

Chaucer's Extraordinary Fabliau: The Merchant's Tale

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Though Chaucer never realised his full conception for the *Canterbury Tales*, in the case of the six fabliaux he completed, one-fourth of the *Canterbury Tales*, we begin to get an idea of Chaucer's ideas about how he could expand the genre of the fabliau. It is my intent to show that the *Merchant's Tale* is of those narratives Chaucer finished of the *Canterbury Tales* the culmination of his thinking on the fabliau. I would include with that later thinking the relevant postulate that Chaucer probably wrote the *Merchant's Tale* the last of all his fabliaux.

In her recent CD-ROM of the Hengwrt MS at the National Library of Wales in Aberwystwyth, Estelle Stubbs lines up the orders of the tales and links in the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts side by side. Half of the fabliaux on the *Canterbury Tales* occur in what Stubbs calls Structural Section I of the Hengwrt MS. These two early manuscripts line up exactly in order in these tales which follow the *General Prologue* in what editors often call the Group A of tales or

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what the standard Riverside edition calls Fragment I. In his revision of the *Canterbury Tales* before his death, Chaucer thoroughly reworked the links and tales of Fragment I, without completing the *Cook's Tale*.¹⁾

One common note for the fabliau narrators in the *General Prologue* is that each of these tale-tellers is fully described there at that beginning point of the framework, whereas some narrators are not described according to Chaucer's proposed model or even at all. These fabliau narrators in the first gathering of tales are the Miller, the Reeve, and the Cook. The first two tellers are grouped with the rogues with whom Chaucer the pilgrim lumps himself. Just after describing two of the ideal characters from the first and third estates, the Parson and his brother the Plowman, Chaucer launches into describing the final grouping of the pilgrims he will accompany to Canterbury:

There was also a Reve, and a Millere,
A Somnour, and a Pardoner also,
A Maunciple, and myself—ther were namo. (I 542-44)

Though it is a commonplace to say that late medieval art frequently juxtaposes in wood, stone, paint, and ink ideal characters, scenes, and notions with grotesque, risible, fallen versions of the same ideas, the point is most strikingly demonstrated in these latter two groups of pilgrims Chaucer describes in the *General Prologue* (Robertson *passim*; Hauser 192).

1) Some Chaucerians perhaps feel that the *Cook's Tale*, despite its abrupt ending, is 'finished.' In a recent discussion at the Leeds IMC Congress, 9–12 July 2001, Carl Brindley (Yale University) and I discussed the possibility of the *Cook's Tale* as logically finished in the context of the gathering of tales in Fragment I.

As the Parson is the *summa* of the good parish priest, so is the Plowman the humblest and most virtuous member of the third estate, more frequently characterised in the *General Prologue* as rising members of the late medieval middle class or bourgeoisie. Chaucer groups these two nonpareils with four of his grotesques, alternating two oxymoronic pairs: the natural enemies (the brawny Miller, who leads the company playing his grotesquely phallic bagpipe [I 565-66], and the thin, choleric Reeve, who rides constantly at the very back of the pilgrims, as far from the Miller as possible [I 622]) and the unnatural friends (the Summoner and the Pardoner, that most grotesque pair of lovers [see I 626, 672-74, and 684 for subtle hints]). To include the pilgrim Chaucer with this collection of humanity is regarded as jocular self-deprecation on Chaucer's part, since he groups himself with five of the most obviously morally defective pilgrims: from the Miller, who takes three times his toll for grinding wheat (I 562), to the ethically bent Manciple, who is clever enough to dupe the more than 30 lawyers of the Temple he supposedly serves (I 576-86), to the Reeve, who knows how to make his master pay for goods he already owns (I 610-12), to the Summoner, who can easily forget the remit of the ecclesiastical court for minor bribes (I 653-58), and, finally, to the Pardoner, who preaches about the deadly sin of avarice so effectively that he can fulfill his own avaricious desires (I 703-06). Whilst I have Chaucer paired with the Manciple, about whom Chaucer says nothing of physical grotesqueness, it may be worth digressing from the *fabliau* characters momentarily to wonder if Chaucer may be implying the same sort of intelligence in duping his royal masters by pairing himself with the Manciple who makes fools of some of the most powerful members of the commons, all lawyers,

Of which ther were a duszeyne in that hous
 Worthy to been stywardes of rente and lond
 Of any lord that is in Engelond ... (I 578-80)

The other fabliau narrators are scattered amongst the portraits of the *General Prologue*. The Cook, whose fabliau stops abruptly as it is heading even lower into the moral abyss than did the Miller's or Reeve's tales, finds himself with that similarly dressed group of guildsmen (I 363-64) whom I assume come from London, since their Cook accompanying them knows well "a draughte of Londoun ale" (I 382), is called The "Cook of Londoun" at the beginning of his Prologue (I 4325), and seems to be known at first hand by the Host (I 4346-53), who knows his first name, his shop, and the reputation of his twice-warmed and cooled meat pies covered with flies. Add to this that the Cook claims his tale set in Cheapside in London is a "litel jape that fil in oure citee" (I 4343). The text affirms that these five guildsmen, described as five peas in a pod, would be well-suited by their wisdom to be aldermen, presumably in London (I 371-72). Unfortunately, Chaucer did not live long enough to reveal these characters further by giving any of them a tale in his *Canterbury Tales* framework (perhaps all five would have to speak in unison as they are characterised in the *General Prologue* as bourgeois types), but the Cook did at least get a chance to start one tale, if not a second, with the Manciple substituting for him at that second instance because of Roger's drunken state (see the *Manciple's Prologue* at IX 44-68). We must add to all this that the Cook's shin has a "mormal," (I 386) an ulcerated sore, perhaps as Haldeen Braddy suggests a runny, pus-filled sore (265-67) that I have always imagined rather matches the colour of

the “blankmanger” mentioned as one of his cooked specialities in the next line (I 387): “For blankmanger, that made he with the beste.” Picture chopped chicken and/or fish boiled with rice with a white sauce on top! And then think of the unhealing sore on Roger’s leg. Even without his drunken behaviour, the leg alone marks Roger born in Ware in Hertfordshire (see the *Cook’s Prologue* at I 4336) as one of the physical grotesques in the *General Prologue*.

As the Summoner is the nadir of physical grotesqueness, with his “fyr-reed cherubynes face” because of pimples, both white and red, “saucefleem” because of adult acne or rosacea, his “scalled browes” because of the skin disease called the scall, and his beard labelled piled because the hair was falling out from infection, there is no question that he is also portrayed as morally grotesque (see Janette Richardson’s notes to I 624-27 in *The Riverside Chaucer* 823). “Of his visage children were aferd” summarises this with brevity (I 628), and his habits of eating garlic, onions, and leeks, and drinking too much cheap wine marks him as both smelly and gluttonous, leading him to “speke and crie as he were wood” (I 634-36).

Besides the Merchant, only one more teller of fabliaux remains to be analysed in the *General Prologue*—the Shipman. It is worth reflecting again on how Chaucer groups these portraits of the fabliau tellers. Before the fairly mildly satirised guildsmen and their grotesque Cook appear in the *Prologue*, we meet two ideals from the world of the clergy, the Clerk of Oxenford, and from the pinnacle of the commoners, the Franklin—a pairing that stands the ideal pilgrims associated with poverty and riches beside each other. If one must be poor, why not live humbly as a student living the life of contemplation?

As leene was his hors as is a rake,
 And he nas nat right fat, I undertake,
 But looked holwe, and therto sobrelly.
 Ful thredbare was his overeste courtepy,
 For he hadde geten hym yet no benefice,
 Ne was so worldly for to have office. (I 287-92)

The Clerk's desire to read all of Aristotle rather than to have rich clothing and to chase after women (I 293-96), here symbolized by stringed instruments, "fithere, or gay sautrie" (I 296), portrays him as an ideal celibate medieval academic, a future Oxford don who will pray for the souls of those who help him during his willing poverty to continue his studies (I 299-302).

Though the Franklin is probably the wealthiest character in the *General Prologue*, despite being from the estate of the commoners, this son of Epicurus shares his wealth day by day to all comers—a sort of St. Julian of hospitality: It snewed in his hous of mete and drynke... (I 335-54). The contrast between the Clerk and the Franklin leads some critics to declare the Franklin's pursuit of delight worthy of satire and to suggest that Chaucer's portrait of the Franklin should be read ironically (see Robertson 276 and Birney 12). Jill Mann sees the portrait as non-satiric, as I do (152-59). I see this sanguine pilgrim as an ideal of liberality, rather after the manner of a Saint Nicholas or a Mr. Fezziwig. He is a successful man of the land as the Clerk is a success in the study.

The grotesque Cook finishes the next group of characters following these two idealised portraits, and, following the Cook in order, the Shipman presents some comic physical elements such as his inability to adapt to the land, illustrated by his scarcely being able to ride upon

a nag (I 390). He hides a dagger on a cord around his neck, hidden beneath his arm (I 392-93). Lest we think this pirate is merely comic, later in his portrait Chaucer describes the attacks to this man's conscience over the years: he has stolen Bordeaux wine from the chapmen who use his ship and he has been a ruthless pirate and smuggler.

Ful many a draughte of wyn had he ydrawe
Fro Burdeux-ward, whil that the chapman sleep.
Of nice conscience took he no keep.
If that he faught and hadde the hyer hond,
By water he sente hem hoom to every lond...
He knew alle the havenes, as they were,
Fro Gootlond to the cape of Fynystere,
And every cryke in Britaigne and in Spayne. (I 396-400, 407-9)

I am sure I would not be justified in labelling the Shipman one of the physical grotesques, though, like the Manciple, he has serious moral lapses in his character. His fabliau is poorly and incompletely adapted to his character, unlike those fabliaux of the "grotesque four" (Miller, Reeve, Cook, and Summoner), for Chaucer had not revised out the lines seemingly referring to all of womankind and probably implying this tale was originally intended for the Wife of Bath:

The sely housbonde, algate he moot paye,
He moot *us* clothe, and he moot *us* arraye,
Al for his owene worshipe richely,
In which array *we* daunce jolily.
And if that he noght may, par aventure,
Or ellis list no swich dispence endure,

But thynketh it is wasted and ylost,
 Thanne moot another payen for *oure* cost,
 Or lene *us* gold, and that is perilous. (VII 11-19; emphasis added)

I conclude that the *Merchant's Tale* is the only fabliau in the surviving framework of the *Canterbury Tales* told by a pilgrim who is not seriously flawed morally. Though he has to borrow to bring about his trading, there is no hint of irony in Chaucer's portrait. The fact that Chaucer does not know his name may argue that the tale is a bit of a letting-off of steam for this man who holds his counsel, who dresses the part of a successful merchant, who speaks his opinions with solemnity, who is an advocate of free trade with Europe. As Chaucer says of him, "estatly was he of his governaunce," meaning he was dignified in his management of his affairs (see I 271-82). How do we get from this sort of *effictio* and character *descriptio* to the man who tells the *Merchant's Tale*?

It is a truth that the mature Chaucer tends to group tales together that react to or echo one another. Is there a better example of a literary parodic *reductio ad absurdum* than the *Miller's Tale* following the heroic romance of the *Knight's Tale*? Or a better example of *ad hominem* arguing than the *Reeve's Tale* on millers, by extension meant to be a character assassination of Robin, our bagpipe--playing Miller?

The *Merchant's Tale* is grouped in Fragment IV with only Chaucer's *Clerk's Tale*, a tale that I would label generically as a saint's life combined with a romance, though as far as I am aware, patient Griselda has never been canonised. After the agonizing tests of this patient wife, no wonder the unhappily and briefly married Merchant should break in dramatically just as the drunk Miller had done with

another fabliau at the beginning of the tale-telling contest. Perhaps the idea of the echo from *Clerk's Tale* to *Merchant's Prologue* arises from the mention of *Ekko* as an ever-talking exemplar for "noble wyves" in the third six-line stanza of *Lenvoy de Chaucer* with which *double ballade* the *Clerk's Tale* ends (IV 1189-94 and 1183). The final stanza elicits the Merchant's opening words:

If thou be fair, ther folk been in presence,
 Shewe thou thy visage and thyn apparaille;
 If thou be foul, be fre of thy dispence;
 To gete thee freendes ay do thy travaille;
 Be ay of chiere as light as leef on lynde,
 And lat hym *care*, and *wepe*, and wrynge, and *waille!*
 (IV 1207-12; emphasis added)

Though the Merchant is apparently not wringing his hands over his marriage, all the other verbs of the last line of the *Envoy* appear as either gerunds or a noun in his *Prologue's* opening couplet:

Wepynge and *waylynge*, *care* and oother sorwe
 I knowe ynogh, on even and a-morwe.... (IV 1213-14; emphasis added)

The Merchant's *Prologue* continues with a direct comparison of Grisildis grete patience and his wife's surpassing "crueltee" (IV 1224-25). The Merchant's language in his *Prologue* "alliterates" (w's predominate) joined with the bitterly sad mood of so many of his vowels (many o's and long a's punctuated at intervals with short a's and long e's and i's).

The comparisons between Griselda and other wives continue in the

tale itself. And as we observe the language Chaucer uses in this tale, we come to a direct comparison with a crucial choice for Griselda in the *Clerk's Tale* and a similarly crucial choice for the aged January in the *Merchant's Tale*. After Walter comes to see Griselda's father Janicula early in the second part of the *Clerk's Tale*, he asks Griselda if she will consent to Janicula's and Walter's agreement that she should marry "in hastif wyse" (IV 349)—that very day—by agreeing to whatever Walter would like her to do without any grudging, "And eek whan I sey 'ye,' ne sey nat 'nay,' / Neither by word ne frowning contenance?" (IV 355-56). I am particularly interested in the phrase "in hastif wyse" as the notion of haste repeats itself in the language of the *Merchant's Tale* too.

In the unending irony at the beginning of the *Merchant's Tale*, the Merchant seemingly defies the warning words of Theophrastus, who wrote the anti-matrimonial tract *The Golden Book of Marriage* (IV 1293-306). In an inexpressibility topos, the Merchant is unable to describe the bliss between a man and his wife:

A wyf! a, Seinte Marie, benedicite!
 How myghte a man han any adversitee
 That hath a wyf? Certes, I kan nat seye.
 The blisse which that is bitwixe hem tweye
 Ther may no tonge telle, or herte thynke....
 She seith nat ones nay, whan he seith ye.
 "Do this," seith he; "Al redy, sire," seith she. (IV 1337-41, 1345-46)

Note the echo of Walter's line 355 in the subsequent *Merchant's Tale* ("And eek whan I sey 'ye,' ne sey nat 'nay'").

This ironic encomium to women at the beginning of the *Merchant's*

Tale goes on to enjoin husbands to follow always the advice of their wives, to praise four biblical women who were known for their wise counsel, Rebecca, Judith, Abigail, and Esther, and to urge husbands to love and cherish their wives (IV 1361-74, 1383-88). This respite, heavily tinged with irony, leads to the "hasty" passage describing January's sending for his friends, putting on a sad face for them as he admits to being at death's door. This virtuous fraud admits to a life of whoring for which he must now repent by marrying:

For I wol be, certeyn, a wedded man,
And that anon in al the haste I kan.
 Unto som mayde fair and tendre of age,
 I prey yow, shapeth for my mariage
Al sodeynly, for I wol nat abyde;
 And I wol fonde t'espian, on my syde,
 To whom I may be wedded *hastily*. (IV 1405-11; emphasis added)

Another virtuous wife in Fragment VII's *Tale of Melibee*, Prudence, gives sound advice to her impulsive husband about the evils of hastiness when seeking advice, the advice for which January supposedly has invited his friends. Citing the book of James in the New Testament, Prudence translates James into Middle English:

"If any of yow have nede of sapience, axe it of God."
 And afterward thanne shul ye taken conseil in youreself, and examyne wel
 youre thoghtes of swich thyng as yow thynketh that is best for youre profit.
 And thanne shul ye dryve fro youre herte thre thynges that been contrariouse
 to good conseil;
 that is to seyn, ire, coveitise, and *hastifnesse*. (VII 1119-22)

Whereas the innocent Griselda decided to follow the agreement of her husband-to-be and her father when her marriage was to take place the day of Walter's initial request, the unrighteous and hasty January seems determined to reject any counsel that counters his desires. That is why the aptly named Placebo (I will please) wins January's favour over the more prudent and just Justinus, who even cites the Wife of Bath as a textual *auctoritee*.

It is a feature of the genre of fabliau that such tales satirise members of society, and Chaucer's fabliaux are not exceptions to this rule. However, in the other five fabliaux, those satirised include only members of the first and third estates, the clergy and the commons. Only in the *Merchant's Tale* is a member of the second estate satirised—the noble January. In their origin, fabliaux were often written to entertain a noble audience at the expense of the first and third estates. But here in the *Merchant's Tale* Chaucer universalises the satire of his fabliau collection. Satire of a *senex amans* like January is also found in John the carpenter of the *Miller's Tale*. In her book on the structure of the *Canterbury Tales*, Helen Cooper suggests that the *Merchant's Tale* is only another of several tales with the theme of the “girl with the two lovers” (Cooper 227-30). The other tales with this structural theme are the *Knight's Tale*, the *Miller's Tale*, and the *Franklin's Tale*. Whereas the heroic romance (*Knight's Tale*) and the Breton play (*Franklin's Tale*) satisfactorily resolve this conflict between the woman's two lovers by the end of the tale, neither of Chaucer's fabliaux ends with any clear resolution. And it is in its ending, again, that the *Merchant's Tale* separates itself from all of Chaucer's other fabliaux—as we will soon see.

Sometimes in my teaching of the *Canterbury Tales* narratives I adapt

the metaphor of Shakespeare's five-act dramas. In addition to the five acts dividing the play's action, there is, by extension, also an Act 0 and an Act 6. In dramatic terms we could call Act 0 that portion of a tale from which the exposition comes. In Chaucerian fabliaux, there is narrower information about Act 0, mostly centring on which town the action takes place in and detailed descriptions to typecast the various players. Whatever else we learn about the characters' lives unfolds before us during Acts 1 through 5.

For example, after we learn at the beginning of the *Miller's Tale* that John is a rich carpenter in Oxford who took in boarding lodgers, currently an impoverished student named hende Nicholas who had studied the liberal arts but favours astrology, what follows is the description of Nicholas's other knowledge, his possessions, and his decoration of his room (I 3187-220). The eighteen-year-old wife Alisoun has a detailed *effictio* as does the third member of the younger lovers' triangle, the parish clerk Absolon, who in a way is almost an ideal of womanly beauty or male effeminacy (I 3233-70, 3312-38). Though the propensities of each character are included in these descriptions, there is no evidence of past interaction with any of the principal characters. All action takes place before us in the fabliau. Contrast that, for example, with the obvious hints in the exposition of a Shakespearean drama like *Much Ado About Nothing* that Beatrice and Benedick have fallen in love in the past. Thus the renewing in the course of this play of that former love between the characters is prepared for.

A similar pattern of principally introducing the setting and characters follows in the *Reeve's Tale* as well as the *Cook's Tale*, though the latter tale ends with that introduction of probably what would have

been the main characters of the tale, had Chaucer finished it.

The pattern of introducing the locale in the first line followed by a description of one of the major characters continues in the other three fabliaux as well. In terms of beginning technique for his fabliaux, Chaucer seems to have arrived early at a satisfactory formula.

Let us continue the Shakespearean metaphor in our study of Chaucer's fabliaux. In the middle Acts 2 through 4, the Chaucerian fabliaux have some rather wide differences: the parody of the *Knight's Tale* determines much of the narrative pattern in the *Miller's Tale*; the parody of Robin the Miller by Oswald the Reeve skews what would be otherwise the tale of a totally different miller; the Summoner's quitting of the Friar's satire of summoners turns into Friar John's extended begging speech as well as a multi-parted preaching sermon on the deadly sin of anger to the unreceptive, old, and ill Thomas of Holderness, Yorkshire, and the sermon is shown to be only so much perturbed wind by the preacher's angry reaction after receiving his gift of a grand fart from Thomas; the *Shipman's Tale* (probably not fully revised from a tale originally assigned to the Wife of Bath) has an apt dialogue about the features that women admire in their husbands between the unnamed merchant's wife and the unchaste monk Daun John, who will seduce the wife of the merchant of Saint-Denis with the merchant's own hundred francs; and, finally, the *Merchant's Tale* is especially characterised in its centre by irony mixed with parody of high style and romance, preparing us, perhaps, for the involvement of the king and queen of fairies in the outcome. To summarise, then, the middles of Chaucer's fabliaux have a good deal of independence one from another.

It is in the ending or Act 5 that the *Merchant's Tale* differentiates

itself from all of Chaucer's other fabliaux. Before analysing the nature of the differences, let me explain what I mean in my Shakespearean metaphor by Act 6. In many of Shakespeare's plays, the poet leads us to reflect at the end of his plays on the future state of the kingdom, on the focussed love relationship, even sometimes on the state of the universe following from the ending of his Act 5. *King Lear* in its apocalypticism represents a play where Act 6 is very much on our minds. In *Hamlet*, how will King Fortinbras, who had Hamlet's dying support, bring healing to the sick Denmark? And on a lighter note, comedies often give us pause to reflect on the developing relationships often sealed in marriage right at the end of the play (or just following – by implication part of Act 6). For example, will Duke Vincentio and the nun Isabella really marry in Act 6 of *Measure for Measure*?

Compared to such reflective endings, the genre of fabliau normally does not enlist much regret or pondering of the fairness of the outcome. Chaucerian fabliaux may be racy but they are never pornographic, causing our students to stray into aberrant behaviour by *imitatio*. Though it is true that John the carpenter is conspired against by Alisoun and Nicholas to make him look a laughingstock of the neighbourhood for his belief in the return of Noah's flood, we do not really wonder if a man of his age will ever recover from his broken arm and resume his work as a carpenter, do we? Nor do we worry if Nicholas will ever have healing for his burned bum or Absolon get over his squeamishness about farting or regain his former fondness for women. Essentially the *Miller's Tale* ends with a hee-haw, the *summa* of Daun Burnel the Ass's learning in his travels around Europe (see the *Nun's Priest's Tale* at VII 3312-16 where it alludes to this *Speculum Stultorum*); we laugh and forget the consequences.

Similarly, when we get to the end of the *Reeve's Tale*, the curative nature of the comedy is fully established, not lasting worries about Malkin's still unmarried state or the deception of the mother with the bed trick. The miller of Trumpington has been behaving badly; with the illness of the college manciple, his cheating ways in his milling have gone amok:

this millere stal bothe mele and corn
 An hundred tyme moore than biforn;
 For therbiforn he stal but curteisly,
 But now he was a theef outrageously.... (I 3995-98)

Essentially, the sharp ending of the *Reeve's Tale* is a requiting of such blatant evil excesses of the miller's character—by extension to his whole family. We have no worries what will happen to the students from Strother or to the miller and his digné family (I 3963-64). There is no hint that the characters will meet again soon on the streets of Cambridge or Trumpington, for that matter.

Of course, the *Cook's Tale* does not have a proper ending, eliminating the metaphor of Acts 5 and 6 for this fragmentary narrative. The conclusion of the *Summoner's Tale* is perhaps twofold in that Friar John receives the gift of the fart in his hand, as he gropes for other treasure beneath Thomas's bottom. After John appeals for redress in his confession to the lord of the village, a man whose "confession" he usually hears (III 2162-2237), the lord's squire Jankyn proposes in good scholastic form how the fart of the old Thomas may be properly divided amongst all the thirteen members of the convent equally (III 2243-86). Friar John had earlier claimed he would divide

Thomas's gift equally with his mendicant brothers, though in my reading of Jankyn's proposal, it appears that Friar John will still get the extra portion (Jankyn calls it "the first fruyt" at III 2277) we somehow feel he now deserves by being beneath Thomas's bottom at the hub of the waggon wheel. Surely there is no Act 6 to reflect on in this tale!

There is surely a curative dimension to the fabliau of the Shipman. The unnamed merchant and his wife have endured a breach in their marriage because of the Scrooge-like devotion of the merchant of Saint-Denis to his money and his business. Though the wife has been duped by the monk Daun John, she learns that by the end of the tale, and she and her husband have resumed talk about their marriage, which has been without intimacy for some time. The mercantile punning at the tale's end raises terms like "taille" (both tally stick and the wife's pudendum), paying debts (both business debts to the merchant and the marriage debt of sexual intercourse), and "cosynage" (both kinship and the punning of the similar-sounding word cozenage, which means deceiving the naive—in this case the merchant husband—see VII 396-99, 406-16). The solution to the problems of this marriage are all spoken of in its ending. Again there is no need for pondering how successful this new resolve will be in this couple's future. We laugh at the happy *double entendre* ending of the tale.

But for the *Merchant's Tale*, the ending is very different. With the intervention of the supernatural king and queen of Faerie, Pluto and Proserpina, the story ascends to a level not found in any of the other fabliaux of Chaucer—perhaps a mixing of romantic elements with fabliau elements. Further, these two rulers of Faerie continue to interfere in the ending of the tale. Though Pluto restores January's

sight in time for him to see Damyan and May having sex up in the pear tree, Proserpina gives May the ability to talk her husband out of what he has rightly seen, saying she was to struggle with a man in a tree to restore January's eyesight. May questions how clearly January could have seen after just having had his sight restored. The old, two-faced January is duped (IV 2354-2410). And rather than May's making a clean break with her old husband, the text suggests a more chilling reality in the Act 6 to follow this Act 5 in the *hortus conclusus*, January's private love-making *locus amoenus*. May concludes wisely and ironically:

Beth war, I prey yow, for by hevenc kyng,
 Ful many a man weneth to seen a thyng,
 And it is al another than it semeth.
He that mysconceyveth, he mysdemeth. (IV 2407-10; emphasis added)

When May jumps down from the fecund pear tree, January kisses her and embraces her, stroking her on her womb, then leads her back to their palace home (IV 2412-15) where their life of deception continues—either May's continuing deception of her husband with the overtone in the lines above of her having conceived an illegitimate heir by Damyan because the old, and, by implication, infertile January was incapable of getting May pregnant or January's willing selfdeception seems likely to linger into whatever future remains for this old nobleman/fool/*senex amans*. Chaucer has changed the fabliau from a light-hearted satiric narrative with no lasting consequences in the “revenge” ending of such tales to a thoroughly black comedy satirising the whole marriage relationship—this relationship which is by the

names of the couple even colder than the usually satirised May–December marriage of the young maid and the *senex amans*. Indeed, a fitting tale to be told by the unhappily married Merchant.

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Abstract

The six fabliaux of the *Canterbury Tales* are a notable artistic achievement.

Of all of them, however, the *Merchant's Tale* is the most notable to show Chaucer's development of the scope of this genre.

We will look briefly at the characters of the fabliau narrators who are crucial to Chaucer's drama of relationships in the course of the Canterbury pilgrimage framework. To distinguish the accomplishment of the *Merchant's Tale*, we will consider the relative merits of each of the other five fabliaux in the *Canterbury Tales*.

The least flawed of the fabliau narrators, the Merchant will tell a powerful tale about an old man's lust turned into a hasty marriage gone wrong that aims its satire at the noble ruling class of the land, not the usual targets of Chaucer's or most other writers' fabliaux. Further, unlike the light-hearted and dismissable endings of the other Chaucerian fabliaux, the *Merchant's Tale* has what we will call an Act 6 of continued deception at all corners of the love triangle represented by the *senex amans* January, his young wife May, perhaps now pregnant after her tryst with Damyan in the pear tree, and the still present young lover Damyan. This triangle of mutual deception will continue into the unknown future under the male and female forces at odds as personified in the king and queen of fairies, Pluto and Proserpina.