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CHAUCER'S MERCHANT AND JANUARY'S
"HEVENE IN ERTHE HEERE"

BY PAUL A. OLSON

The Merchant in the *Canterbury Tales* tells the tale of a husband whose misfortunes bear an obvious relation to his own marital pain. He has this advantage over his character: that he is perfectly clear-eyed about the miseries of his marriage. One cannot say so much for January. Though the knowledge that one is not "in the perpetual possession of self-deception" may form small consolation if one is a husband in the Merchant's situation, it does seem to dull his affliction somewhat to imagine a character who endures his own extremities but endures with the torpor and innocence of the ass. He would have one believe that he is, unlike January, a man who learns from experience. Thus, January's inner blindness would appear to mirror both the narrator's own past condition and his present contempt for it. However, though the Merchant is clearly conscious of his tale's relevance to the blindness of marital concupiscence, he reveals that some of January's torpor is also his in that he is innocent of its further relevance to his personal position as merchant.

One theme which finds consistent iterative expression throughout the *Canterbury Tales* is the theme of the evil of avarice. Among the harshest words of Dame Prudence is a warning against covetousness as the root of evil (VII, 1836-42; VII,

1550-1646).¹ Chaucer's good Parson comes down heavy on the same sin (X, 738 ff.). What is expressed in a hortatory fashion in the prose treatises is dramatized with force in the tales: the Summoner's friar goes wrong through the love of money as does the Friar's summoner; the worlds of the Reeve and the Shipman are driven foolish by it; the Canon's Yeoman has his autobiographical tale of what the alchemist's love of gold can do to one, and the Pardoner's revellers are killed by the *radix malorum*, at the foot of the tree whose root is gold. However, the *Merchant's Tale*, told by the representative of the class commonly and possibly justly regarded as most guilty of the vice, says nothing directly concerning the subject. Chaucer, it is true, glances at the Merchant's usury and cleverness in business in the *General Prologue*, but he appears to allow his character, when he speaks in his own voice, to avoid all mention of his business or its motives. This failure to touch the question is the more strange in view of January's being an old man and a Lombard. Old men were characteristically afflicted with the vice of avarice as were supposedly also those Lombards known to most fourteenth century Englishmen. However, the failure to open up the subject is not a lapse if one considers the character who is speaking, and it becomes a positive success if one considers how he speaks. The poet's merchant is a secretive businessman, prudent lest he reveal too much of himself. He could hardly speak of his own business and its vices in the brazen fashion of the Pardoner or the Canon's Yeoman. Even when he tells what he knows about marriage, he only does so by referring to another man's experience. However, that other man of whom he speaks becomes the mirror not only of what his marriage has been but of what he has been and of what his values have been. January's love of May reflects, in heightened colors, the face of his own commercial love of the world's goods.

The shift from the love of a woman to the love of possessions required no very great leap of imagination in medieval times, since, to the medieval mind, the acquisitive vices were essentially matters of love: "Avarice . . . is a likerousnesse in herte to have erthely thynges," the Parson asserts (X, 740). Medieval thinkers knew that the desire to possess a woman and the desire to possess any other purely physical object proceeded from the

¹ *The Poetical Works of Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson (Cambridge, 1933). All quotations and citations from this edition.

same root.² Thus, by a quite natural transition, January's love of May can become a speculum in which the implications of all possessive desire may be seen. Amid the humid preparations for January's marriage, one point emerges with clarity; January does not love May as a person but as a thing. Her characterization is so flat as hardly to make her a person at all, and there is little evidence that January ever sees her as more than a convenient possession, as even so much as a flat character. As the story develops, she is surrounded, by an extended submerged comparison, with all the romantic associations of a piece of property. At the outset, the Merchant, in his ironic paraphrasis of January's view of marriage, calls a wife the "fruyt" of a man's treasure (IV, 1270), a permanent gift of God which will outlast the gifts of Fortune and outstay one's desire that she remain (IV, 1311 ff.), a guarantee against adversity, and the "kepere of . . . housbondrye" (IV, 1338, 1380).³ The speech makes a woman as useful as an insurance policy. Then for January, a woman is as attractive as a delicate calf; she is the "tendre veel" (IV, 1420) which can be bought young for an old man's palate. His woman he purchases after he has examined her and other like fillies in the "commune market-place" of his mind (IV, 1580 ff.), and we are led to believe that he paid to obtain her the good price of feoffment with his land and his real estate in town and tower (IV, 1698, 2172). Such allusions hardly bear out January's reminder to May that he chose her "nought for no coveitise, douteless" (IV, 2166). While it is evident that he did not marry her for her money or property (he had no need of these), it is also evident that he married her *as* money and *as* property, as the last luxury of a prosperous lifetime. January's implicit motives become patent when he becomes jealous, for jealousy, like avarice, is

² The words "libido," "amor," and "concupiscentia" are commonly used in definitions of avarice; cf. "amor habendi," *Aeneid*, VIII, 327, cited by Gerson, *Opera Omnia* (Basil, 1728), I, 338; Arator, *PL*, LXVIII, 131; John Bromyard, *Summa Praedicatorum* (Venice, 1586), I, 79v. For examples of *libido* and *concupiscentia*, cf. Richard Fitzralph, "De Pauperie Salvatoris," in Wyclif's *De Dominio Divino*, ed. Reginald Poole (London, 1890), II, xxv; St. Jerome, *PL*, XXII, 418; called "nutrix luxuriaie," Ambrose, *PL*, XIV, 732. The whole fifth book of the *Confessio Amantis* interprets avarice in terms of the metaphor of sexual love. The word "cupiditas" can, of course, mean both avarice and lust in general.

³ I follow Sedgewick in regarding IV, 1267-1392 as the "stream which has been passing through the mind of January"; G. G. Sedgewick, "The Structure of *The Merchant's Tale*," *UTQ*, XVII (1948), 341.

essentially a possessive vice. To the medieval mind, the husband who locks up his wife is like a miser locking away his treasure; his wife is that treasure, and the gallant who invariably gets at the treasure has something in common with the ordinary thief.⁴ The blind and fearful January who clings to his wife with one hand and clutches in the other the key to the garden where he can lock her up is certainly more than the Merchant's victim; he is also *moral image* of that prudent and secretive magnate.

January loves May not only as a treasure but as a paradise, and he loves her best in the self-made garden paradise which somehow magnifies her beauty. Any culture's paradise is the visible embodiment of its system of values: its conception of what constitutes man's *summum bonum*. The first thing January announces when he speaks in the tale, is that marriage is so comfortable that it is a *paradise in this world* (IV, 1264-65). The Merchant's paraphrasis of January's views again reminds us that a woman is, indeed, an Eden (IV, 1332). When January chooses a woman, he chooses her as a *heaven*, as a *summum bonum* which carries with it certain other values and liabilities:

⁴ Chaucer's colleague, Gower, is very explicit about this convention: "Bot finali to taken hiede, / Men mai wel make a liklihiede / Betwen him which is averous / Of gold and him that is jelous / Of love, for in on degre / Thei stonde bothe, as semeth me. / That oon wolde have his bagges stille, / And nocht departen with his wille, / And dar nocht for the thieves slepe, / So fain he wolde his tresor kepe; / That other mai nocht wel be glad. / For he is evere more adrad / Of these lovers that gon aboute, / In aunter if thei putte him oute. / So have thei bothe litel joye / As wel of love as of monoie." *Confessio Amantis*, V, 595-610. *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G. C. MacCaulay (Oxford, 1899). The same association, in *La Roman de la Rose*, explains *Amis'* grouping of the sins of *La Jaloux* with the sins of avarice which have beset civilization since the Golden Age. *Le Roman de la Rose*, ed. Ernest Langlois (Paris, 1914-1942), 8355-9664. Jean de Meun's source may have been Alanus who writes concerning the avaricious man: "Sic casus varios terroris somnia monstrant. / Uxoris fraudes, furisque sophismata, terror / Nuntiat. . . ." Alanus de Insulis, "De Planctu Naturae," *PL*, CCX, 446. The convention is evident in the Provençal *Roman de Flamenca*; cf. Paul A. Olson, "Le Roman de Flamenca: History and Literary Convention," *SP*, LV (1958), 11, 16-17. It would appear to inform a number of the fabliaux where the jealous husband is also an avaricious member of the bourgeois classes: "Miles Gloriosus," *La "Comedie" Latine en France au XII^e Siecle*, ed. Gustav Cohen (Paris, 1931), I, 195 ff.; "De la Borgoise d'Orliens," "De la Dame qui fist battre son mari," "Des Braies au Cordelier," "Aloul," *Recueil Général et Complet des Fabliaux des XIII et XIV Siècles*, ed. M. A. Montaiglon and Gaston Raynaud (Paris, 1872-1890), I, 116 ff.; IV, 133 ff., III, 275 ff., I, 255 ff. The convention also informs a number of Renaissance characters who are both avaricious and jealous: Spenser's Malbecco, Shakespeare's Iago, Jonson's Corvino, Security, Fitzdottrell etc.

Yet is ther so parfit felicitee
 And so greet ese and lust in mariage,
 That evere I am agast now in myn age
 That I shal lede now so myrie a lyf,
 So delicat, withouten wo and stryf,
 That I shal have *my hevene in erthe heere*. (Italics mine)
 For sith that verray hevene is bought so deere
 With tribulacion and greet penaunce,
 How sholde I thanne, that lyve in swich plesaunce
 As alle wedded men doon with hire wyvys,
 Come to the blisse ther Crist eterne on lyve ys?
 (IV, 1641-52)

Knowing what the heavenly paradise costs and what the earthly, January chooses the easier bargain. When aphrodisiacs and hard work do not give him all he hoped to find in this purchased Eden, he builds an external paradise to complement the subjective paradise he found in May, a paradise where complete ownership is possible:

He made a gardyn, walled al with stoon;
 So fair a gardyn woot I nowher noon. . . .
 In somer seson, thider wolde he go,
 And May his wyf, and no wight but they two;
 And thynges whiche that were nat doon abedde,
 He in the gardyn parfourned hem and spedde.
 (IV, 2029, 2052)

This garden makes a comfortable world. There all summer things conspire to give the feeling that the place is beyond morality: a world perpetually green, perpetually temperate, and perpetually prurient, built in mimicry and scorn of the "verray Paradise" of *Genesis* with its arbors and flowing waters. If the first Eden was the Paradise of divine love, this is the paradise of earthly lust. To get full use of his purchase, January erects a locus consistent with her kind of value, and, not inappropriately, he locates at its center a phallic tree of life: the pear tree.⁵

⁵ *Pirum* is a phallic pun in the "Lydia" (*La "Comedie" Latine*, I, 245) as is "poire" in Thibaut's *Li Romanz de la Poire* [ed. Friedrich Stehlich (Halle, 1881), pp. 45-47]. An illumination in the ms. of Thibaut's romance shows the pear tree with Cupid sitting in it, supervising the stratagems of a pair of young lovers (Bibl. Nat. Fr. 2186, fol. 15). The pear's association with the male genitalia and with amorous affairs in general is based on the double meaning which both "pirum" and "poire" bear; both mean pear and rod. This double meaning explains the irony of May's line, "so soore longeth me / To eten of the smale peres grene (IV, 2332-33)." At one level, May is flattering January with the happy suggestion that she is pregnant;

Whether January's garden be considered literally, as a sexual Eden, or figuratively, as the Eden of the economic man, the Priapean pear tree which crowns it is a fit summit for a world whose perfections appear as perfections only because they satisfy the desire for acquisition and comfort. Such a pear-tree Paradise forms an appropriate setting for the consummation of the "temporal marriage" which exists between January and May even as the analogous Garden in one of Chaucer's sources, Deschamps' *Miroir de Mariage*, with its Fountain of Compunction in the Valley of Humility, its rose of martyrdom and lily of chastity, is proper to the quiet splendor of "spiritual" marriage.⁶ January's phallic garden gives tangible form to the commercial ideal of a "hevene in erthe heere"; Chaucer understood both the ideal and its splendors.

January's love of May is like the love of possession; it is the love of possession not as one among many goods but as the highest good. Once we see the love relationship as bearing this figurative extension, the meaning of the tale's action with respect to its narrator becomes fairly evident. Wherever May is involved, prosperity is also involved at a secondary level. January's naive Jovinian arguments in favor of marriage as the font of happiness constitute ironic arguments in favor of wealth as the spring of happiness (IV, 1252-1468); the debates concerning whether and how January should undertake marriage also dispute what constitutes man's ultimate good: temporal comfort or spiritual beatitude (IV, 1479-1576, 1617-1690). The marriage binds January to the former good as a reality, and the rest of the story is an experiment in living with this good. That January's end is figuratively connected with the ideal which he has pursued was first noticed by Lydgate who advised his readers to take the tale seriously: "Remembre wele on olde January / Which maister Chaucer / ful seriously descryveth, / . . . and how Justyne did vary, / Fro placebo, but yet the olde man wyveth; / Thus sone he wexeth blynde & than onthryveth / Fro worldly joye for he sued bad doctryne . . ." ⁷ Lydgate saw that the story is about

at another, she is suggesting exactly where her hunger for Damyan is directed; cf. Milton Miller, "The Heir in the *Merchant's Tale*," *PQ*, XXIX (1950), 437-40.

⁶ "Le Miroir de Mariage," *Oeuvres Complètes de Eustache Deschamps*, ed. Gaston Raynaud (Paris, 1894), ll. 6119, 7202-7215.

⁷ *Lydgate's Minor Poems*, ed. J. O. Halliwell (London, 1840), p. 28. The poem has sometimes been assigned to Hoccleve.

the pursuit of worldly joy, the search for a heaven on earth; he also saw that the first part of the story concerns itself with January's achieving of worldly joy, the last with his losing of it; the two together constitute a typically Boethian action.

In Chaucer's translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, Fortune is the metaphor for temporal goods; her turning represents their necessary variance between seasons of prosperity and seasons of adversity.⁸ Reason, whose hope transcends the variabilia of the seen world and seeks the eternal, regards Fortune's frown as cause neither for despair nor for escape. Rather it sees temporal adversity as an aspect of a Providence which, in taking away the ephemera, purifies the good and punishes the wicked, reminding the latter of the insufficiency and impermanency of their goals. By trusting in the eternal, the reasonable man places himself beyond susceptibility to injury from Fortune and her changes. The fool of Fortune is not so protected. Having placed his reliance on the permanence of his temporal prosperity, he is likely to see the loss of that prosperity as the loss of the ultimately valuable. His loss is not the result of destiny or chance. He, of free choice, made himself a candidate for deception by regarding as permanent what must by its nature change. Having chosen to satisfy himself in the transient, material world, his happiness then becomes dependent on the necessity which moves through transient things. His fall may come with a comic or tragic inevitability, but inevitable it is. Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* sees the quest for an earthly paradise through the eyes of such Boethian philosophy. In selecting May as his earthly good, January fixes himself to Fortune's wheel by convincing himself of the "permanency" of a delicacy which we know from the beginning must by her nature change. In the garden, he rises to a heaven of wet prosperity; blinded, he begins his fall, and, cuckolded, he ignores the spiritual meaning of an adversity which is no less real for

⁸ The tale's conception of prosperity, adversity, and Fortune (IV, 2057), as well as Justinus' conception of the providential implications of suffering (IV, 1655 ff.) are Boethian. Robinson points other Boethian parallels (IV, 1582, IV, 1783 ff.). The tale's indebtedness to the *Consolation of Philosophy* is more a matter of the pattern of its action than of strict verbal echoes, however. Critics recently have questioned the extent to which Chaucer acceded to Boethian conceptions of the freedom of the will; there can be little doubt as to how the *Merchant's Tale* answers this question. Chaucer dramatizes January's choosing between alternatives presented to him by his own speculation and by Placebo and Justinus about as clearly as such choice can be dramatized in a work of art.

being comic. Each of these stages in the wheel's turn needs to be analyzed separately.

Adam, according to the Monk, was the first of the human heroes to trust to Fortune and discover his Paradise lost.⁹ Deschamps makes Adam a type of the reason, and Eve, a type of the temporal appetites (*M. de M.*, 6991-7039). The *Merchant's Tale* places another of Fortune's heroes in a Paradise with an Eve-like May to govern him through his lower appetites. In the first part of the tale, January considers the arguments of "Raphael" and the "serpent": Justinus and Placebo; St. Jerome and Jovinianus. He is free to choose either. Given the alternatives of Fortune's temporal or Christ's eternal Paradise, he decides for the former. Having made "holynesse" a front for "dotage," he then lets his lower appetites decide for him in the lovely bedroom farce where May is "apoynted" at the direction of an autoerotic dream after her lover has engaged in some curious "bisynesse":

And whan that he on hire was condescended,
Hym thoughte his choys myghte nat ben amended.
(IV, 1605-06)

At the beginning, May is a picture in the mind. When January goes blind, she becomes again only a picture to his inner sight, but seen from beneath the pear tree she is, in a confused way, both picture and reality though the desirable imagination ultimately conquers the rather unsatisfactory real thing in January's mind. May's glamor is located primarily in January's fancy; she is most comforting, most paradisaical, when she is an illusion. The fact that she is mainly illusion for January both places her firmly among the gifts of Fortune and points up the irony of the Merchant's assertion:

Alle othere manere yiftes hardily,
As londes, rentes, pasture, or commune,
Or moebles, alle been yiftes of Fortune,
That passen as a shadwe upon a wal.
But drede nat, if pleyntly speke I shal,
A wyf wol laste, and in thyn hous endure,
Wel lenger than thee list, paraventure.
(IV, 1312-1318)

Whatever other wives may be, January's May is a shadow.

⁹ D. W. Robertson, "Chaucerian Tragedy," *ELH*, XIX (1952), 9-11; my general indebtedness to Professor Robertson is, I hope, apparent.

In the garden, January rises up to a heaven of prosperity. At the marriage, he had become the subject of Fortune as well as of Venus; he knows the satisfaction of sexual prosperity, clumsily in the bedroom and then more professionally in the garden: "Ther nys no werkman, whatsoever he be, / That may bothe werke wel and hastily (IV, 1832-1833)." At the same time as he fixes up the enclosed paradise which will insure his felicity, he also manifests his wealth in the luxury of his menage (IV, 2021-2041). The blindness brings to him the first sign that his stock is unsteady (IV, 2057-2068), but, instead of reading the omen and turning, he intensifies his efforts to protect himself from the "poverty" which it forebodes by locking his hand to his wife, and, though blindness temporarily qualifies his sense of security, he is still able to worship in Fortune's paradise with the lush ceremony of genuine religion:

"Rys up, my wyf, my love, my lady free!
The turtles voys is herd, my dowve sweete;
The wynter is goon with alle his reynes weete.
Com forth now, with thyne eyen columbyn!
How fairer been thy brestes than is wyn!
The gardyn is enclosed al aboute;
Com forth, my white spouse! out of doute
Thou hast me wounded in myn herte, O wyf!
No spot of thee ne knew I al my lyf.
Com forth, and lat us taken oure disport;
I chees thee for my wyf and my confort."

(IV, 2138-2148)

Fortune's phallic Eden becomes the old man's church, May his Blessed Virgin, and, with a brilliant poetic stroke, the *Sponsus* of Solomon's garden is replaced by deities more conformable to the commercial ideal:¹⁰ Pluto, the god of avarice,¹¹ and Proser-

¹⁰ The specific interpretation of the *Canticum* which January is inverting is that of St. Jerome, "Adversus Jovinianum" *PL*, XXIII, 263-265. The *Sponsus* is there interpreted as Christ, the *Sponsa* as the Church. The coming of Spring is interpreted as connoting the passage of the old law and the coming of the new, and the other images of the passage are related to various forms of chaste love and love for God. In announcing the coming of "Spring," January is perhaps figuratively announcing the appearance of a new religious dispensation, the commercial dispensation.

¹¹ Chaucer would have known this convention from Dante (*Inferno*, VII, 1 ff.). Claudius also associates Pluto with riches: Claudius Claudianus, *The Rape of Proserpina*, ed. with translation R. M. Pope (London, 1934), p. 6 (I, 20 ff.), p. 52 (II, 235 ff.). Cf. *Commento di Francesco da Buti sopra La Divina Comedia*, ed. Crescen-

pina, the goddess of wealth.¹²

January, when cuckolded, ignores the providential meaning of temporal adversity. The same marriage ceremony which gives January his wealth also gives him his poverty; the Venus of earthly love who burns him also burns Damyan,¹³ and the mechanical laws which produce the miser create the thief. Damyan's sickness, May's frustration and her pity of Damyan, January's blindness, the whole march of absurd adversity follow mechanically.

The culminating scene is, of course, the great pear-tree scene which, by any standards, must be one of the great comic scenes of literature. While Pluto, as god of avarice and January's sponsor, and Proserpina, as Pluto's possession and May's sponsor, argue with ample Biblical authority concerning the pains of marriage and "ownership," Damyan climbs the pear tree. May, like

tino Giannini (Pisa, 1858), I, 201; Benvenuto da Imola, *Comentum Super Dantis Aldigherij Comoediam*, ed. W. W. Vernon and J. P. Lacaita (Florence, 1887), I, 243-244; *L'Ottimo Commento della Divina Commedia* (Pisa, 1827), I, 107-108; *Comento alla Divina Commedia d'Anonimo Fiorentino del Secolo XIV*, ed. Pietro Fanfani (Bologna, 1866), I, 179; Pietro Alighieri, *Super Dantis Comoediam Commentarium*, ed. V. Nannucci (Florence, 1845), pp. 96-97; Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Comento alla Divina Commedia*, ed. Domenico Guerri (Bari, 1918), II, 229-31. From the allegorical tradition which identified Pluto as the god of riches evolved the conception of Pluto as also the god of the avaricious: cf. Fulgentius, *Opera*, ed. R. Helm (Leipzig, 1898), p. 20; *Les Oeuvres Poétiques de Baudri de Bourgueil*, ed. Phyllis Abraham (Paris, 1926), p. 275; "Mythographus Tertius," *Scriptores rerum mythicarum* . . . , ed. G. H. Bode (Cellis, 1834), p. 174; Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium*, I, 401; Coluccio Salutati, *De Laboribus Herculis*, ed. B. L. Ullman (Zurich, 1951), II, 604.

¹² "Proserpina significat pecuniam," *Two Medieval Satires on the University of Paris*, ed. Louis Paetow (Berkeley, 1927), p. 250. "A serpendo dicta est Proserpina quia fruges per terram serpunt, et quia quecumque inter divitias reputamus in terra latent, ut aurum, gemme, et cetera huiusmodi, bene sub Proserpine nomine possunt intelligi . . ." Salutati, *De Laboribus Herculis*, II, 604. Boccaccio speaks of "Proserpina, la quale alcuna volta significa 'abbondanza.'" Giovanni Boccaccio, *Il Comento alla Divina Commedia*, II, 231; cf. Boccaccio, *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium*, I, 402. The handling of the figures of Pluto and Proserpina may be further clarified when the glosses on Claudian are published. For an illuminating discussion of Chaucer's debt to Claudian, see Mortimer J. Donovan, "The Image of Pluto and Proserpine in the *Merchant's Tale*," *PQ*, XXXVI (1957), 49-60.

¹³ The Venus of IV, 1723 and IV, 1777 is one of the clearest cases in Chaucer of the use of a classical god allegorically. The mundane Venus is interpreted conventionally as a symbol of the stimulus of carnal concupiscence and its after effects, and this is precisely the role which Venus plays in this tale. Cf. Fulgentius, *Opera*, p. 39; Bernard Sylvestris, *Comentum Super Sex Libros Eneidos Virgili*, ed. G. Reidel (Gryphiswaldae, 1924), p. 9; "Mythographus Tertius," p. 228 ff.; Pietro Alighieri, *Super Dantis Comoediam Commentarium*, pp. 604-605; Giovanni Boccaccio, *Teseida delle Nozze d'Emilia*, ed. Aurelio Roncaglia (Bari, 1941), p. 417.

Eve, takes the small green pears from the serpent (IV, 1786) while January hugs the tree to forestall his thievery. Again the man is deceived by the woman in the garden, and again his eyes are opened:

“ Out! help! allas! harrow! ” he gan to crye,
“ O stronge lady stoore, what dostow? ”
And she answerde, “ Sire, what eyleth yow? ”
(IV, 2366-2368)

January's eyes are opened, but not to his or to May's guilt or to the absurdity of his situation, for this is only a mimic fall in a mimic bourgeois paradise where failure threatens more than evil because success and prosperity are everything. Having believed in May as a sound bet in the way of prosperity, January cannot really believe that he has lost her even with the evidence at hand. His final absurdity is not that he is cuckolded but that he does not learn anything in the process, not even anything about May:

He kisseth hire, and clippeth hire ful ofte,
And on hire wombe he stroketh hire ful softe,
And to his palays hoom he hath hire lad.
(IV, 2413-2415)

He imagines a prosperity where none is in order to keep secure an Eden which never really existed. Thus, as acquisitive man, January makes himself inaccessible to the providential meaning of adversity—that it may be “ ‘ Goddes meene and Goddes whippe ’ (IV, 1671) ”—by denying what his eyes tell him in order to believe his wife, that is, in order to believe what his appetites wish religiously to believe.

Through the Merchant's metaphors, through his references to Boethius, the Bible, St. Jerome, and the classics, references which are, incidentally, dramatically inappropriate to him, Chaucer is able to illuminate the inner fragility of his character's bourgeois world of banking, usury, and commerce in wools. The Merchant has a wife who like May has deceived him, a wife who is a figure for the wealth which has seduced him into usury, avarice, and sophistry (I, 270-284) and yet left him a debtor (I, 280).¹⁴ The Merchant has some advantage over January: the advantage that he is partly aware that he has been deceived. The knowledge has

¹⁴ I accept the traditional reading of this line; that is, that it implies that the Merchant is in debt.

left him cynical and capable only of imagining an experience more empty than his own and of valuing that experience at the market place rate. The whole section dealing with the Merchant turns on a series of parallelisms: the Merchant and his money; the Merchant and his wife; January and May; Pluto and Proserpina. Each pair is emblematic of unreasonable possessor and unreasonably possessed. In each case, possessor is opposed to possessed as death to life. Altogether the pairs extend Chaucer's satire from the particulars of his own time to classical and universal archetypes which are broader than their particular manifestations in any one historical period.

The *Merchant's Tale* follows directly on the Clerk's. While the *Clerk's Tale* is set in an agrarian, feudal and ultimately religious Italy, the *Merchant's Tale* is set in a prosperous, mercantile, half pagan, and secular Italy. The *Clerk's Tale* is an allegory of spiritual marriage (IV, 1142-1162); its purpose is to dramatize that, given certain conditions, suffering and adversity can be meaningful. The *Merchant's Tale* is a tale of a temporal marriage; its action evidences that there is a world in which even prosperity is meaningless: the world beyond the morality of the economic man. The two worlds, the world of Griselda and the world of January, lie side by side in the *Canterbury Tales* as they lay side by side in fourteenth-century England and fourteenth-century Italy and as they were to lie for the next four centuries. Chaucer's comment on one of those worlds is not less clear eyed and impersonal and perfect than Jonson's or Swift's or Blake's. The *Merchant's Tale* bears implications which reach in many directions; one of those directions is the vision of good which compels the acquisitive society.

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