

Chaucer's Merchant's Tale: Another Swing of the Pendulum

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Chaucer's Merchant's Tale: Another Swing of the Pendulum

IF ANY dominant trend is discernible in recent commentary on the Merchant's Tale, it is the twofold proposition that the tale is most properly read outside the dramatic context provided by the Merchant's Prologue (E 1213–44), and that once set free from the impediment of the prologue the tale stands revealed as broadly and good-naturedly comic—a series of humorous variations on the theme of the besotted *senex amans*. Such a view, of course, is radically at odds with the body of older criticism on this tale. Kittredge, for example, called it “one of the most remarkable tales in the whole collection,” and then went on to add that it was chiefly distinguished for “the savage and cynical satire with which the Merchant has loaded the story.”¹ In much the same vein Tatlock spoke of the Merchant's Tale as “one of the most surprising pieces of unlovely virtuosity in all literature,” and proceeded to compare it to “a volcanic crater, the black rough floor burst now and again by a spurt of white-hot lava.”² Both testify to its excellence as a tale, and both agree that the distinguishing feature of the Merchant-narrator, and hence of the tale he tells, is an irony so dark and mordant that it is unique in the *Canterbury Tales*.³

Such, with one exception,⁴ has been the mainstream of criticism on the Merchant's Tale, a current that has run without interruption until recent years. The first significant challenge to the traditional view came in 1961 when Bertrand H. Bronson called attention to the fact that “in approximately half of the more complete MSS of the *Canterbury Tales*, there is no Merchant's Prologue,” and that in these MSS the Merchant's Tale occurs between the Squire's Tale and the Wife of Bath's Tale.⁵ From this Bronson assumes that the tale of January and May was originally composed outside the dramatic framework of the tales, independent of any prologue, and unassigned to any pilgrim. In this state the tale was designed as a piece of traditional anti-feminist japery, “another

high card played in the unending game between the sexes.”⁶ Late in the composition of the *Canterbury Tales*, Bronson goes on to argue, Chaucer arbitrarily assigned the tale to the Merchant, and at this point manufactured *ex post facto* a life for the Merchant (E 1213–44), including most significantly a shrewish wife and a bitter marriage. The result, in Bronson's words, was to work an “instant seachange on the story.” What had formerly been humorous and straightforward was now changed by a kind of mordant venom into a dark and untidy tale. Chaucer, in effect, had spoiled his story.

The sense of this artistic untidiness is even stronger in Robert Jordan's examination of the Merchant's Tale, which represents a radical and, as he himself admits, largely anarchistic attempt to work out some of the implications of Bronson's position.⁷ Here again is the insistence that the tale is much more naturally read as a free-floating, self-contained story than as an expression of the anguished and bitter Merchant of the prologue. The Merchant's Tale, in Jordan's view, is an “extraordinarily *un-unified* tale, bristling with discordant elements.”⁸ The first half of the tale is composed largely of rhetoric; the second half is courtly romance debased in accordance with the anti-romantic viewpoint. The speaker of the first half is the foolish academic debater; the speaker of the second half a sophisticated literary man of wide reading and fine sensibility. Other than plot and character the two parts have nothing in common; in their style, tone, and general attitude they are separate literary entities. Jordan's view, then, is that the tale is a pastiche, a medley of themes, tones, and points of view, many of which are habitual Chaucerian devices, here put in the service of traditional anti-feminist raillery. What unity is perceptible is mechanic rather than organic, and the many disparate elements found in the tale are more or less held in place by their relevance to the subjects of lust and marriage.

Whatever else the effect of such commentary may be, its immediate effect is to leave us with a tale diminished to the point where it is in danger of disappearing. One cannot help thinking that Jordan's reaction to the Merchant's Tale, like Harry Bailly's outburst at the end, misses most of the "sentence" of the story, to say nothing of its more refined and artful effects. To say that the Merchant's Tale is essentially an amusing version of the traditional jape of horning the *senex amans* is a little like saying that *Venus and Adonis* is a poem about boar hunting. It is that, of course, but it is also something much more. In the case of the Merchant's Tale what the exact nature of this "something more" is has troubled commentators from the very beginning. Undeniably the tale presents a variety of difficulties, but Bronson and Jordan have not solved these by taking the tale out of the context of the Merchant's Prologue, nor have they accounted for the extraordinarily rich and complex texture of the tale by insisting only on its comic aspects. My purpose, then, is to take issue with their conclusions by arguing that the tale must be read in the context of the Merchant's Prologue, that the tale is satisfactorily unified by a consistent narrative point of view, and, finally, that the tale may impress us in any number of ways, but its final effect is not comic. Such an argument is essentially conservative and represents a partial return to the tradition of Kittredge and Tatlock, though not, I hope, for quite the same reasons.

To look first at the problem of the Merchant's Prologue and the effect it exerts on the reading of the tale, it is necessary to return for a moment to the "facts" of composition that prompted Bronson to evolve his theory. That the prologue of the Merchant's Tale does not occur in many MSS is undeniable; that it was a late production, written after the tale it introduces, is highly probable.⁹ It does not follow, however, as Bronson would have us believe, that the prologue is therefore so wholly dispensable that it should be ignored when reading the tale lest an unlovely "seachange" take place. I do not dispute the fact that a "seachange" of some sort does take place whenever any independent story or anecdote is assigned to a fictional narrator and placed in a carefully contrived dramatic context. A complex series of interrelationships immediately arises, and the result is a new and frequently more potent artistic entity. The Three Robbers story is a case in point. G. G. Sedgewick has noted how the "Three Robbers

story . . . is one thing when it is excerpted in a short story anthology, and quite another as the Pardoner tells it."¹⁰ Told by the "noble ecclesiaste" in the special setting of the pilgrimage, the ancient story takes on a new and more complex life of its own, a life that has been modified forever by the personality and circumstances of the Pardoner. So with the Merchant's Tale and its relationship to the prologue. Here, it seems to me, the most fruitful business of criticism is not to deplore the "seachange," but to account for its effects as fully and precisely as possible. The prologue, after all, is indisputably by Chaucer, it is found in twenty-three MSS,¹¹ and, as far as we know, it represents Chaucer's final disposition in the matter. The text of the prologue also makes clear that Chaucer wrote it with the tale of January and May specifically in mind, and that in it he was at some pains to reveal a significant aspect of the Merchant's life, as well as an attitude toward women and marriage that would be relevant to the tale he was about to tell. Such attention on Chaucer's part suggests very strongly that the prologue, far from being an ill-considered afterthought, botched together to satisfy the minimum requirements of narrator probability, was actually an artful and subtle piece of work, one that it would be fatal for criticism not to take at its full value. It also suggests that in the state Chaucer left the tales, the story of January and May was meant to be told by an older man still smarting from a disastrous marriage. This much, at least, seems evident, though it can also be argued, I think, that it makes very little difference to a reader intent on accounting for the success of the tale whether the prologue was composed before or after the tale. Read in the sequence of the E fragment, prologue and tale no longer seem separate entities with separate histories, but exist together in a new relationship wherein each part sustains and modifies the other. This, in effect, is what Chaucer has left us, and this is what finally we have to deal with as critics, Bronson's cavil notwithstanding.

The objection of Jordan that the Merchant's Tale suffers from two narrators, the dry-as-dust academic debater of the first part and the sophisticated literary figure of the second, also disappears when examined in the light of Chaucer's general practice in the *Canterbury Tales*. Part of the problem for both Jordan and Bronson rests in their inability to reconcile the character and condition of the Merchant-narrator with what he says and how he says it. During the course of the tale, for

example, the narrator makes a wide range of literary, philosophic, and mythological allusions. Seneca, Cato, Theophrastus, Solomon, Hymen, Martianus Capella, and Priapus are all called upon, and there are a score of other references to standard medieval reading. In similar fashion his frequent use of epic apostrophe, *exclamatio*, and various other flowers of the rhetorical tradition suggests a literary stylist of some cultivation. What has all this to do with the stolid Merchant of the General Prologue or the embittered figure of the prologue to the tale? Very little if we are to believe Bronson and Jordan, both of whom strongly question the ability of the Merchant to tell this tale. And yet similar objections might be made against many other tales. Examples are almost too well-known and too ready to hand. The drunken Miller, to name the most obvious case, a ruffian and a know-nothing, quotes aptly from Plato in the midst of telling one of the most poised and artful tales of the pilgrimage. The Franklin, to name another, confesses to being a "burel man," wholly ignorant of "colours of rethoryk." Yet his tale, told with both elegance and learning, contains one of the most "literary" passages (F 1245–55) in the *Canterbury Tales*. Other examples abound. My general point is that in questions involving range of allusion and variety of style Chaucer did not feel himself bound by any narrow considerations of reportorial or psychological realism. Charles Muscatine, perhaps, has come closest to defining the prevailing relationship between the narrators and their tales: "Where Chaucer mediated carefully between teller and tale, he sought not an idiomatic but a tonal and attitudinal relationship. No medieval poet would have sacrificed all the rich technical means at his disposal merely to make a story sound as if such and such a character were actually telling it."¹²

The general astuteness of these remarks is especially evident in the Merchant's Tale where Chaucer shows almost no interest in matching idiom and range of experience to the pilgrim he has chosen to tell the story. Of course, some of the rhetoric and many of the allusions are beyond what we would expect from the Merchant described in the General Prologue, but to expect fidelity of this sort is to ask for a level of reality that Chaucer is not interested in, and that, in any event, he is not prepared to give. He is not, needless to say, a Zola or a Chayefsky. But he does attempt, very successfully I believe, to unify the various parts of the tale—mock encomium, *débat*,

romantic narrative, mythological episode, and fabliau ending—by establishing a tone and a point of view that are common to all, and that, from first to last, quite clearly belong to the Merchant-narrator.

Two dominant features characterize this narrator, one of them tonal, the other attitudinal. The first is the cool, controlled, acidulous quality of the voice we hear recounting the story; the second is a pronounced and very persistent interest in sexual activity of all sorts, an interest that frequently borders on the morbid and perverse. Both features are part of Chaucer's attempt to individualize the narrator, and to give him, if not a full and rich psychological characterization, at least a strong, viable narrative presence. Both features, but especially the first, are established in the very opening lines of the tale:

Whilom ther was dwellynge in Lumbardye
A worthy knyght, that born was of Pavye,
In which he lyved in greet prosperitee;
And sixty yeer a wyfles man was hee,
And folwed ay his bodily delyt
On wommen, ther as was his appetyt,
As doon thise fooles that been seculeer.
And whan that he was passed sixty yeer,
Were it for hoolynesse or for dotage,
I kan nat seye, but swich a greet corage
Hadde this knyght to been a wedded man
That day and nyght he dooth al that he kan
T'espien where he myghte wedded be.

.....
"Noon oother lyf," seyde he, "is worth a bene;
For wedlok is so esy and so clene,
That in this world it is a paradys."

Thus seyde this olde knyght, that was so wys.¹³

(E 1245–57; 1263–66)

The voice we hear in these lines is anything but open, direct, and good-natured. Already it displays a slight cutting edge, a tendency to put down and disparage. The blunt, mildly contemptuous invective of "as doon thise fooles that been seculeer"¹⁴ suggests at once the stern sense of superiority that permits such a judgment to be made. A second reading of the tale makes clear what we might only have suspected at first—that the narrator of this passage habitually says one thing and means another, that the old "knyght" is neither "worthy" nor "wys," and that wedlock is anything but a "paradys." His pretended inability to tell whether the knight's folly sprang from "hoolynesse" or "dotage" simply adds to our developing suspicion that the narrator is at once

remote, oblique, and sharply censorious. Clearly he is not a simple man, least of all the "familiar Chaucerian innocent" that has been urged on us by Jordan.

Irony is almost never the chosen weapon of the dolt, the literal-minded, or the pure in heart. In this poem, significantly, we encounter it at every turn, almost as if the narrator's vision of the world is so constituted that merely to speak is to be ironic. Jordan has cautioned us against attempting to solve all the problems of the poem by an appeal to irony,¹⁵ and it is a warning to be taken seriously as long as it does not obscure the fact that the constant play of the narrator's ironic intelligence is one of the chief unifying factors of the tale. Here it might be useful to make a distinction between those ironies that belong to the inherited plot of the poem, and those that belong to the narrator's commentary on the poem, the special mark of his manner, as it were. For the most part the narrator's irony derives directly from his attitude toward January, May, Damyan, love, women, and even the rites of the church. It is a remarkably consistent attitude—a dry, controlled, rather hostile voice that we hear throughout the tale. We hear it in the opening passage where January is called "worthy" and "wys," and this tendency to a "perverted diction"¹⁶ continues to be a constant feature of the poem as we encounter again and again "fresshe" May, or hear of the "honeste thynges" of January.

Much of the narrator's irony is more subtle than this, however, and depends frequently upon the slightest inflection given a single word in a passage. Speaking of the wedding of January and May, for example, the narrator tells how the priest

seyde his orisons, as is usage,
And croucheth hem, and bad God sholde hem blesse,
And made al siker ynogh with hoolynesse. (E 1706–08)

Here "siker" takes on a special ironic significance in view of the fact that this marriage will need far more than the blessing of the church to endure. The irony, of course, is primarily at the expense of the ill-sorted couple, but beyond this, there is the suspicion that part of it is directed against the "hoolynesse" of the sacrament of marriage itself. Similarly, at the end of January's grotesque parody of the Song of Solomon (E 2138–48) the narrator comments acerbically, "swiche olde lewed wordes used he," where the single word "lewed" operates in a complex fashion on the sanctity due to the word of God as it is revealed in Holy Scriptures,

on the lust of another older man (Solomon) for a younger woman, and on the discrepancy between the exalted language of January and the sordid motive which occasions it.

Many of the narrator's ironic traps are even more elaborately sprung, and either draw upon a wider range of allusion or are sustained through a whole verse paragraph. Describing the wedding feast of January and May, for example, the narrator goes far beyond the requirements of the narrative to embellish the scene with an ironic apostrophe to the poet Martianus Capella:

Hoold thou thy pees, thou poete Marcian,
That writest us that ilke weddyng murie
Of hire Philologie and hym Mercurie,
And of the songes that the Muses songe!
To smal is bothe thy penne, and eek thy tonge,
For to descryven of this mariage.
Whan tendre youthe hath wedded stoupyng age,
Ther is swich myrthe that it may nat be writen.
Assayeth it youreself, thanne may ye witen
If that I lye or noon in this matiere. (E 1732–41)

The effect of the rhetoric here, as elsewhere throughout the second part of the poem, is to point up the tawdriness at the heart of the marriage by ironic contrast with the swelling language and heroic classical allusion. In fact, the distinctive pattern of the last section of the poem seems to be the conscious juxtaposition of the lyrical and the grotesque, the noble and the debased. Hence all the mock-heroic identifications of January and May with Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus (E 1744) and Paris and Helen (E 1754), as well as much of the sounding apostrophe and *exclamatio* in the latter half of the poem, far from being evidence of a different, more literary narrator as Jordan has suggested, are in reality wholly consistent with, in fact a logical extension of, the caustically ironic view of the world that has characterized the narrator from the beginning.

Such Juvenalian bitterness on the part of the narrator finds plenty to feed upon in the poem. Everywhere he looks he finds perversions of friendship, love, loyalty, common sense, and marriage. Commentators have long noted his hostility to Courtly Love, the conventions of which are reduced to a squalid little backyard affair. And if the narrator is resolutely anti-courtly, he is even more passionately anti-feminist. It is the lechery of faithless women that draws his special wrath, and, though the Merchant's Prologue is silent upon this point, it is difficult not to infer that such vehemence can only come from personal experi-

ence with the goatishness of women. Certainly, his response to May's hasty surrender to Damyan is a piece of succinct venomousness unequalled in Chaucer. "Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte," he remarks bitterly, a piece of dark irony that depends for its full effect on the memory of other contexts where the sentiment is perfectly appropriate. The corrosive tone, the habitual irony, the anti-courtly bias, the fierce contempt for women—all these are marks of a distinct personality that Chaucer conceived especially to narrate the tale.

One other element in the characterization is equally distinctive. Most readers have noticed the cheerless obscenity of this tale, as well as its graphic descriptions of sexual play. Few, however, have recognized that these elements are always part of the narrator's commentary on the action, and thus tell us as much about the narrator as about January and May. If there is a single dominant trait in the narrator's makeup, it is a heightened awareness of sex, particularly in its more ugly, violent, and repellent forms. It is the constant, often gratuitous expression of this awareness that accounts for the curiously unsavory atmosphere of the tale. There is, for example, the narrator's habit of making us party to scenes that leave us with the uncomfortable sense of having seen far too much. He forces us, as it were, to share in a species of voyeurism, and on the occasion of May's wedding night, we peep with horrid fascination at the pathetic and flagging lusts of old January:

He lulleth hire, he kisseth hire ful ofte;
With thikke brustles of his berd unsofte,
Lyk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere—
For he was shave al newe in his manere—
He rubbeth hire aboute hir tendre face,
And seyde thus, "Allas! I moot trespass
To yow, my spouse, and yow greetly offende,
Er tyme come that I wil down descende.

... ..
He was al coltish, ful of ragerye,
And ful of jargon as a flekked pye.
The slakke skyn aboute his nekke shaketh,
Whil that he sang, so chaunteth he and craketh.
But God woot what May thoughte in hir herte,
Whan she hym saugh up sittynge in his sherte,
In his nyght-cappe, and with his nekke lene;
She preyseth nat his pleyng worth a bene.
(E 1823–30; 1847–54)

Everything here is rendered with almost terrifying particularity: the "slakke skyn," the "thikke brustles of his berd," the "nekke lene," and later

(E 1957) the nocturnal cough that rouses him to renewed labors. The details combine to shock and disgust; sex is thought of as a trespass and an offense. The graphic rendering, of course, enforces a legitimate point—that the lovemaking of old men like January is thoroughly repellent. But beyond this, one notices that the act of love has for the narrator a fascination far beyond the requirements of the story. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he is at once fascinated and repelled. For the narrator, as for January, physical love is always offensive and associated with violence. As the wedding night approaches we overhear January musing to himself:

"Allas! O tendre creature,
Now wolde God ye myghte wel endure
Al my corage, it is so sharp and keene!" (E 1757–59)

Later, as we have seen, he asks pardon of May for the offense he is about to commit on her "er tyme come that I wil down descende." It is also hardly coincidental that the meeting of the two young lovers, May and Damyan, in the tree is rendered in terms that are at once grotesque and violent:

Ladyes, I prey yow that ye be nat wrooth;
I kan nat glose, I am a rude man—
And sodeynly anon this Damyan
Gan pullen up the smok, and in he throng.
(E 2350–53)

From first to last, in large detail and small, the raw material of the tale is shaped and interpreted by an imagination characterized by a morbid preoccupation with sex. We see it in the way he recounts with such relish the erotic imaginings of old January (E 1599–1604); we see it in the constant pose of false delicacy of such lines as:

She feyned hire as that she moste gon
Ther as ye woot that every wight moot neede;
(E 1950–51)

we see it in his pretended concern for the fastidiousness of his audience, when, in reality (as we see above in E 2350–53), he is preparing to shock the pilgrims by the bluntness of his language. There is, in fact, a kind of pervasive linguistic violence in the narrator's discourse that is hardly out of key with the character I have been describing, and in this trait of personality, as in the acerbity of the narrator's judgments and his full-ranging irony, we find additional evidence that Chaucer's conception of the narrator was surprisingly full and coherent.

All of this suggests a much darker view of human

nature than one has been taught to expect in Chaucer, as if "God's plenty" included only cakes, beer, skittles, and ale. It is precisely these somber colorations, so pronounced and integral a part of the text, that the comic theory of the tale misses so completely. Perhaps the greatest objection to such a theory is that when we finish the tale we do not laugh. And we fail to laugh, not because we have been conditioned by Kittredge, Tatlock, and Sedgewick to read the tale as the expression of the Merchant's frenzied hatred, but because the atmosphere of the tale is not the sort that can sustain comedy. Told in a different way by a different narrator it might have been humorous, but then it would not have been the Merchant's Tale. Even if we strip from the tale all the darker tonalities we have been considering, and examine only the conduct of the narrative and the delineation of character, we are still forced to recognize that the final impact of the tale is not comic. Consider for a moment the relation of the audience to the unfolding of the plot. We watch during the course of the tale the old dupe January, blind to the disadvantages of marriage to a young woman, stubbornly pursue a course of action that is catastrophic. We in the audience, who know that old men, especially foolish old men, often get into trouble when they marry young women, see the disaster approaching, and interpret all the signposts correctly—the loveless marriage, the highly sexed young bride, the lusty squire. The cuckolding of January, therefore, is predictable and satisfactory. Our pleasure in this part of the story derives from seeing a generalized truth about human experience borne out—silly old men who marry lusty young wives will be cuckolded—and we silently congratulate ourselves that we live in a predictable universe where all remains as it should be. On this level comedy is comforting, and if the story had ended here the effect would have been broadly humorous.

But there is a further ironic twist. January is not only cuckolded, but his sight is miraculously restored so that he witnesses his wife's infidelity. Nevertheless, May proves to have sufficient answer. She convinces January that she is responsible for restoring his sight. Even more outrageously, she makes him believe that his newly restored sight (and this is Chaucer's addition) is so imperfect that he can't be sure what he saw in the tree. Her job is made easier by the fact that January wants to believe her, that he actually prefers his blindness to seeing clearly, his illusions about the world to the unbearable reality he has

just glimpsed. And what are we left with at the end? A "glad" January, his sight and his wife restored, caressing May, whom he believes to be pregnant with his heir, and leading her back to what are, from his point of view at least, the blisses of the bedroom.

Such an ending is scarcely comic, upsetting as it does our view of the fitness of things in this world, where we have been conditioned to expect folly to be ridiculed and immorality punished. Instead we are left with the disturbing notion that a measure of happiness is possible through folly and self-deception. If you would be happy, be blind—hardly a comforting conclusion for an audience that has been prepared for a restatement of the rational world in comic terms.

Unlike January, the Merchant sees quite clearly, though it may be true that we as an audience do not like what he chooses to see and what he chooses to ignore. For what he sees, the reality of his world, is as unbearable and sordid as January's brief glimpse of May in the tree with her skirt up around her neck. There is no faith in wives, no loyalty in squires, no certainty in friendship, no rectitude in religion, no hope in supernatural powers. In the entire world created for us by the Merchant all the characters are either contemptible (January, May, Placebo, Damyan) or bitter (Justinus, Proserpina, Pluto), and one looks in vain for a single act of wisdom, compassion, or good humor. Even the physical attitudes the characters assume are almost uniformly squalid, and it is a striking fact about the tale that the most graphic and memorable images are also the most grotesque: May in the privy reading her *billet doux*, Damyan squatting in hiding in the garden, blind January, his buttocks thrust out, holding the trunk of the tree in both arms. Everything in the tale is either mean, foolish, or ugly, and if the tale provides us with any kind of an overview by which the Merchant and his world can be made palatable, I confess I cannot find it. We seem obliged to deal with him as he presents himself—coldly bitter, ridden by sex, protecting himself against the hurts of the world by the constant play of his irony.

To this point in time, much good criticism of the Merchant's Tale has been partially disarmed by the desire to squeeze the poem willy-nilly into one of the more conventional literary forms, usually comedy or satire. Thus, John C. McGalliard attempted to demonstrate resemblances of technique and effect between Chaucer of the Merchant's Tale and the comedies of Ben Jonson and

Molière.¹⁷ The attempt miscarried, I think, but it suggests another comparison that may be much more fruitful—to the so-called “problem comedies” of Shakespeare, and most especially to *All’s Well That Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*. With these plays the Merchant’s Tale shares a darker tonality; an odd juxtaposition of realistic, lyric, and satirical elements; a more complex and disturbing rhetoric; a preoccupation with moral issues beneath the pat folklore surfaces; as well as a concentration on ugliness, both physical and moral. Equally striking is that, like these plays, the Merchant’s Tale impresses us as being something quite outside the writer’s usual style. Nothing else in Chaucer comes close to its curious and powerful effect, despite the fact that all the constituent elements are wholly and familiarly Chaucerian. And like these plays, the Merchant’s Tale cannot be classified as belonging to either the comic or tragic mode. Rather, the ultimate effect of both the Merchant’s Tale and *All’s Well* depends upon a way of apprehending reality that is

not reducible to any conventional literary genre. Hence our uncertainty in dealing with formal aspects of these works, and our reluctance to make comparative literary judgments. One thing is certain, however. In the Merchant’s Tale Chaucer was responding to the press of an experience with the world that forced him beyond the available literary genres into a new and freer form that is very much *sui generis*. It is a remarkably daring piece of work, the product of a poet who had reached that point of fullness where technique and conception answer one another perfectly. One senses it in the flexible, forward-thrusting verse, in the astonishing control of tone, in the bold use of rhetorical contrast, but above all in the ability to comprehend and savor that chilly aspect of human experience that is represented by the Merchant—a dark and solitary figure, but undeniably part of “God’s plenty.”

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Notes

¹ George Lyman Kittredge, *Chaucer and his Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass., 1915), pp. 201–02.

² J. S. P. Tatlock, “Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale*,” *MP*, 33 (1936), 367, 375.

³ Largely in agreement with these views, though developing special aspects of the tale more fully, are the following major treatments: Germaine Dempster, *Dramatic Irony in Chaucer* (New York, 1959), pp. 46–58; G. G. Sedgewick, “The Structure of the *Merchant’s Tale*,” *UTQ*, 17 (1948), 337–45; C. H. Holman, “Courtly Love in the *Merchant’s* and *Franklin’s Tales*,” *ELH*, 18 (1951), 241–52; R. M. Lumiansky, *Of Sundry Folk* (Austin, Texas, 1955), pp. 152–75; E. T. Donaldson, *Chaucer’s Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader* (New York, 1958), pp. 920–23; Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (Berkeley, Calif., 1964), pp. 230–37. Paul G. Ruggiers, while accepting the validity of the Merchant’s Prologue, places the tale at the “furthest, most sardonic range of comic art”: *The Art of the Canterbury Tales* (Madison, Wis., 1965), pp. 109–20. Other central interpretations, all focusing on the moral realm of the tale, are: Paul A. Olson, “Chaucer’s Merchant and January’s ‘Hevene in Erthe Heere,’” *ELH*, 28 (1961), 203–14; Bernard F. Huppé, *A Reading of the Canterbury Tales* (Binghamton, N. Y., 1964), pp. 147–62; and Gertrude M. White, “‘Hoolynesse or Dotage’: The Merchant’s January,” *PQ*, 44 (1965), 397–404.

⁴ J. C. McGalliard, “Chaucerian Comedy: *The Merchant’s Tale*, Jonson and Molière,” *PQ*, 25 (1946), 343–70.

⁵ B. H. Bronson, “Afterthoughts on the *Merchant’s Tale*,” *SP*, 58 (1961), 584.

⁶ Bronson, p. 596.

⁷ Robert M. Jordon, “The Non-Dramatic Disunity of

the *Merchant’s Tale*,” *PMLA*, 78 (1963), 293–99. This article, with some revision, appears as Ch. vi in Jordan’s *Chaucer and the Shape of Creation: The Aesthetic Possibilities of Inorganic Structure* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), pp. 132–51.

⁸ “Non-Dramatic Disunity,” p. 293.

⁹ Thus, Tatlock maintains that Chaucer, following his usual practice in the *Canterbury Tales*, wrote the prologue after the tale, in this case to account for the “extravagant animosity” of the Merchant-narrator: *Development and Chronology of Chaucer’s Works* (London, 1907), pp. 200–01. J. M. Manly and Edith Rickert also cite evidence to show that the composition of the prologue was “rather late”: *Text of the Canterbury Tales*, II (Chicago, 1940), 266.

¹⁰ “The Structure of the *Merchant’s Tale*,” p. 340.

¹¹ Including the authoritative Ellesmere and Harley 7334. For a complete list of the MSS see Manly and Rickert, *Text of the Canterbury Tales*, III, 376.

¹² *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 172.

¹³ My quotations from Chaucer, here and elsewhere, are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd ed., ed. F. N. Robinson (Cambridge, Mass., 1957).

¹⁴ Following McGalliard, Sedgewick, and Lumiansky, I interpret “seculer” to mean a layman who is unprotected from sin by holy orders; see McGalliard “Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale* and Deschamps’ *Miroir de Mariage*,” *PQ*, 25 (1946), 194; Sedgewick, “Structure of the *Merchant’s Tale*,” p. 339; Lumiansky, *Of Sundry Folk*, p. 158.

¹⁵ “Non-Dramatic Disunity,” p. 294.

¹⁶ The term is Muscatine’s: *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 233.

¹⁷ “Chaucerian Comedy,” pp. 343–70.