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ILLUSION AND REALITY: PSYCHOLOGICAL TRUTH IN CHAUCER'S PORTRAIT OF JANUARY

It is a frequent error of Chaucer criticism, and by now a well-documented one, to speak of the illusory world of the Canterbury pilgrimage as if it were a part of the fourteenth-century reality.[1] Chaucer hardly ever draws attention to the distinction between the two, and even if the reader is alert enough to remember that the tales, set as they are in the dramatic context of the pilgrimage and being often fantastic or unusual, are illusions, he is less likely to keep it in mind about the pilgrimage itself. Furthermore, Chaucer's characters and their actions, whether in the pilgrimage or in the tales, often possess a psychological reality with the power to delude the reader on an unconscious level.

As a narrative poet, then, Chaucer laboured over the illusory re-creation of the real world, but beyond this he was concerned with the operation of illusion in real life. As some writers have recognized,[2] this conflict between illusion and reality is the central theme of one of Chaucer's best tales, the Merchant's Tale, forcing the professed marital and anti-feminist themes to the peripheries. It is the basis of the tale's pervasive irony, which depends largely on January's refusal to recognize the truth, detached from wishful thinking. My purpose in this essay is to demonstrate by Jungian analysis the psychological verisimilitude of January's characterization, based as it is on that conflict between illusion and reality which was one of Chaucer's central concerns, both as an artist and as a man.

No doubt it will be objected that Chaucer had never heard of Jung, and that it is therefore invalid to analyse his characters in Jungian terms. But my point is surely, not that Chaucer was acquainted with modern psychology, but that he accurately observed, and recreated in fiction, truths about human sexual conduct which were not "scientifically" expressed until Jung recorded them earlier in this century.

I have chosen to use Jung, rather than Freud, the behaviourists, or the Gestalt psychologists, because Jung pays the most attention to the details of adult sexual conduct and to the means of achieving balanced sexual relationships. Furthermore, Jung's orientation is as much humanist as scientific, and he supports his theses from art and literature as well as from clinical observation.

Jung and his school argue that a wider consciousness, a more intense appreciation of reality, is the chief psychological good which an individual can hope to gain from a long-term sexual relationship. A strong grasp of reality, as well as the ability to actualize fantasies in the real world, is a mark of maturity, in particular for the introverted type,[3] to which, as will be shown, January belongs. Hence, the Merchant's Tale, with its fundamental conflict between illusion and reality, taking place largely within January's head, is sub-consciously recognized by the reader as having the vital issue of psychological maturity as its real concern.

People of the introverted type, according to Jung's definition, are characterized by a capacity for abstraction, an extreme subjectivity, and a resultant poor grasp of the objective world.[4] January gives ample evidence of all three characteristics.

He demonstrates his capacity for abstraction in the first place by giving his allegiance to the principle of marriage, before he has found any particular person who might serve him as a partner. His relationship to the idea is so much better than his relationship to the object. The narrator makes it clear that the urge to marry came upon January very suddenly, and that he quickly raised it to the status of an obsession:[5]

> And whan that he was passed sixty year,
> Were it for hoolynesse or for dotage,
> I kan nat seye, but swich a greet corage
> Hadde this knyght to been a wedded man . . .
> (1252–5)

January seeks the advice of Placebo and Justinus with his mind already made up. No objective data – and Justinus supplies a quantity of it – has the capacity to budge him from his position.

January is typically the introvert in that he lives at least as much on a theoretical plane as he does on a real one. Problems approach him first as theories, and his first recourse is to a theoretical solution. His initial problem is the conflict which arises between his lechery and his fear of hell-fire; the solution, first conceived only in theory, is a young wife, who he thinks, will make lechery lawful:

> He seyde, "Freendes, I am hoor and oold,
> And almoost, God woot, on my pittes brynke;
> Upon my soule somwhat moste I thynke.
> I have my body folily despended;
> Blessed be God that it shal been amended!
> For I wol be, certeyn, a wedded man,
> And that anoon in all the haste I kan.
> (1399–1406)

January also preconceives a theory as to the kind of wife he wants, and finally marries a woman whom he believes to fit his preconception. He stresses above all that she should be young, and sexually desirable. This pre-requisite is related firmly back to the original theoretical problem:

> For if so were I hadde swich myschaunce,
> That I in hire ne koude han no plesaunce,
> Thanne sholde I lede my lyf in avoutrye,
> And go streight to the devel, whan I dye.
> (1433–6)

January also offers a theory to account for his preference for youth:

> But certeynly, a yong thyng may men gye,
> Right as men may warm wex with handes plye.
> (1429–30)

It is a psychological truth, recognized by Jung, that it is easier to achieve a sort of union where one partner is a developed personality and the other

is not, than it is to achieve a proper relationship between two established personalities. In choosing a young bride, then, January is limiting from the start the potential for increased maturity which the new relationship holds for him, and at the same time providing the reader with proof of his essential immaturity.

January thus demonstrates one characteristic of the introvert – the capacity for abstraction – in his premature theorizing about his marriage. His inability to moderate the other two characteristics – subjectivity and poor grasp of external reality – constitutes the sub-conscious tragedy of the Merchant's Tale. The opportunity for widened consciousness which his new relationship offered is allowed to degenerate and comes to nothing.

When January encounters May, he moves rapidly from a state of obsession to one of illusion. Chaucer points to the element of fantasy determining his initial search:

> Heigh fantasye and curious bisynesse
> Fro day to day gan in the soule impresse
> Of Januarie aboute his mariage.
> (1577–9)

Although fantasy-projections are a necessary prelude to "falling in love", in particular for the introverted type, personal development and a proper relationship can only be achieved by shedding illusions and recognizing the real nature of the partner.

Chaucer's account of January's falling in love gives further evidence of his psychological penetration:

> But natheless, bitwixe ernest and game,
> He atte laste apoynted hym on oon,
> And leet alle othere from his herte goon,
> And chees hire of his owene auctoritee,
> For love is blynd alday, and may nat see.
> And whan that he was in his bed ybroght,
> He purtreyed in his herte and in his thoght
> Hir fresshe beautee and hir age tendre,
> Hir myddel smal, hire armes longe and sklendre,
> Hir wise governaunce, hir gentillesse,
> Hir wommanly berynge, and hire sadnesse.
> And whan that he on hire was condescended,
> Hym thoughte his choys myght nat ben amended.
> For whan that he hymself concluded hadde,
> Hym thoughte ech oother mannes wit so badde
> That inpossible it were to repplye
> Agayn his choys, this was his fantasye.
> (1594–1610)

This passage seems to aim mainly at showing the speed with which January moves from a conscious choice, made only half in earnest, to a conviction of the rightness of his choice which is as unshakeable as it is irrational. The central part describes the growth of the illusion. It has a curiously willed quality – "He purtreyed in his herte and in his thoght". January's thoughts move from May's observable physical qualities – which are yet partially idealized[6] – to qualities, such as "wise governance" and "gentillesse", which are not observable, and for which the reader is

forced to take January's word. The whole passage imitates this movement from objectivity to subjectivity, which is thus most clear in its central portion.

Jung would probably have explained what has taken place by stating that January has projected his anima on to May. His most usual synonym for anima is "soul", and he explains it as "a definitely demarcated function-complex that is best characterized as a 'personality'"[7]. He makes a distinction between the persona, or the mask which the individual assumes in response to a given situation, and the anima, which is the true self or the individuality. In men whose consciousness or individuality has not been developed, the identification with the persona is very strong. The repressed characteristics which are the complements and opposites of those expressed in the persona exist in, and partially comprise, the anima. In men the repressed characteristics tend to be feminine, and in women masculine, hence the terms anima, applied to men, and animus, applied to women. The anima and the animus seek expression by means of the projection of their image on to a real person. A successful projection results in the state commonly known as "in love". Jung describes the process thus:

> In all those cases where an identity with the persona (v. Soul) is present, and the soul accordingly is unconscious, the soul-image is transferred into a real person. This person is the object of an intense love or an equally intense hatred (possibly even fear). The influence of such a person has the character of something immediate and absolutely compelling, since it always evokes an affective response.[8]

Chaucer's stress on the growing compulsive element in January's feeling for May is in striking conformity with this description.

While Chaucer thus presents the internal activity of January's psyche in detail, May is seen almost exclusively from the outside. She appears most often through January's distorting projection, sometimes through that of Damyan. The Merchant himself avoids direct comment, and it is May's own actions which, by the end of the tale, reveal her as a ruthless, if resourceful, sensualist. The rare glimpses provided of May's thought-processes confirm that lust is her motivation in accepting Damyan. Her dissatisfaction with January's love-making is stated twice:

> But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte,
> Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte,
> In his nyghte-cappe, and with his nekke lene;
> She preyseth nat his pleyyng worth a bene.
> (1851–4)

> How that he wroghte, I dar nat to yow telle;
> Or wheither hire thoughte it paradys or helle.
> (1963–4)

May's final decision to accept Damyan is recounted with a sneer which is in accord with the narrator's anti-feminism. The cause is May's wilful self-deception, and her fundamental lack of integrity:

"Certeyn," thoghte she, "whom that this thyng displese,
I rekke noght, for heere I hym assure
To love hym best of any creature,
Though he namoore hadde than his sherte."
Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!
(1982–6)

May thus romanticizes her motivations, claiming an altruistic affection capable of ignoring Damyan's poverty.

Despite these few unprepossessing insights, the Merchant and Chaucer are generally reticent about May's internal functioning, thus allowing her to appear as, and to some extent genuinely to be, a representative of a common female psychological type recognized by the Jungian psychologists. M. Esther Harding, using Jung's theory as a basis, called this type the anima woman, or the man's woman. The essential characteristic of the anima woman is that, having little developed consciousness or individuality of her own, she readily becomes the vehicle of the man's projected anima. Typically, the anima woman is attractive to a large number of different men. M. Esther Harding describes her characteristic behaviour as follows:

> She begins very early in life to gain her ends through coaxing or merely being adorable. Her whole way of functioning is in relation to someone else from whom she may attract attention or care or love ..... She rarely stops to ask what she herself wants or how she feels ..... In this way she makes of herself a sort of mirror which reflects the man's mood, his half-realized feelings.9

The anima woman, then, is essentially fluid and immature.

Before she begins to reveal herself by her actions, May appears as an unflawed representative of this type, a passive bearer of male projections. The aged January's response to her –

This Januarie is ravysshed in a traunce
At every tyme he looked on hir face;
(1750–1)

is by no means different from that of the youthful Damyan:

He was so ravysshed on his lady May
That for the verray peyne he was ny wood.
(1774–5)

The narrator's own mock-epic encomium of May's charm when she first appears is a tribute to her perfection in the anima role –

Hire to biholde it semed fayerye.
(1743)

The determined externality and generality of this whole passage (1742–9) thus has a psychological significance complementary to the moral one so convincingly argued by Donaldson.[10] The recurrent bland epithets, "faire, fresshe", are a further means of conveying May's apparent fluidity and adaptability.

In as much as she is hard-headed and resourceful, exploiting male projections in pursuit of preconceived sensual ends, May is not a true representative of the anima type. On the other hand, she is a true anima in her instinctive recognition that her security depends on fostering male illusions. This is presumably why she humours January and goes to such lengths to keep her adultery secret. An instructive contrast can be drawn here between May's behaviour and that of the Wife of Bath. The vivid individuality of the latter, according to the account in her prologue, rapidly destroyed the illusions of her old husbands, and so cleared the way for the purifying advance of reality and reason. The opposite is the case with May and January.

Once January has fallen in love, or, to speak in Jungian terms, once his soul-image has been projected, he acts as selfishly and irrationally as one would expect. He prefaces his announcement that he has found a bride with the warning that he will not listen to any criticism (1618–22). Thus he deliberately rejects the evidence of external reality.

January further refuses to take much notice of objective data when he dismisses May's "smal degre" (1625) as being of no importance. January is a materialist only in the sense that he regards May as an object.[11] Materialism in the proper or worldly sense is not, in fact, the characteristic vice of introverts, since objects, as such, have little reality for them. Towards the end of the second scene with Placebo and Justinus, January reasserts his primary attachment to abstraction in his, in the Merchant's view, extraordinary fear that marriage will provide him with a premature heaven.

January's physical blindness is an expression, from a psychological viewpoint psycho-somatic, from a literary viewpoint symbolic, of his internal blindness, his lack of consciousness. As the working-out of the tale shows, the internal blindness is much more far-reaching in its effects, and much more difficult to cure, than its physical counterpart. Chaucer is expressing a universal truth, which the human race has traditionally found extremely difficult to remember. In being an externalization of a psychological truth, the physical blindness has an artistic function very similar to that of the debate between Pluto and Proserpine, which may be taken as an external dramatization of the unexpressed conflict between January and May.[12] While the blindness is a necessary feature of the plot, it manages, like the Pluto episode, to be, on a strictly literal level, irrelevant to the central theme of January's failure to distinguish illusion from reality. The narrator himself seems to feel it as a side-issue:

> O Januarie, what myghte it thee availle,
> Thogh thou myghte se as fer as shippes saille?
> For as good is blynd deceyved be
> As to be deceyved whan a man may se.
> (2107–10)

For January, the chief significance of his blindness is that it may provide May with an opportunity to be unfaithful; its effect on the rest of his life is as nothing in comparison with this – a striking testament to the strength of his projection:

Allas! this noble Januarie free,
Amydde his lust and his prosperitee,
Is woxen blynd, and that al sodeynly.
He wepeth and he wayleth pitously;
And therwithal the fyr of jalousie,
Lest that his wyf sholde falle in some folye,
So brente his herte that he wolde fayn
That som man bothe hire and hym had slayn.
(2069–76)

The immaturity of his love is nowhere more obvious than in his intense jealousy, his insistence on literally keeping May in his grasp.

The contrast between January's illusions and May's real nature reaches its pitch in the first part of the pear-tree scene, before the intervention of Pluto and Proserpine. January's drivelling professions of love, and his promise to make May his heir, form an ironic chorus to Chaucer's account of her efficient, economical arrangements to cuckold him. This is perhaps the bitterest moment in the tale, since January's apparent generosity threatens to wring some sympathy from the reader. Mature consideration, however, should lead to the conclusion that January, being emotionally dependent on May, is attempting to strike a bargain with her, by offering something he does not want, his property after his death, in exchange for her present fidelity. Pluto, January's mythological counterpart, is, appropriately, the only one to be deceived by the externals of the situation. He sees no more than "this olde, blynde, worthy, knyght" (2259).

The thematic function of the climax, January's sudden vision of events in the pear-tree, is that it gives him his first uninhibited glimpse of reality. The restoration of his physical sight promises to be matched by the beginnings of insight into the truths of human relationships and by a widened consciousness. But, with only a little assistance from May, he lets his god-given opportunity go by. He chooses to keep his illusion, and thus to confirm for ever his psychological immaturity.[13] This is the real tragedy of the Merchant's Tale, the result of the sub-conscious drama that is played out beneath the farcical surface of the pear-tree episode.

Thus, the Merchant's Tale portrays some timeless truths about human relationships which yield readily to analysis in modern psychological terms.

1. G.L. Kittredge, for example, in his famous article, "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," MP, IX (1912), makes the literally untrue statement that "The Wife of Bath addresses her heresies not to us or to the world at large, but to her fellow-pilgrims." In reality, Chaucer is the only narrator and we are the only readers. Numerous other statements suggest that Kittredge became over-involved in Chaucer's illusion. (See Lyons, C.P., "The Marriage Debate in the Canterbury Tales," ELH, 32 (1935), 252–62.)

2. For instance, Michael D. Cherniss, "The Clerk's Tale and Envoy, The Wife of Bath's Purgatory, and the Merchant's Tale," CR, 6 (1972), 246–53; and Gertrude M. White, "'Hoolynesse or Dotage': The Merchant's January," PQ, XLIV (1965), 397–404.

3. C.G. Jung, Psychological Types, Tr. H. Godwin Baynes, London, 1946, p. 120:

> But since, in order to escape affectedness, the introvert cannot abstract indefinitely, he ultimately sees himself forced to shape the external world. "That he may not be merely world, he must impart form to matter," says Schiller; "he shall externalize all within, and shape everything without."

4. See in particular C.G. Jung, Psychological Types, London, 1946, pp. 471–80. Extensive descriptions of the introverted type are to be found elsewhere in this work, and in Jung's other writings.

   This paper does not pretend to present an in any way detailed or exhaustive analysis of January. Although the major trends of his character are obvious enough, the finer points escape definition as, perhaps, might be expected in what is, after all, a literary creation. Thus, no attempt has been made to determine January's predominant "function" – whether it be "feeling", "thinking", "intuitive", or "sensation". Jung makes the point that function is much more difficult to determine, even in living subjects, than the degree of extroversion or introversion.

5. J.C. McGalliard, "Chaucerian Comedy: The Merchant's Tale, Jonson, and Moliere," PQ, XXV (1946), 350–1, deals with January's devotion to the idea of matrimony.

6. The adjectives employed convey a generalized, rather than an individual perfection – the ideal quality of feminine waists is smallness; arms are ideally long and slender.

7. Psychological Types, p. 588. See also Two Essays on Analytical Psychology, Vol. 7 of the Collected Works Princeton, Princeton University Press (Bollingin Series XX), 1953, pp. 188–9.

8. Psychological Types, p. 597.

9. M. Esther Harding, The Way of All Women, London, 1971, p. 6.

10. Speaking of Chaucer, London, 1970, pp. 51–53.

11. Miss G.M. White, op.cit., p. 399, argues that January lived as a materialist before the events narrated in the tale occurred. She seems to base this on the statement, occurring in the third line of the narrative, that January had spent his life "in greet prosperitee" (1247). A similar statement occurs at 1. 2070, but the following passage, which precedes the description of the garden, comes closest to making the point explicitly:

> Somme clerkes holden that felicitee
> Stant in delit, and therefore certeyn he,
> This noble Januarie, with al his myght,
> In honest wyse, as longeth to a knyght,
> Shoop hym to lyve ful deliciously.
> His housynge, his array, as honestly
> To his degree was maked as a kynges.
> (2021–7)

Even here the main point seems to be that January's materialism was merely a means to the major end of satisfying his lust. It is stated explicitly that January's possessions conformed exactly to the expectations of his rank. If there is a Chaucerian irony lurking here, it is so muted as to be virtually indetectable.

While P.A. Olson, in "The Merchant's Lombard Knight," TSLL, III (1961), 259–63, provides convincing evidence for the view that January was "more commercial knight than chivalric ruler", he does not attempt to argue that he was ipso facto a materialist.

The main reason, it seems, for presenting the view that January was a materialist is that it has the effect of strengthening the link between him and the materialistic Merchant, and so between the Merchant and the tale as a whole. But this link is already so strong as to require little reinforcement.

12. Pluto stands for January, of course, and Proserpine for May. See Donovan, M.J., "The Image of Pluto and Proserpine in the Merchant's Tale," PQ, XXXVI (1957), 49–60.

13. Jung sees the development of conscious individuality as being synonymous with psychological maturity. In refusing to abandon his illusions about May, January is choosing the collective unconscious, or "instinct", as his determinant. See Psychological Types, pp. 475–6, 560–1.