9.1 PARAMETRIC CURVES

EXAMPLE A Investigate the family of curves with parametric equations

$$x = a + \cos t \qquad y = a \tan t + \sin t$$

What do these curves have in common? How does the shape change as a increases?

SOLUTION We use a graphing device to produce the graphs for the cases $a = -2$, -1, -0.5, -0.2, 0, 0.5, 1, and 2 shown in Figure 1. Notice that all of these curves (except the case $a = 0$) have two branches, and both branches approach the vertical asymptote $x = a$ as x approaches a from the left or right.

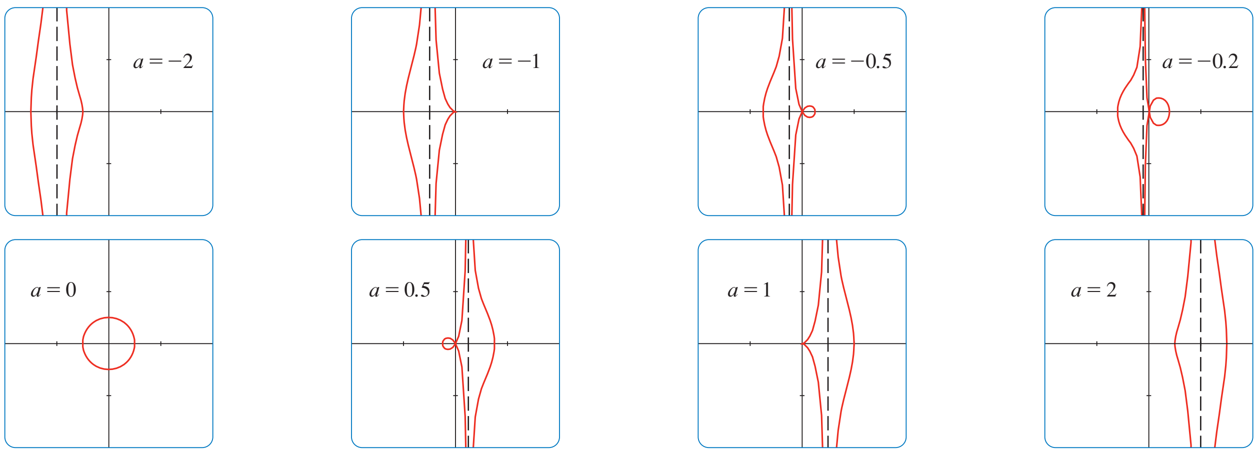

FIGURE 1 Members of the family $x = a + \cos t$, $y = a \tan t + \sin t$, all graphed in the viewing rectangle $[-4, 4]$ by $[-4, 4]$

When $a < -1$, both branches are smooth; but when a reaches -1, the right branch acquires a sharp point, called a *cusp*. For a between -1 and 0 the cusp turns into a loop, which becomes larger as a approaches 0. When $a = 0$, both branches come together and form a circle (see Example 2). For a between 0 and 1, the left branch has a loop, which shrinks to become a cusp when $a = 1$. For $a > 1$, the branches become smooth again, and as a increases further, they become less curved. Notice that the curves with a positive are reflections about the y-axis of the corresponding curves with a negative.

These curves are called **conchoids of Nicomedes** after the ancient Greek scholar Nicomedes. He called them conchoids because the shape of their outer branches resembles that of a conch shell or mussel shell. ■