



Excursions into *Faerie*

Comparing Chaucer's Pluto and Proserpina
with Shakespeare's Oberon and Titania

Seminar Paper
Old & Middle English

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“Pluto and Proserpina probably suggested Oberon and Titania” Dorothy Bethurum wrote in a journal article in 1945. I’ve read both texts — Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale* — while on holiday. Yes, this could be, indeed, I thought. At first glance, this fact didn’t stroke me as especially noteworthy. In both of them are fairies that meddle in human affairs. So what? It would only seem natural if Shakespeare knew Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and took some motives from there. Having a database of all kinds of snippets of ideas myself, I know perfectly well that inspiration can come from all kinds of sources, and that their final execution can turn them into something else entirely, with only the author knowing what their original root was. It appeared to me that this was the only conclusion there was to draw. I was wrong. It was only after reading secondary sources and digging deeper into the two texts that I began to realise how vastly different Shakespeare and Chaucer use their fairies in their stories. In the following paper, I therefore would like to show how Chaucer and Shakespeare treat their fairy royals, and how they moved from a simple adoption of folk lore in Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale* to an integral part of the narrative in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

Shakespeare and Chaucer introduce their pair of fairies very differently. For Shakespeare, they are (necessarily) part of the exposition. Oberon and Titania are presented as the last of the four groups in the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* after Theseus/Hippolyta, the four youths and the rustics. It is done with the meeting of a fairy and Puck which are attendants to Titania, respectively Oberon. They both announce that their sovereigns will be here the coming night:

FAIRY

[...] I do wander everywhere
Swifter than the moon’s sphere,
And I serve the Fairy Queen,
To dew her orbs upon the green.

[...]

Farewell, thou lov of spirits; I’ll be gone,
Our Queen and all her elves come here anon.

PUCK

The King doth keep his revels here tonight.
Take heed the Queen come no within his sight,
For Oberon is passing fell and wrath
Because that she as her attendant hath

A lovely boy stilen from an Indian king.
[...] And jealous Oberon would have the child
Knight of his train, to trace the forests wild.
[...]
And now they [Oberon and Titania, KM] never meet — in grove or green,
By fountain clear or spangled starlight sheen —
But they do square, that all their elves for fear
Creep into acorn cups and hide them there. (II.1.6-II.1.31)

*When quoting from Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, the numbers refer to act, scene and line.*

In these lines almost everything about the conflict between Titania and Oberon is contained. When they just moments later appear on stage, they are already arguing. The information the audience has been given makes clear that this is a quarrel that has been going on for some time now, something their dialogue even enforces. They both have come for Theseus' wedding to give them their blessings — a fact that integrates them in the play from the beginning.

This is very different in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*. His fairies are introduced very late in the tale. They are mentioned for the first time in the description of January's garden:

Ful ofte time he Pluto and his queene,
Proserpina, and al hire faierye;
Disporten hem and maken meoldye
Aboute that welle, and daunced, as men tolde. (826-829)

When quoting from Chaucer's text, numbers refer to the lines.

They are mentioned, but not really integrated into the narrative. Their inclusion could just be a hint at the beauty of the garden: Even the fairies choose to visit this garden, so it must be really marvelous. Nevertheless, this remark foreshadows their appearance in the garden with January and May and makes it less of a surprise. When January and May enter the garden, we indeed find Pluto and Proserpina there, which Chaucer almost flatly states. This nonchalant way to introduce these two characters into the action may seem at first surprising. However, if we remember that Chaucer draws on old folk tales for this story, the surprise is considerable lessened: many folk tales are told in the same simple, no-frills style that places the magical right besides the mundane. Still, we cannot consider the introduction of Pluto and Proserpina as part of the (indeed overly long) exposition: it is very late and seemingly an afterthought of Chaucer.

Shakespeare's Titania and Oberon are vital for the narrative, and are therefore tightly integrated. Shakespeare introduces Hermia, Helena, Lysander and Demetrius as being fiercely in love. It would be very hard to understand for the

audience if they changed their mind all of a sudden. They need a motivation to do that — and this motivation can not come out of their own group. Change must be initiated from the outside. This is the role of the fairies. Not unlike a “*deus ex machina*”, though less obvious, they watch the humans and through the power of the flower’s juice change the initial setting of who loves whom. The *Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a comedy, so we should not be surprised if some of this magic goes wrong the first time. The fun lies in those mix-ups, these variations upon unwanted/unrequited love.

In Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale* we have the same need for change to have the narrative moving on as soon as we reach a stasis. With January and May married, Damian recovered, we are arriving at an anti-climax.

Up riseth Damyan the nexte morwe;
Al passed was his siknesse and his sorwe.
He kembeth him, he preyneth him and piketh,
He dooth al that his lady lust and liketh;
And eek to Januarie he gooth as lowe
As evere dide a dogge for the bowe.
[...]
And fully in his lady grace he stood.
[...]
And in this wise, many a murye day,
Lived this Januarie and fresshe May. (797-842)

How is the narrative to continue? Something must change to disrupt this fragile truce. In contrast to the *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, this change does not necessarily have to come from the outside. From the beginning, the initial setting is less stable. May is merely an investment for Januar. Love is a non-issue in the relationship between January and May. Both Damian and May could decide to act; however, something more surprising happens. January goes blind, in way that is left almost carelessly unexplained by Chaucer other than fate and ill fortune:

O sodeyn hap, o thou Fortune unstable!
[...]
Allas, this noble Januarie free,
Amidde his lust and his properitee,
Is woxen blind, and that al sodeynly. (845-859)

There is no reason for this to happen, no motivation available. It just happens, and initiates the necessary change. It could be argued that this illustrates January's blindness towards the affair between Damian and May, however, this view is in no way enforced by Chaucer. In the end, January gains his eyesight back – by the power of Pluto who wants to make January see how he is betrayed by his wife May. However, one might argue that the fairies in the *Merchant's Tale*, considering how late they are introduced, are not needed at all. If January goes blind all of a sudden, as he does, he could gain his eyesight back in the same fashion. The fact that it happens just when his wife is committing adultery is fate; Fortune is, after all, rather unpredictable. As seen from this point of view, it is questionable why Chaucer would introduce Pluto, when Chance might have done the job just as well.

If January doesn't need Pluto to get his eyesight back, what about May then? Proserpina has taken her side and promises,

*That I shal yeven hire suffisant answere,
And alle wommen after, for hir sake;
That, though they be in any gilt ytake,
With face boold they shulle hemselſ excuse,
And bere hem doun that wolden hem accuse.
For lak of answere noon of hem shal dien.* (1054-1059)

Does May really need the suggestions from Proserpina to get away with her adultery? May is, indeed, at first more of a woodcut rather than a fully fleshed out character. She appears very passive; her first lines of direct speech are on line 770, over two thirds into the tale — and it is only her private thinking. Even Damian, who, according to Holman, “is so perfect an illustration of the courtly love lover that he loses individuality because of the conventional nature of all his reactions” (1951, p. 246), has some direct speech long before May. It is but very slowly that the audience realises May's potential. When January gets blinded and is consumed by the “fyr of jalousie” (861), he keeps May even closer, robbing her of every freedom to talk with Damian. When she cries over this (880), we are hardly surprised, as this is exactly the reaction one would expect from a character as passive as she was presented until now. However, not very soon after, she begins plotting against her husband. Together with Damian she invents a secret sign language and makes a copy of January's key to the garden:

*But nathelees, by writing to and fro,
And privee signes, wiste he what she mente,
And she knew eek the fin of his entente.*

[...]
This fresshe May, that I spak of so yoore,
In warm wex hath emprented the cliket
That Januarie bar of the smale wicket,
By which into his gardyn ofte he wente,
And Damyan, that knew al hire entente,
The cliket countrefeted prively. (892-909)

That does not really sound like a silently suffering woman. The audience's suspicion is further aroused by her reply when January lectures her about why she should stay true to him. This is the first time in the narrative that she addresses another character directly — and she is making quite a scene out of it. Weeping, she assures January, that she would never “do unto [her] kin that shame” (p. 985). Very fast she turns her defence into an attack on men:

Why speke ye thus? But men been evere untrew
And wommen have repreve of yow ay newe.
Ye han noon oother contenance, I leeve,
But speke to us of untrust and repreve. (991-994)

January seems to be baffled, as he remains silent; meanwhile, May gestures Damian to climb into the tree, in the perfect negotiation of what she was telling January just a moment ago. Later, she feigns being sick to get into the pear tree as well:

This fresshe May, that is so bright and sheene,
Gan for to sike, and seyde, ‘Allas, my side,
Now sire,’ quod she, ‘for aught that may bitide,
I moste han of the peres that I see,
Or I moot die, so soore longeth me
To eten of the smale peres grene. (1116-1121)

These passages make clear that she is witty enough to come up on her own with the answer she presents January with on top of the pear tree, without any help by Proserpina. This is even more striking if we consider the fact that Chaucer describes Pluto actions to make January see again:

And whan that Pluto saugh this grete wrong,
To Januarie he gaf again his sighte,
And made him se as wel as evere hi mighte. (1142-1144)

Proserpina however is not described as doing anything:

*'Out, help; alas, harrow!' he [January, KM] gan to crye,
'O stronge lady stoore, what dostow?'
And she [May, KM] answerde [...]* (1154–56)

May's clever reaction comes right after January's accusation, without any interaction by Proserpina described. Even if Chaucer made this omission to leave the action uninterrupted, the audience hardly feels anything missing. In the end, May is strong enough to deal (successfully!) with January and wins. January believes that (really?) and the two (or rather: three?) of them live happily ever after – or so it seems.

Dorothy Bethurum writes that “The Merchant's Tale provides [Shakespeare] in Pluto and Proserpina with the closest parallel to Oberon and Titania” (1945, p. 89f). But clearly, Shakespeare made them far stronger characters. Chaucer's Pluto, “this king of Fairye thanne adoun him sette, / Upon a bench of turves, fressh and greene” (1021-1022) and seems to be rather bored. Other than this, it is not possible to see a reason why he would start an argument with his wife over the “untrouthe” of women (1029). His speech clearly lacks the anger and bitterness we see in Shakespeare's version:

OBERON
Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania!

TITANIA
*What, jealous Oberon? Fairy, skip hence.
I have forsworn his bed and company.*

OBERON
Tarry, rash wanton! Am not I thy lord?

TITANIA
Then I must be thy lady. (II.1.60-II.1.64)

Instead, it is a lecture intended for his wife Proserpina, who ironically proves him wrong afterwards. As it is noted by Maurice Hussey, an editor of the *Merchant's Tale*, “Pluto, the god of the underworld and of money [...] has biblical allusions at the ready” (Hussey, 1966, p. 99) — quite exceptional for a pagan god. Pluto wants to

graunten, of [his] magestee,
Unto this olde, blinde, worthy knight
That he shal have ayen his eyen sight,
Whan that his wyf wold doon him vileynye. (1046-1049)

Proserpina for her part counters that (she, too, knows the bible quite well) and promises that May would be able to give a quick answer when accused by January: “For lak of answeere noon of hem shal dien” (1059). As we have seen, Proserpina is not described as acting on behalf of May; moreover, we cannot see any reaction of the deities to the outcome. They are dismissed right after Pluto has given January back his eyesight, not to appear in the narrative again. This, too, is very different from the *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, where the fairies even have the last word of the play. January could have gained his eyesight back by chance, May is witty enough on her own, the fairy royals are silently dismissed after duty: the plot is in no need of Pluto and Proserpina, and still Chaucer chose to include them.

Simply stating that Pluto and Proserpina are not needed is bound to send some Chaucer scholars into a rage. Pluto and Proserpina are unnecessary: yes, in plot-centric view of the *Merchant’s Tale*. They are not as well interwoven into the narrative’s fabric as Titania and Oberon are in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which, as discussed earlier, cannot be extracted without destroying the entire play. The question remains why Chaucer would still introduce them. In the *Story of Lydia and Pyrrhus* from the *Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio, which Peter Beidler extensively compares to the *Merchant’s Tale* in his article (1973) and regards as a possible source (a view that is supported by Carol Heffernan as well (2006, p. 336)), there are no deities that meddle in human affairs. Peter Beidler remarks that Chaucer hardly uses only one source alone, but combines several of them into a new whole: “Chaucer so combined and changed and added to a number of the stories he knew that the precise nature of his original or originals are no longer accurately inferable from the distinctively Chaucerian work of art that he has left us.” (1973, p. 282) Indeed, the meme of the blind husband and the pear tree in the *Merchant’s Tale* can be found in several folk tales. Research has shown over ten analogues where “the blind husband, after his eyesight is restored by supernatural interveners, looks up and sees his wife with her lover in the tree above his head, and is subsequently convinced by her quick response that her purpose was to cure his blindness.” (Beidler, 1973, p. 268) [Emphasis KM]. One of them, an Italian *Novellino*, might have been known by Chaucer — Beidler assumes it as the direct source (1973, p. 269). In this version, as retold by D.L. Ashliman (1998), it is God and St. Peter that see the wife with the lover in the pear tree and the blind husband below. St. Peter urges God

to give the poor man his eyesight back, so he might see what his wife does, and God answers — in a strangely laid back manner — that the man will see the light, but the woman will know an excuse, too – which is, that she had to do so in order to make him see again. God and St. Peter are introduced in the same negligent, nonchalant fashion as we see in the *Merchant's Tale*, it is not necessarily clear that the husband sees because of God's intervention — and the wife is not in need of help either, just as is May. The vexing thing about that is that even if one can trace the idea for the deities back to the source, it is clear that Chaucer did not simply borrow from there. His supernatural beings are not biblical, but pagan. He turns them into husband and wife. He balances their powers. These changes clarify that Chaucer did not just needed an excuse to make January seeing again: Pluto and Proserpina mattered to him, they have been integral part of the overall concept of the tale all along.

One reason for the inclusion of Pluto and Proserpina is their function in the genre of romance that Chaucer mocks in the *Merchant's Tale*. It has been noted from very early on that in this tale the “machinery of romance [...] is introduced in all its traditional forms” (Schlauch, 1937, p. 212). The *Merchant's Tale* is told similarly to popular romances, as Margaret Schlauch shows (1937). Not only is its cast to be found in many other romances; magic, too, “ranks high among the distinguishing features of the genre” (Cooper, 2004, p. 137). Therefore, it was not to be missed. Ironically, as we have seen above, it plays a minimal part in the plot. While this might sound surprising at first, it was fairly common, as Helen Cooper describes:

[One] particular way of making magic central to romance appears again and again in the work of the most skilled craftsmen of the genre, and that, paradoxically, is by sidelining it, diverting its wonder elsewhere.

(Cooper, 2004, p. 138)

Pluto and Proserpina make an appearance on the stage, promise to do miracles — of which one has not the desired effect and the other was probably not needed at all. They perform “magic that doesn't work.”, are “decoration rather than substance” (Cooper, 2004, p. 143). In romances, the inclusion of magic is supposed to evoke astonishment – even more so when it fails and the hero has to overcome himself and prove his worth on his very own. “What we are invited to marvel at is not the magic, but at the courage and endurance unaided by magic” (Cooper, 2004, p. 143). Chaucer lets the magic fail too; but just as the *Merchant's Tale* is not a romance but rather a parody, an “antidote” (Schlauch, 1937, p. 210) to this genre, so has the non-working magic exactly the opposite effect. How ironic to say that Pluto “made him [January, KM] se as wel as evere hi mighte”

(II44), when we later begin to realise that this means: not at all. January, even if aided by magic, decides not to see the adultery committed by May as soon as she insists that it was for his own good; instead, he welcomes her back in his arms. Pluto's magic has failed in that (metaphorical) sense: January takes the easiest way out by simply not acknowledging the fact that would endanger his marriage, his "hevene in erthe heere". Not even the gods can help January in his self-chosen blindness; "his persistence in moral blindness marks the limits even of fairy power." (Cooper, 2004, p. 200). The failing magic in the *Merchant's Tale* is not to show courage or endurance, but exposes exactly the opposite. January is shown as a coward, further heightening the irony of the tale.

When comparing the magic in the *Midsummer Night's Dream* with the one from the *Merchant's Tale*, we can see that it is no longer failing: Titania and Oberon's magic works, apart from some hobgoblinian errors. They become invisible ("I am invisible, / And I will overhear their conference" (II.1.186f)), by the power of the magical flower, Lysander falls in love with Helena (II.2.109), as does Demetrius; Bottom gets an ass' head (III.1.96); Titania falls in love with the transformed Bottom (III.1.122); Bottom is disenchanting (IV.1.83); all apart from the fact that the stage is almost bursting from fairy royals, fairy servants, hobgoblins and amazon warriors. This is highly potent magic, which is, as we have seen before, necessary for the plot to advance and in the end being solved.

Besides from exposing January as a fool, Pluto and Proserpina are also used as a device to discuss the topic of the *Merchant's Tale* at large. Having two sides of an argument split up in two characters that represent either side is a device one would expect to see in a play rather than in prose. Nevertheless, there are several other instances where Chaucer uses such dramatic devices in the *Merchant's Tale*. In the very beginning, January could continue to contemplate the pros and cons of marriage on his own, yet Chaucer introduces two of his friends, "Of whiche that oon was cleped Placebo, / Justinus sootly called was that oother." (264-265). They represent merely the two sides of the argument – with Justinus having almost no chance against January's preconception of marriage. Placebo and Justinus have no further purpose in this story, after having embodied the two sides in January's reasoning, they disappear from the tale entirely. Giving a character in moral dilemma two partners to represent either side of an argument in order to keep him or her from monologuing is common practice in stage texts, but not necessarily in prose texts. Chaucer might have done so in order to create a more lively scene and to introduce more points into the reasoning. Pluto and Proserpina's quarrel in the garden (1025-1107) is therefore not just the "domestic quarrel [...] going on in the royal household" (Bethurum, 1945, p. 90), it is a meta-comment, delivered by meta-beings and could well be presented as the prologue of the tale. With this comment, Chaucer is able to make his point far

clearer than just by using the plot alone and letting the audience guess its meaning. Moreover, it is not just about January and May. Pluto talks about women in general:

*'My wyf,' quod he, 'ther mey no wight seye nay;
Th'experience so preveth every day
The tresons whiche wommen doon to man. (1025-1027)*

So does Proserpina:

*Now by my moodres sires soule I swere
That I shal yeven hire [May, KM] suffisant answere,
And alle wommen after, for hir sake[.]
[...]
Al hadde man seyn a thing with bothe his yen,
Yet shul we wommen visage it hardily,
And wepe, and swere, and chide subtilly,
So that ye men shul been as lewed as gees. (1053-1063)*

This turns the whole tale into a general fable about the relationship between women and men, with January and May exemplifying it. One should keep in mind that Chaucer makes the unhappily married merchant deliver this tale: it is probably as much a description of his own marriage, in which he feels betrayed and fooled.

The inclusion of Pluto and Proserpina has another effect on the whole narrative. The tale clearly states its setting as Lombardy in the beginning. With enough fantasy, one can imagine a more or less realistic, mediaeval Lombardy, given the lack of details and the rather generic description. This realism is broken for the first time at the wedding:

*Bacus the wyn hem sinketh al aboute,
And Venus laugheth upon every wight,
For Januarie was bicomme hir knight [...]. (510-512)*

While this may still pass as a rather exuberant metaphor, it still nudges the location away from the historically correct realism. When we finally meet Pluto and Proserpina strolling in January's garden, we definitely have arrived in a parallel universe where gods, fairies and humans live side by side.

“Chaucer’s substitution of the classical gods, Pluto and Proserpina, for the Novellino’s God and St. Peter effectively expands the implications of his mordant tale of marriage into the eternal (and pagan) realm. [...] The Merchant’s Tale garden is at once comic and otherworldly.” (Heffernan, 2006, p. 341f)

Indeed: this is the same world we see described in *Midsummer Night’s Dream* — however, we have to give Shakespeare credit, for he is far stricter in describing this realm. Even if the Englishmen shimmer through the Athenian robes, the play lacks the numerous biblical allusions we find in the *Merchant’s Tale* and which are a striking contrast to the setting in the pagan Faerie.

In an overall conclusion, we can see even though that Shakespeare may have drawn on Chaucer’s Pluto and Proserpina from the *Merchant’s Tale* for his own Oberon and Titania in the *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the author’s management of the deities’ roles are vastly different. While Chaucer takes them over from their folk tale origin and uses them to comment on a meta-level on the tale itself, adding not much to the actual plot itself, Shakespeare weaves them intricately into his plot, moving it both forward and solving it in the end. In almost all aspects, Shakespeare expands the original fairies: their quarrel is more devastating, their magic mightier, their influence on humans greater, their behaviour more fairy-like. Besides them, Chaucer’s Pluto and Proserpina are but shadows of gods: once powerful, yet now in a largely christianised middle age at the edge of extinction because no one believes in them anymore; forced to argument in biblical terms. Not even the Underworld seems to need tending, Pluto has idle time to lounge about in January’s garden ...

To me, it now seems a wonderful example how a nucleus of an idea can lead another author to a whole new work — how Shakespeare having glimpsed upon Faerie in the *Merchant’s Tale* decided to travel there on his own and taking us, the audience, with him onto this excursion.

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