

Summer 1961

The Merchant's Lombard Knight

Paul A. Olson

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, polson2@unl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs>

Olson, Paul A., "The Merchant's Lombard Knight" (1961). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 147.
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/englishfacpubs/147>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications -- Department of English by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

THE MERCHANT'S LOMBARD KNIGHT

By PAUL A. OLSON

THE PROBLEM OF CHAUCER'S REASON for having his Merchant tell a tale about an Italian from Pavia is little closer to solution now than it was when Skeat expressed bafflement before it.¹ The Merchant seems to bear a positive hatred for his character; he projects all the marital evils which he knows on him and makes him suffer stupidly and innocently. A proper explanation of the Merchant's motives must not only account for his interest in Italy but for his animus toward Italians or, at least, toward Lombards from Pavia. When the Merchant begins his prologue, the Clerk has just told his idealistic story about an Italian nobleman and the Job-like sufferings of his wife. The Merchant, however, is more impressed with the Clerk's picture of modern marriage (IV, 1177-1212) than with his stylized picture of ancient virtue. After the Clerk finishes, he breaks into a diatribe against his own marriage, a marriage particularly modern. When he is asked by Harry Bailey to continue and make clearer exactly how things are at home, he reflects, and coming to himself, turns to take up the subject of Italy and Italian marriages. As the Clerk has told about a Lombard from Saluzzo, he makes his subject a Lombard from nearby Pavia. The important thing here is that the tale is about a *Lombard*. The Clerk tells us how he came to know his Lombard tale: he has studied with Petrarch in Padua; the Merchant does not let us know how he came by his Italian information. Yet it is not difficult to guess. In one occupation and one alone, Englishmen and Lombards in Chaucer's period met on familiar and competitive ground: that of the combination wool merchant and banker who dominated fourteenth-century English commercial life.

The story of medieval England's commercial expansion and of the part which commercial relations between the Lombards and the English played in that expansion is familiar enough, but portions of it will bear repeating here insofar as they illuminate the relationship between the Merchant and January. Fourteenth-century England may be regarded, in a simplified way, as including two Englands: an agrarian feudal England and a commercial urban England of expanding industry and expanding trade. In the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries,

¹ Skeat writes, "I suppose that Chaucer had no special reason for locating the tale in Lombardy." (*The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. W. W. Skeat [Oxford, 1900], V, 353) Tatlock's discussion of the Italian locale ("Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," *MP*, XXXIII [1936], 377) shows that Chaucer knew his Italy but concludes inconclusively: "Lombardy is not inevitable, but it is fitting enough." Robinson (2nd ed., p. 713) speculates that the localization in Lombardy may be due to an unidentified source.

Italian and Flemish wool merchants began the commercial ferment by bringing in large amounts of fluid capital for the purchase of English wools.² By the mid-fourteenth century, native English merchant groups had formed and were competing with the continentals in the buying and selling of wools. A native manufacturing industry, represented by the Wife of Bath, was competing with the continental processors and weavers of wool. Moreover, the growth of trade and manufacture brought with it the development of collateral banking institutions which, by the late fourteenth century, had gone a fair way toward developing a new economy in England, one based on money and credit extended at usurious rates of "chevysaunce."³ The native merchant groups and the Lombards (Italians engaged in commerce were generally known as Lombards) were automatic rivals. A dominant, if not *the* dominant purpose of the great fourteenth-century native English merchant groups was to get the control of these two areas away from the foreigners from Italy and safely in the hands of native traders. The growth of the indigenous groups had, at first, been hampered by Edward III's policy of granting, to the Italian commercial houses, various exclusive rights in the wool trade in return for loans with which he could pursue French wars.⁴ However, in 1343, Edward defaulted on his payments to the foreigners and imprisoned many of them. From that time on he turned, in the main, to native traders for financial assistance: at first to William de la Pole and his syndicate, and, then, in the 1360's and 70's, to the larger group of the Staplers' Company.⁵ To these groups, Edward gave monopolies more extensive than their Italian predecessors in royal finance had enjoyed. Edward's action, it seems probable, was in part instigated by the English merchants, but the king's gesture did not immediately exclude the Italians from English politics and trade.⁶ They continued

² M. Postan and E. E. Rich, *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe* (Cambridge, 1952), II, 237; George Unwin, *Finance and Trade Under Edward III* (Manchester, 1918), pp. 98-99 ff.; Henri Pirenne, "Le Hanse Flamande de Londres," *Bulletin de l'Academie Royale de Belgique*, III (1889), 26-51.

³ For England's commercial revolution and the place of merchants in it, see L. F. Salzman, *English Trade in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1931); Alice Beardwood, *Alien Merchants in England, 1350 to 1377* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1931); Postan and Rich, II, 232-246; Eileen Power, *Medieval English Wool Trade* (Oxford, 1941), 86-123. For the practice of "eschaunge" and "chevysaunce," see Salzman, p. 317; [John Carpenter], *Liber Albus, Liber Custumarum, et Liber Horn*, ed. Henry Thomas Riley (London, 1862), III, 143-144; *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman*, ed. Skeat (Oxford, 1886), B, V, 247-250; *Mirour de l'Omme*, The Complete Works of John Gower, ed. G. C. MacCaulay (Oxford, 1899), ll. 25417-25425; J. M. Manly, *Some New Light on Chaucer* (New York, 1926), pp. 193 ff.

⁴ Unwin, pp. 102-103, 119-120, 194-199; Postan and Rich, II, 238; Power, pp. 97-98.

⁵ Postan and Rich, II, 242 ff.; Power, 114 ff.

⁶ Alice Law, "The English *Nouveaux-Riche* in the Fourteenth Century,"

to export wool to Italy under royal license until well into the fifteenth century; at least once after 1345 (1353–1359), they got back the monopoly on wools, and the reorganized Bardi continued to enjoy positions of prestige at court until very late in the century.⁷

To the merchants and the commoners of London of the later fourteenth century, the Italians were the source of continual antipathy. The Staple itself was an instrument of the merchants' anti-Italian policy.⁸ The devices used against the Italian were not always so indirect. In 1359, for instance, a Luccanese money lender was killed by an English merchant, and the merchant was let off in the English courts. Between 1359 and 1369, street brawls between the Londoners and the aliens were not uncommon.⁹ The London commons, which would be strongly influenced by local London trade interests, addressed a number of petitions to Parliament which claimed that the Lombards were traitors, spies, and usurers, and Jews and Saracens in disguise, petitions rather obviously aimed at running the rascals out.¹⁰ Even the poets, Gower and Langland, could not restrain themselves from asserting the commercial and sexual deviousness of the Lombards:¹¹ indeed, the sexual reputation of the Lombards may explain the enormity of January's *luxuria*.

When the Merchant begins his piece, the Clerk has just told a tale idealizing the patience of Italian wives and the ultimate decency of Italian noblemen. The Merchant picks up the glove. He attempts to challenge the Clerk's picture of marriage on the basis of his own experience; then realizing that to talk of his own marriage would be too embarrassing, he attacks the Clerk's whole picture: his picture of Italy and her noblemen as well as his picture of marriage. He does this by foisting marital difficulties like his own on an Italian nobleman who is

Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, n.s., IX (1895), 61–62; Unwin, pp. 120–121; Power, pp. 100–101; Beardwood, pp. 5 ff.

⁷ Power, pp. 97–100; Beardwood, pp. 5 ff.

⁸ Power, pp. 92–94, 88–89.

⁹ Beardwood, pp. 11–14; cf. pp. 181–196.

¹⁰ "ITEM supplie la Commune, qe touz les Lombardz queux ne usent autre Mestier fors cele de Brokours, q'ils soient deinz brief faitz voider la terre; issint come male Usure, & touz les subtile ymaginations d'icell sont per eux compassez & meyntenez. Entendantz, tres-nobles Seignrs, q'il i ad deins la terre moult greindre multitude de Lombardz Brokours eux Marchantz, ne ne servent de rien fors de malfaire: Issint come plusours de eux qi sont tenuz Lombardz sont Juys, & Sarazins, & privees Espies . . ." (*Rotuli Parliamentarum*, II, 332) Cf. *Rotuli Parliamentarum*, II, 335; III, 527; II, 320.

¹¹ Gower charges them with deceit in the commercial dealings and asserts "Qu'ils sont de no conseil l'espie." (*Mirour de l'Omme*, ll. 25441–25525, 25461) Moreover, he says that the Lombard nobles are lecherous, proud, vainglorious, tyrannous, hypocritical, disrespectful of the laws of God, violators of virgins. (*Mirour de l'Omme*, ll. 23233–23529.)

more commercial knight than chivalric ruler. He marries him to May, and then lets him suffer. The relationship between the Merchant and his victim may have been obscured for the modern reader because January is a knight. From our knowledge of the Black Prince and our reading of Froissart, we expect English knights to ride in rusty armor from the holy wars or French campaigns.¹² One has little reason to expect such performances from the nobility of fourteenth-century Italy. Italy did have a feudal nobility, but it had also a great and thriving commercial aristocracy composed of those whom merchant wealth had given rank.¹³ If the Clerk's Walter behaves as one would expect a feudal lord to behave in a story, the Merchant's January does what is natural to a commercial aristocrat. Prosperous and vain at sixty, his main concern, aside from sex, seems to be with the keeping of his land and his heritage of town and tower. (IV, 1247; 1437–1440; 1698; 2172) His interests are not those of the chivalric quester but those of the ordinary burgher, desirous of security, of domestic order, and of a decent amount of luxury and ostentation. (IV, 2021–2041) January's name may carry some of the connotations which attached to the patron god of the month of January; Janus was sometimes regarded in the Middle Ages as the god of merchants and, in Roman times and in the fourteenth century, was treated as the inventor of money and the patron of trade and shipping¹⁴ (these are, of course, secondary rather than primary connotations). Thus, when Chaucer's Merchant turns from his own hardship to the troubles of a citizen of Pavian Italy, he is taking the heat off himself, the heat put on by Harry Bailey's request that he reveal what he knows of marriage; he is answering the Clerk's Petrarchan picture of Italy and of wedlock; but, even more, he is turning his malice and that

¹² William de la Pole was the first English merchant to found a noble house (Power, p. 115), and there appears to have been no great push, among English merchants, to ennoble themselves; cf. Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Chicago, 1948), pp. 274 ff.

¹³ A good account of the commercial aristocrats in Florence and in Italy in general is to be found in Enrico Fiumi's "Fioritura e decadenza dell'economica fiorentina: Nobiltà feudale e borghesia mercantile," *Archivio Storico Italiano*, CXV (1957), 395–405, and *passim*, 385–439.

¹⁴ "In foro rerum venalium Ianus habebat tria templa: unum in primo aditu, alterum in medio, et tertium in fine quod ipse deus est mercatorum." (Fausto Ghisalberti, "Arnolfo d'Orléans: un cultore di Ovidio nel secolo XII," *Memorie del R. Istituto Lombardo de scienze et lettere*, XXIV [1932], 163, from Arnulph's commentary on the *Fasti*) W. H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexikon der Griechischen und Römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1890–1894), II, i, 24; S. M. Stevenson, *A Dictionary of Roman Coins* (London, 1889), p. 472. Janus' head is everywhere present on Roman coins, and references to Janus' relation to the invention of money are to be found in sources fairly available to the Middle Ages; Boccaccio refers to this relation in his *Genealogie Deorum Gentilium*, ed. V. Romano (Bari, 1951), I, 391.

of his audience loose on a fellow somewhat like himself in commercial interest and marital estate, but a fellow whom his audience could hate as a foreigner and whom he could see as a rival similar to those with whom he would have been competing on the English scene. Chaucer's Merchant knew what he was doing when he chose to tell a scurrilous tale about a Lombard from Pavia. "Lombard" had come to stand for enemy and commercial rival, and "Pavian," in a less emphatic way it seems, for usurer.¹⁵

¹⁵ Usury seems to have been associated with Pavie; Gower asserts that he would not be caught dead in the sin for all "le tresor de Pavie." (*Mirour de l'Omme*, l. 7319.)

The University of Nebraska
Lincoln, Nebraska