meekness of the dove and the slyness of the serpent that characterize her behavior, tricked her husband, the king, and thus saved her people at the expense of her enemies. Abigail may have saved her husband Nabal for a while, and therefore can be regarded as a figure of the Virgin Mary, and in her intervention to save her husband prefigures the Virgin's pleading «for the deliverance of sinful mankind»-as Charlotte F. Otten maintains(8)-but the


(8) Otten, p. 282.
The actual story tells us how she disobeyed her husband, betrayed his memory, and rushed to the marriage bed of King David who was a more attractive lover and a better match. It is through this second marriage that she is remembered as the patroness of marriage. The Church may have purified Abigail and the other ladies, yet on the literal level they are emblems of trickery and deceit and love abused. Therefore, when the Merchant refers to them, we need to follow their adventures «with as unsympathetic an eye as the Merchant's, eager to pounce on every unfavorable detail», as Emerson Brown warns us.\(^{9}\)

With Judith, an expert in treachery as well, the theme of frustrated love and the «cheated» lover darkens further. In the Apocrypha, January could have read how the attractive widow had deliberately planned to take advantage of Holofernes's weakness and seduce him. We read in the Book of Judith (12:16) that her charms had stirred the desires of the general, and «he was exceedingly desirous of intimacy with her», but when he finally had his chance to satisfy his lust, he was «prostrate upon his bed...drenched with wine», incapable to have sex with her (13:2). Not only were his desires frustrated, his lady-love carried his severed head away as trophy of her victory. The medieval Church, as usual, had allegorized the biblical lady, and for a moment January seems to read the symbolic meaning behind the story. When he recalls that she «by wys conceil she Goddes people kepte» (I. 1367), he sounds very much like the Church Fathers who regarded her as a «figure of the Church or the Virgin defeating the enemies of the Church, often the Devil himself»,\(^{10}\) Emerson Brown has argued; however the critic connects neither Judith nor Abigail with the theme of frustrated love. Immediately after this grand picture of the deliverer lady, the other image of Judith comes to January's mind: the gory and heroic Judith coming forth from the tent of Holofernes carrying his bloody head, a scene that inspired many medieval painters and poets. Like them, the Merchant and January remember not so much the savior lady but the seductress who cheated the general out of his sexual fling and the bloody Amazon who killed a sleeping man—a deed of which even Lady Macbeth of more recent times was not capable. «And slow hym Olofernus, whil he slepte» (II. 1366-68), January remembers. This Judith certainly is not an emblem of satisfied sexual love; she is not a guardian of a happy and prosperous marriage bed.

Neither is Sara who, along with Rebecca, is recommended to May as a

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\(^{10}\) Brown, «Biblical Women», p. 394.
model of wifely obedience by the wedding service. At first glance, she definitely is a pillar of her family, for Abraham's Sara is remembered by the Church and tradition as the great matriarch of her people—perhaps a bit possessive and curious—but a spotless wife and mother nevertheless. She is too perfect to fit into the pattern established by her biblical sisters whom we have so far met in the tale, and Leigh A. Arrathoon assures us that «there was absolutely nothing in the story of Abraham's wife that the Merchant could misconstrue». Thus the critic is convinced that Chaucer must be playing the «trick of the two Saras»—that of the Sara of Abraham and the Sara of Tobit. The latter Sara is no stranger to female wiles, he argues. She is more than at home in the midst of her biblical sisters. This Sara certainly is an embodiment of frustrated love, even more destructive that the sterile and deadly Judith, though Arrathoon does not make the connection.\(^{(11)}\)

Arrathoon recalls for us the tradition of this lady. The Church Fathers had included Sara of Rages, together with Abraham's Sara, in the nuptial mass, for they regarded her marriage to Tobit as a «prototype for the sacrament of marriage». The sexually passive Tobit was the fortunate and perfect match for his wife in virtue and therefore was never threatened by her as were her previous husbands who all had lusted after her body and wanted to consummate their marriage to her. None of them—and there were seven—survived the wedding night. Their love for Sara was frustrated, for, as it is related in the Book of Tobit, this very beautiful lady was possessed of a very nasty devil who was fond of killing lecherous husbands, the critic reminds us. With such guardian spirits assembled around his wedding bed, old January's chances for a happy wedded life with his lusty May become slimmer and slimmer.

Arrathoon would like us to believe that Abraham's Sara «was spotless as a wife»\(^{(12)}\), but it seems that the critic is unaware of the complete story of the patriarchal couple as recorded in Genesis (12:10-20). Neither has any other critic examined the reference to this Sara against the whole biblical context. True, Abraham's beautiful Sara whom we know from the Old Testament was definitely never prompted by any demon to play the femme fatale; still there were other men besides Abraham and their son Isaac in the life of the «Mother of Israel». Perhaps Abraham's Sara is not really a trickster lady; rather she is a victim «of the superior male» who has hatched the plot.\(^{(13)}\) Nevertheless, she is involved

\(^{(11)}\) Arrathoon, pp. 18-40.
\(^{(12)}\) Arrathoon, p. 20.
\(^{(13)}\) Frymer-Kensky, p. 206.
with trickery that leads to duped lovers and husbands and thus to frustrated love.

Let us turn to the biblical account. Once when times were had for Abraham and his clan, Sara, on his order, went to the court of Pharaoh pretending to be merely Abraham's sister while she was really his wife and accepted to become the wife of Pharaoh as well. She was not actually lying, since it was customary in patriarchal times to refer to one's wife as one's «sister». Still, her assertion was a fallacious half-truth by any standard. She played her new role so convincingly that Pharaoh never suspected her other sexual allegiance. Sara's life in sin lasted till God's anger made the guilty couple confess to the deceived «husband». Then the mature beauty—she was sixty-five years old when she bewitched Pharaoh—left a duped royal «husband» behind. As punishment, «the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues», and she returned to Abraham, we read in Genesis. Abraham's trick had worked so well that he repeated it again when the happily reunited couple went to Gerar. There Sara left another duped and frustrated lover, this time Abimelech king of Gerar, behind (Genesis, 12). Trickery and half-truths do not really blemish the good name of biblical patriarchs and their consorts; Tikva Frymer-Kensky assures us that «biblical women, including the heroines of Israel, are frequently portrayed as using tricks and lies. And so are the men. The great cultural heroes of Israel all lie and deceive» in order to achieve what they thought was God's aim for them and their people. May really will keep good and respectable «company».

These extra-marital episodes in Sara's life appealed to medieval artists much more than those that show her as good wife and mother. The Merchant, more than likely, was also aware of these escapades in Sara's life, and thus Chaucer lets him play the game of the «two» Saras with even greater skill and irony than Leigh Arrathoon suspects. Whereas the biblical ladies who are to watch over January and May's wedded bliss appear from the very beginning to any literalist to be treacherous and harmful to their respective menfolk, the classical «guests» who attend January's metaphorical wedding banquet suggest that they are entertaining and benevolent; as usual in the Merchant's dark world this happy illusion does not last long and soon returns us to the world of frustrated sex and love. As the biblical figures could be interpreted in bonum and in malo, Chaucer found that figures from ancient legend could serve as exemplars of virtue and vices, as John P. McCall has pointed out. The critic, though, does not associate this classical «crew» with the theme of love cut short.

(14) Frymer-Kensky, pp. 137f.
(15) McCall, p. 15.
The wedding guests also have dark associations. Still, the entertainment they provide is magnificent. Orpheus enchants his audience: Bacchus, the god of revelry, pours the wine; Venus, the embodiment of feminine beauty, delights; and Hymen, the guardian of happy wedlock, has never seen a happier party than January's. Presiding over the feast is the loving bride who looks as if she has taken the teaching of the Church Fathers to heart: «Queene Esther looked nevere with swich an ye/On Assuer, so meke a look hath she» (II. 1744-5). The marriage should be a success; only it soon becomes obvious that the bridegroom has not invited the right combination of well-wishers.

It is a musical festive occasion, only the associations are wrong for a wedding celebration. Brown and Butcher have pointed out in passing that the music is compared with that of Orpheus and Amphion and Theodamus of the doomed city of Thebes, all figures associated with marital loss or civic destruction, as is the one biblical musician, Joab. Nevertheless, Orpheus's music is divine and breathes life into the hardest stone; and we remember that once before on a similar occasion he fascinated an audience with «swich a melodye» (I. 1717), but the feast ended in sadness and frustration. It is Orpheus's own wedding feast as described by Ovid in the Metamorphoses.

Among the various authorities known in the Middle Ages for rendering the tale of Orpheus are Boethius and Ovid of the Metamorphoses, the popular secular source book of the Middle Ages which, like the Bible, inspired a long tradition of moral interpretation. The story of Orpheus appealed very much to Chaucer; he had translated it in his Boece, had referred to it in the Knight's Tale, Troilus and Cryseyde, House of Fame, The Book of the Duchess, and of course in The Merchant's Tale. In his Troilus and Cryseyde as well as in the House of Fame, Chaucer changes the setting from Europe to the Underworld.

Ovid tells that on the day of the wedding of Orpheus and Eurydice, as the bride was wandering in the meadows...a serpent bit her ankle, and she sank lifeless to the ground. The lovers never had a chance to consummate their marriage, and the grief-stricken groom followed her to the underworld. There he charmed the grisly guardians and softened the heart of Pluto and Proserpine who


allowed Eurydice to follow her husband to the upper world on condition that he
would not turn round and look at her. Being only human, Orpheus turned to see
whether she were still behind him, and so lost her forever. (18) So far the story of
Orpheus and Eurydice depicts the great devotion a husband can have for his
wife, but it is too sad a tale about devoted love twice cut short to stand at the
beginning of a happy marriage.

Perhaps the presence of «Ymeneus, that god of weddyng iss» (l. 1730) and
who watches over January's party can still bring the happy couple good fortune.
Not everything is sublime music, sad romance, and true love in the traditional
story as the critics tend to suggest. In Orpheus's tale, his «true» love for his
Eurydice eventually becomes a pitiless and savage daimon demanding human
sacrifice. After the double loss of his wife, his profound love turned against
itself, and he indulged in homosexual Bacchic debaucheries, avoiding especially
the company of women, some sources say. The Maenads, also followers of the
god, who used to enjoy Orpheus's company, did not take this anti-feminist slight
lightly. One day, in a drunken frenzy, a band of demented Maenads attacked him
physically in what could be described as extremely violent communal rape, castrated and dismembered him, and finally threw his head into the River Hebros
that carried it to the sea. It finally came to rest on the Island of Lesbos.
Throughout this long and grizzly odyssey, people could hear it weep and cry out
for his beloved Eurydice. The poet Ovid does finally show compassion for the
ardent lover and husband. Once at rest, we read in the Metamorphoses: «The
ghost of Orpheus passed beneath the earth; he recognized all the places he had
seen before and, searching through the fields of the blessed, found his Euridyce,
and clasped her in eager arms. There they stoll together, side by side» (19). The
Eleusian Fields seems to be ruled by poetic justice after all. Nevertheless, what
an array of literary ghosts, doubly and triply frustrated in love, January has
invited to attend his wedding through the «presence» of Orpheus!

Still, Orpheus's music is sublime, and Hymen, after all, is watching over the
festivities. But how much sexual satisfaction can he promise? According to sev-

the reception of the Orpheus-Eurydice story in the Middle Ages, see: Kenneth R. R. Gross Louis,
«Robert Hensons Orpheus and Euridice and the Orpheus Traditions of the Middle Ages»,

(19) Phillipa Hardman, «Narrative Typology: Chaucer's Use of the Story of Orpheus», MRL,
85 (1990), pp. 545-554; Ann W. Astell, «Orpheus, Eurydice and the 'Double Sorwe' of Chaucer's
Troilus», Ch R, 23 (1990), pp. 282-299; Michael A. Calabrese, Chaucer's Ovidian Arts of Love
(Gainesville, 1995).
eral classical traditions, this son of Aphrodite and Bacchus, though the guardian of wedding feasts, was bisexual, the very embodiment of frustrated sex. So it is not surprising that he did not bring luck to Orpheus and Eurydice—and cannot promise much to January and May. Of the former feast, Ovid tells us that on that occasion the wedding torch that the god carried «spluttered and smoked» and could not be kindled—and Eurydice died on her wedding day. There is nothing wrong with May's wedding taper; it is burning bright, and Venus with «hie fyrbrond in hire hand» (l. 1727) inflames the desires of the wedding guests but disrespects the legitimate combinations.

Hera, or Juno as the Romans called her, the protectress of chaste wedlock, is conspicuously absent at January's feast; Venus, the goddess of love and beauty, instead is there. The medieval Church Fathers would not have been disturbed at her presence, for they had spiritualized her as well, had married her to Hymen, and had made her one of the patronesses of the «holy faith of marriage», according to Alain de Lille, whose De Planctu Naturae was one of the great source books for the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, they had not forgotten her origin and were consequently familiar with the tradition of the two Venuses. They did recognize that this second Venus who would laugh «upon every wight» (l. 1723) threatened marital happiness. Every medieval schoolboy had been taught how this ancient lady had deceived her husband Vulcan who, in turn, had frustrated her affair with Mars; how Adonis had paid with his life for his infatuation—the list of lovers and husbands that she changed like soiled clothing is quite long. She surely is a perfect guardian of frustrated sex and love.

In the meantime, January «was bcome her knyght» (l. 1724), and, inflamed by her «fyrbrond» and in his delusion, he identifies himself with one of the most dashing young lovers of Greek mythology when he wants to «streyne» May in his arms «harder than evere Parys dide Eleyne» (ll. 1753-4). Ironically, January is reminded of the appropriate story; what he does not realize in his aphrodisiac-inspired «ragerye» (l. 1847) is that in his own love triangle he will come to play the role of the cheated old husband Menelaus and not that of the youthful lover Paris. The fact remains that May, Helen, and Venus are very beautiful and please the eye; Orpheus gratifies the ear; and to cheer up the not musi-

cally inclined, "Bacus the wyn hem shynketh al aboute" (l. 1722). Bacchus, the god of wine and fertility, can be an outstanding host, only throughout the centuries he has been associated rather with orgies and stag parties than with respectable wedding feasts. The tales from Greek and Roman mythology make it clear that the harmony between couples is not sacred to him. Our medieval school boy, more than likely, would remember the tale of poor abandoned Ariadne on the island of Naxos to illustrate this weakness of the god's character. The image of the betrayed woman, so well exemplified by Ariadne, had also impressed the young Chaucer. Some traditions of the Theseus story tell how the prince and Ariadne fled together from the wrath of her father Minos, and how Bacchus, all aflame with lust for her, threatened the prince in his dreams and made him forget his vows, even the very existence of his beloved. Theseus feared the anger of the god, and the disillusioned princess was left alone on the island where she quite willingly succumbed to her divine admirer.

Bacchus is the destroyed of marital love; Venus, like a harlot, dances from one admirer to another; the devoted love of Orpheus is frustrated; and "Yemeneus, that god of weddyng is" powerless watches over frustration, lust, and adultery.

The Merchant's allusion to courtly romance also stands under the sign of frustrated love. After Damyan has been struck by Venus's "brond"., May is moved to compassion for the lovesick swain, and the Merchant in an aside sneers: "Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!" (l. 1986). Francesca di Rimini had once before used similar words-"Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'appendre" ("Love, which is quickly kindles in the gentle heart")-as she described to the pilgrim Dante how the love between her and Paolo grew. It all started as they were reading the romance of Sir Launcelot together; then "Quel giorno piu non vi leggemo avante" (that day we read in it no father)-Inferno, Canto V, ll. 100, 138). May will be in a similar situation after she has torn her billet doux from Damian into pieces «and in the pryvee softly it caste» (l. 1594). The Merchant does not need to comment on what he thinks about the grand passion of Dante's poor unfortunate lovers.

Through the paraphrase of the line from the Inferno, the Merchant has associated May and Damian with two of the great lovers from Western literature; they are though a couple that faces eternal frustration. Death put an end to their adulterous passion, but for all eternity Paolo and Francesca shall be together for short moments as the hellish wind hurls them in different directions through the outskirts of Dis: they will for brief seconds be close to each other, but always just out of reach.
While the pilgrim Dante was moved with pity and compassion for these lovers, the Merchant again turns to Ovid in the hope to find in the writings of the expert on love confirmation of his own soured views of this art. He recalls how the lovers Priamus and Thisbe-like Damian and May—could not be kept apart by a wall. That the highly idealistic lovers and their problems have very little in common with May and Damian and their «plight» does not disturb the Merchant at all, or perhaps as Jay Schleussener has pointed out, he meant to show that Damian and May look even «meaner» when compared to the devoted lovers of antiquity. Again, it is a couple whose love was frustrated, in their case by death, a point that the critic does not make. (22)

Let us recall the tale. Ovid tells in the Metamorphoses how the young couple were deeply in love with each other, but their parents forbade their coming together in marriage. Since «nothing can escape a lover’s eyes», the ancient poet says, they did find a hole in the wall that separated them and tried to escape from jealous relatives and the jaws of a hungry lion. Unfortunately before they reached their goal, they fell victim to a tragic mistake. As Emerson Brown has suggested, their love is pure but frustrated by untimely death. There is a bit of consolation for them: Death has united them in a single urn, and the fruit of the mulberry tree under which they died will be forever stained purple with their innocent blood. (23)

The frustrated lovers, the wall, the tree, the garden—they are all important in the tale of Priamus and Thisbe and in that of January and May as well and serve in both instances as emblems of love cut short

To «celebrate» his love, January has «made a gardyn, walled al with stoon» (l. 2029), a literary topos greatly favored by critics. January invites his May into this hortus conclusus with the beautiful lyric that echoes the Song of Songs and brings to mind conjugal love, the love of King Solomon for his beautiful Shulamite, the mysteries of the Church—the union of Jehovah with Israel, the union of Christ with the Church—and the Virgin Mary:

Rys up, my wyf, my love, my lady free!
The turtles voy is herd, my dowve sweete;
The wynter is goon with alle his reynes weete.
Com forth now, with thyne eyen columbyn!

(23) Emerson Brown, Jr., «Hortus Inconclusus», pp. 38-40; Ovid, Metamorphoses, pp. 95-98.
How fairer been thy brestes than is wyn!
The gardyn is enclosed al aboute;
Com forth, my white spouse! (Ll. 2138-2145).

It is, at first glance, a lovely address to any new bride; for us by now it is not surprising that there is something jarring in this beautiful lyric. The paraphrase of the Song of Songs turns in January's mouth into «olde lewed wordes» (l. 2149), as the Merchant points out for the benefit of his audience. Solomon in the garden world of The Merchant's Tale, of course, is not a paragon of wisdom and virtuous love but «this Jew, this Salomon» (l. 2277), a lecherous old man and an «ydolastre» (l. 2298), as Queen Proserpine interprets his role to her husband Pluto. Solomon, the traditional creator of the hortus conclusus of the Song of Songs, too, is not at all out of place in January's paradise of frustrated love. Barbara Gates has recalled for us the «ill fated love of the king for the Shulamite and her ultimate desertion of the wealthy ruler for a humble lover» (24). It seems to be a bit strange to imagine the King Solomon of the countless wives and concubines as a sexually frustrated lover; but then we also remember that, in order to seduce her, he had to use every magic trick he knew to lure his illustrious visitor, the Queen of Sheba, into an artificial version of the garden of the Canticle.

Eventually all the biblical parallels that are to lend dignity and authority to January's garden prove to be too much for the old sinner. During the early stage of his lovesickness, he found justification for his lechery in the Garden of Eden (II. 1264-5), that archetypal garden of frustration and loss. Now, at the crucial point of his love song to his wife, he confuses two vastly different biblical gardens, Alfred L. Kellogg (25) as pointed out, though without suggesting that Susannah's garden typifies frustrated love as well. January thus pulls down the beautiful hortus conclusus to his own level which is also that of the sex-crazy elders who assured the beautiful Susannah who lived in Babylon during the days of the prophet Daniel that the «gardyn is enclosed al aboute» and that «no one can see us». The story of Susannah, found in the Apocrypha, was a very popular source book for medieval artists. It deals with chaste as well as lecherous love, and after the lofty love lyric we are back in January's world of lust and frustrated love. Susannah, finally, turned out to be chaste and defied the threats of the elders, even though she almost paid with her life for her virtue. The lust of

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the elders, in turn, was cut short, and in due course of the law, they were found out by the wise Judge Daniel. Like Holofernes, they paid with their head for their lust. To compound their crime, they had forgotten to agree with each other under which type of tree the alleged adultery had supposedly taken place.

Trees also grow in January's actual and metaphoric gardens; he is very fond of trees, both ornamental and fruit trees. And they are not always benevolent. For instance, among them grows the thilke tree» whose branches carry the fruits of «synnes, seveme» (l. 1641); that «blosmy tree» that will bear fruit (ll. 1461-2) with which January has associated himself early on in the tale. There are yet others, and not all of these trees have attracted scholarly attention.

Damian and May favor bushes and the pear tree which Chaucer had inherited from Near Eastern tradition, while January thinks of himself more in terms of the laurel. Early in the tale, he has chosen the manly laurel to be the emblem of his virility. He knows that his hair has turned gray; no matter, since «myn herte and alle my lyms been as grene/As laurer throug the yeer is for to sene» (ll. 1465-6) he boasts to his friends and justifies thus his longing for a young wife. When the wedding night approaches and January has to boost his «grene herte and lyms» with all the recommended love philters in De Coitu, this «grene» laurel becomes somewhat suspect. January, nevertheless, will take his emblem of virility into the garden where it shades the «welle». There the tree will soon become the symbol of the only type of love possible in January's world.

This tree is shading the «welle/That stood under a laurer alwey grene» (ll. 2036-7). Such a well can be a dangerous place, though it is even more magnificent than a similar pleasance the poet of the Romance of the Rose has created for Narcissus (l. 2032). Since ancient Greek times, it has been a commonplace that the «well of Narcissus is a perilous place: Narcissus died there and he dies of self-love», Priscilla Martin observes. The tale of the beautiful youth is sad indeed, but what is more frustrating and sterile than self-love? Ovid in the Metamorphoses tells the tragic story of the rejected Echo and how her love was spurned by the utterly selfish and cruel youth, and how Nemesis caused him to fall in love with himself and his own image. So we leave this perilous place where «January can see his own evergreen virility...and poetic immortality in the laurel tree mirrored in the glassy surface of the well below it».

(27) Ovid, Metamorphoses, pp. 83-86.
January's laurel in the garden is usually mistaken by the critics for a version of the evergreen tree of life that grows in many paradise gardens; the darker associations they have not seen. At first sight the literary associations of the laurel are definitely positive and bright; we think of life as well as honor and fame and poetic inspiration. The laurel is, after all, the tree dedicated to the bright god Apollo, also called Phoebus—the same god who shines over January's garden as Damian is hiding in the bushes:

Bright was the day, and blew the firmament;
Phebus hath of gold his stremes doun ysent,
To gladen every flour with his warmnesse (ll. 2219-21).

Ovid tells in his *Metamorphoses* how the tree came to be dedicated to Phoebus. We read that once the god of light and poetry fell in love with the nymph Daphne who did not think that her admirer was such an irresistible lover. She wanted to avoid his attentions and fled from him. This excited him more, and he chased her through woods and meadows. He did eventually catch up with the girl when Peneus, her father, granted Daphne her prayer and turned her into a laurel tree. Phoebus was left with the laurel, the memento of his frustrated desires: Even as a tree, Phoebus loved her. He placed his hand against the trunk, and felt her heart still beating under the new bark. Embracing the branches as if they were limbs, he kissed the wood: but even as a tree, she shrank from his kisses. Then the god said: 'Since you cannot be my bride, surely you will be my tree.'

January invites his May, his dove «with thyne eyen columbyn» into the beautiful bright garden with the well and the reflected laurel, all illuminated by Apollo, the god slighted and frustrated by his beloved.

«Columbyn»—a somewhat strange name for a lady love? We are more used to roses and lilies and violets and forget-me-nots, even daisies, when referring to the beloved lady. The reference to this particular flower has not attracted the attention of the critics. Both the flower columbine and the bird that goes by the same name, the dove—the bird symbolizing the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary, as well as the classical Venus, and in January's mind his May as well—will find an appropriate resting place under and in the branches of the «manly» laurel. In its shade, the «columbyn» will flower and unfold its traditional and symbolical sig-

The Merchant in his ironic manner lets January «cultivate» the right flower in his garden, but the plant's true significance and meaning, as usual, the physically and spiritually blind old lecher will not be able to recognize.

The columbine was grown during medieval times in many European cottage gardens; this had been recommended by both Albert Magnus and Hildegard von Bingen in their writings. In those days, the graceful flower was probably not appreciated so much for its beauty; rather, it was grown for its medicinal properties. According to European folk tradition, treating damaged eyes with infusions from various parts of the plant could restore vision—we recall «columbyn»—May's argument that her behavior with Damian in the tree had brought back January's eyesight. Medicines made from the columbine were reputed to cure yet a number of other maladies; their main use was related to male and female sexual activities. It was common knowledge in medieval medical practice that the seeds of the flower could be used with great success to enhance male virility, and books like De Coitu, a book that belongs to January's favorite literature, highly recommended the tinctures and concoctions made from the plant. As we have seen, all the recommended remedies, perhaps even those suggesting the «columbyn», did not help January all that much during his wedding night.

Of course, we can only speculate whether or not Chaucer cultivated the columbine for its beauty or for all these various medicinal reasons in his own cottage garden—or if he grew the flower at all. How many of these folk traditions did he know and practice? Carol Falvo Heffernan suggests that «as with so much else in medieval science, Chaucer appears to have had knowledge of the prevailing practices in his day regarding contraception and abortions»—and more than likely was also aware of the different remedies for impotence as he found them recommended in books like De Coitu. We can be sure that Chaucer associated May not merely randomly with the graceful columbine.

Because of its fecundity-enhancing qualities, the columbine was associated with several divine mother figures: it was sacred to both the Norse goddess Frigga and the medieval and Renaissance Venus. The flower was also introduced into many a poetic and painted hortus conclusus dedicated to the Virgin Mary. It has been said that because the flower was associated with melancholy, the columbine symbolized the seven sorrows of the Virgin. Thus on medieval

(30) See Appendix II.
paintings, it is often present at the Annunciation, it decorates the Virgin's crown, or it grows at her feet, or it blossoms close to the fountain and tree of life. Leonardo da Vinci, a bit after the Merchant, linked the flower with John the Baptist. The columbine is also the flower of Christ, the flower of the Holy Spirit, the flower of the Holy Trinity. The flower that Albertus Magnus had recommended for its beauty to every cottage gardener had become the favorite Gothic flower par excellence. And May seems to partake of its glorious associations.

Perhaps this lovely flower that so strongly embodies divine love can redeem January's frustrated erotic hell. But then we recall its use as ingredient in aphrodisiacs and its association with the wanton Venus. A medieval tradition saw in the columbine the perfect symbol for the very ambiguous androgyne, best exemplified by Hermaphroditus, the bastard child of the wanton Venus. No other creature can better represent perverted and sterile and frustrated love than the androgyne.

The lovely «columbyn», the flower of the Virgin Mary, after all, turns out to be the appropriate plant for January's sterile erotic paradise garden.

The garden with its columbine and laurel is so beautiful that even Priapus «though he be god of gardyns» (l. 2035) cannot describe it properly, the Merchant says. Priapus, the offspring of the wanton Venus and the lusty Bacchus who helped celebrate January's wedding, has found his tree in the garden as well. The red god of the garden was known to Chaucer and his contemporaries not as a great expert in horticulture; to them he was a «lecherous figure...a medieval example stock character in bawdy jokes: the would-be ravisher with his pants down»(32), Brown observes. Another embodiment of frustrated love. As the critic has pointed out, the source of this ludicrous figure and his frustrated affairs was, of course, Ovid. Chaucerian criticism has also been aware of other frustrated and lewd garden escapades in the life of the god: there was once Vesta and then Lotis together with the notorious braying ass.

Pluto and Proserpine, the fairy-gods that offended the sense of decorum of a number of Chaucerian,(33) have come to take the air in a garden that belongs to them just as much as to anybody else we have met in the tale. From classical


(33) The following studies, for example, deal with the problem the classical deities pose: Mortimer J. Donovan, «The Image of Pluto and Proserpina in the Merchant's Tale, PQ, 36 (1957), pp. 49-60; Karl P. Wentersdorf, «Theme and Structure in the Merchant's Tale: The Function of the Pluto Episode», PMLA, 80 (1965), pp. 522-527; Marcia A. Dalbey, «The Devil in the Garden:
times through the Middle Ages, Katherine Heinrichs points out, «the denizens of Hades were interpreted as representing the destructive passions of men», and their repeated appearances in medieval works of art and literature signify «frustrated or unfortunate love»(34). This is as well the function of Pluto and Proserpine in January's golden garden.

January, the rich, lecherous, and blind senex, has his double in Pluto, the god of riches, sterility, death, blindness--his prototype is the Greek Hades whose name even means «sightless». Pluto should enjoy his little outing in January's erotic garden; the classical god of the underworld used to be fascinated by cosy places like this garden paradise, we are told by the authorities of classical mythology. The Merchant's Pluto, on the other hand, seems to have lost his taste for gardens of love; in the Merchant's version this divine old lecher has become strangely moral and turns to his queen and abuses all wives as if he were St. Jerome in person, the Church Father whose treatise Against Jovinian provided medieval misogynists with ample proof for the iniquity of all women. The Merchant could not have nominated better deities than Pluto and Proserpine to reign over January's sterile world of rape and perverted and sterile and frustrated love. No critic need apologize for their presence in the garden.

Where do these strange caretakers come from that have replaced the stable and sober figures of St. Peter and God the Father whom we usually meet in the analogues of The Merchant's Tale? Chaucer himself seems to provide the answer to this puzzle, and critics and ordinary readers alike have taken the poet's claim at face value that in «Claudyan ye may the stories rede» (I. 2232). No question, Claudian's short epic De Raptu Proserpinae is a major source for January's tale on which the critics have pounced--and have neglected to notice equally important other sources, especially in Ovid.

There is not much love lost between the King and Queen of Hades on this golden day in early summer when they visit January's garden; in fact, according to tradition, there never is peace between husband and wife when both Pluto and Proserpine are seen together in the upper world. Pluto as king of the underworld


has very little business in the upper world, it would seem, and when Proserpine
and we encounter him on an island or in the gardens of the living, he is there to
satisfy his boundless lust for pretty women. Once upon a time, he found his
future queen among the flowers of Sicily, raped her, and took her with him to his
kingdom. Another time, he dazzled the nymph Menthe with his virility, his
golden chariot, and his horses. He would have seduced her without any diffi­
culty had not Queen Proserpine come in the nick of time, scolded him, and meta-
morphosed Menthe into the sweet-smelling herb of the same name. On still
another garden rendez-vous, he charmed the nymph Leuce; again his queen put
an untimely end to the affair and changed the girl into the white poplar tree that
grows by the pool of Memory. Ovid recorded the respective stories. The queen
of the underworld certainly knows how to curb the lecherous «needs» of her hus­
band, and Pluto and Proserpine definitely are not out of place in January's garden
of frustrated love.

Queen Proserpine does control the affairs and politics of the garden, but has
not the Merchant dedicated his tale to the Virgin Mary herself? He recommends
us to her care at the end of the tale: «God blesse us, and his mooder Seinte
Marie» (I. 2418). The Virgin is very much present throughout the tale. The
Merchant turns to her and addresses her on several occasions (II. 1337, 1899,
2334, 2418); we have seen that January has modeled his hortus conclusus after
her paradise garden; the biblical women we have met in the tale foreshadow her
in her role in God's grand design for man; we have even been introduced to one
of the flowers sacred to her. The presence of the Virgin in the tale is certainly
ubiquitous, and it appears that the Merchant respects and venerates some­­
just for once.

Again, as usual, this happy illusion does not last long.

His love for the Virgin might not equal that of a medieval mystic nor of
Geoffrey Chaucer himself; at least the Merchant does not seem to sneer at her
and the love that was shown through her to mankind. But then we remember
how the Merchant and old January could not understand the stories about the
biblical ladies, the prototypes of the Virgin Mary; and we remember how these
two sinners managed to pollute the pure hortus conclusus that symbolizes the
Virgin Mary.

The Merchant, that tourist to the realm of love, like any «sensible» and prac­
tical medieval Christian, has put his «pilgrimage» under the protection of the

(35) Robert E. Bell, Women of Classical Mythology: A Biographical Dictionary (New York,
understanding and all-forgiving «mooder Seinte Marie». The prototype of this Virgin he could not have found in the Scriptures, nor the Church Fathers, nor on the pedestal in any of the medieval churches and cathedrals he might have visited. Neither is the Virgin to whom the Merchant addresses himself the creation of his very own spiritual blindness and blaspheming heart. A great number of the Virgin's medieval worshipers suffered from similar spiritual ailments. For these «sinners», as Geoffrey Ashe has shown, the Virgin was their very own «feudal protectress» who closed both eyes and allowed her devotees «to get away with anything»; she, the Virgin of popular tradition, «represented the all-too-human» and condoned it. (36)

This lady understood and forgave everything. Her devotees also recalled that in the relationship with her husband things were not what they should have been; that the role St. Joseph played in the life of the Virgin was very much that of a cheated husband, and that he was aware of his position. In the Gospel according to St. Matthew, it could be read that St. Joseph, even before the wedding, wanted to break off their relationship till the words of the angel of the Lord made him change his mind (1:18-24). Many medieval scholars also pondered the question whether not the marriage of the Virgin and St. Joseph could ever have been consummated.

It is precisely this Virgin, together with her doubting and duped husband Joseph, that figures quite prominently in several medieval folk versions of the narrative and iconographic traditions of the Holy Family. This folk tradition of the cuckolded old Joseph must be festering in the Merchant's mind when through allusion and innuendo, as is his way, he has the May of his tale climb up the tree to her lover— all before the blind eyes of her husband—and lets her claim that she desires to eat from the fruit of the tree: «I telle yow wel, a womman in my pit/May han to fruyt so greet an appetit» (ll. 2335-6). According to Bruce A. Rosenberg, these lying words of the young adulteress parody those of the pregnant Virgin in the «Cherry-Tree Carol», a very popular song in the doubting-Joseph tradition during medieval times.

Nothing is sacred to the Merchant, not even the Virgin to whom he seems

to turn in faith and devotion; we definitely get the impression that it has given him great satisfaction to have profaned and blasphemed human ideals and values which he himself cannot appreciate. What, after all, is the difference between his «frshsh May» and Chaucer's very own «Glorious virgine, of alle floures flour»? («An ABC», 1. 4).

In the Merchant's blaspheming heart, not much. If he ever was aware of what ideals the Blessed Virgin embodies, he has certainly used in his tale to great advantage every rhetorical trick and fallacy to debase whatever appeals to the higher aspirations of women and men. He is a very clever rhetorician and knows how to appeal to the baser instincts of his audience then and now. We need to be careful not to be hoodwinked into joining him vicariously on his escapades into his dark continent of love.

If we do accept his invitation and are tricked into sharing the views of the authority of «thise monthes two, and moor nat, pardee»--then the world we discover is filled with cynicism, blindness, folly, deceit, lechery, lies, and our own debased imagination.\(^{(37)}\) It is a place of frustration—not a place where any kind of love can grow and redeem mankind. It is a nasty and mean world indeed.

If we accept the Merchant's premises, then we, too, are morally on the same level with old January and the Merchant. We, too, are then blind and have truly been led by the blind. The blind stumble and fall and see only darkness while the sun continues to shine and the flowers continue to bloom—only the company of the blind cannot see this. Yet their blindness cannot diminish the light of the sun and the beauty of the flowers, a truth that shines behind the Merchant's «dark» tale. For no matter what cynicism the Merchant directs against the lovers from sacred and secular tradition, the biblical ladies, the hortus conclusus, the Blessed Virgin, divine love itself, for those of us who can use our eyes and mind and read the ultimate meaning beyond the literal word, the lovers of the tale, the «Glorious virgine, of alle floures flour», and true love can never be touched by any baseness that comes from the mouth of any January or Merchant. On the surface it seems paradoxical, but this is the ultimate message of The Merchant's Tale hidden behind that dark and «dense mosaic of references, allusions, quotations» that unifies the theme of frustrated love.

\(^{(37)}\) Jay Schleusener, «The Conduct», has discussed the tactics the Merchant uses to invite us to join him in his nastiness. Emerson Brown, Jr., in «Biblical Women», has discussed the Merchant's dark view of the Virgin; and Douglas Wurtele, «The Blasphemy», has shown how the Merchant through his rhetoric has tried to debase the Blessed Virgin. For a positive reading of the images see: C. David Benson, Chaucer's Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in «The Canterbury Tales», (Chapel Hill, 1995), pp. 127-130.
For a while it was a critical pastime to dissect the tale into an encomium on marriage, a courtly romance, a fabliau, and a fairy tale episode. Nevertheless, there were even then a few advocates of unity who have seen an underlying matrix of images. The tale «is superimposed upon a dense mosaic of references, allusions, quotations all of which take on a new colour in the tale», writes Sedwick, «The Structure of The Merchant’s Tale», *UTQ*, 17 (1947/8), p. 344, but he does not examine this «mosaic». Leigh A. Arrathoon agrees: The tale is «a tissue of biblical and classical allusions, with the major emphasis upon the biblical element rather than upon the classical one», he points out. «The Two Saras of Chaucer's Merchant's Tale», *Ball State Forum*, 25 (1984), p. 20. However, these allusions are «sometimes only implied, sometimes sketched with closing brevity». Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: A Study in Style and Meaning* (Berkeley, 1957), p. 230. It is then not surprising that any approach to the tale is «sure to be complicated by the poet's penchant for variety, ambiguity, and uncertainty». John P. McCall, *Chaucer Among the Gods: The Poetics of Classical Myth* (University Park, Pa., 1979), p. 2. Emerson Brown, Jr., discussing the types of frustration typified by Priapus and the lovers Priamus and Thisbe, suggests that in *The Merchant's Tale* we are constantly directed «outside of the text to discover the full meaning» which the numerous references to biblical, mythological, and other characters and traditions carry in their poetic context. «Hortus Inconclusus: The Significance of Priapus and Pyramus and Thisbe in The Merchant's Tale», *Ch R*, 4 (1970), p. 31. Marcia A. Dalbey has pointed to the «constant juxtaposition of Christian and classical materials, set within a framework so strongly Christian that we are forced to interpret» the classical references within their Christian context. «The Devil in the Garden: Pluto and Proserpine in Chaucer's Merchant's Tale», *Neophilologische Mitteilungen*, 75 (1974), pp. 408-415. Charles A. Owen, Jr., has suggested that the controlling images in the tale «are the linked ones» of the garden, the tree and of blindness. «The Crucial Passages in Five of The Canterbury Tales: A Study in Irony and Symbol», *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. Edward Wagenknecht (New York, 1959), pp. 255-259. For Michael D. Cherniss, «the underlying purgatory-paradise metaphor, together with the images which it controls», unifies the tale. «The Clerk's Tale and Envoy, the Wife of Bath's Purgatory, and The Merchant's Tale», *Ch R*, 6 (1972), pp. 245-254.
APPENDIX II


On the other hand, Ingo Krumbiegel in «Die Akelei: Eine Studie aus der Geschichte der deutschen Pflanzen», Janus, 36 (1932), pp. 71-92, 129-145; and E. M. Kronfeld, «Zur Geschichte der Akelei», Wiener medizinische Wochenzeitschrift, 64 (1914), have discussed the significance of the plant in medieval medicine. («Akelei» is the German word for «columbine»).


Elemire Zolla has pointed out that the columbine during the Renaissance and earlier was considered to symbolize the androgyne. the androgyne: *Fusion of the Sexes* (London, 1981), pp. 52f.