

“To take a wyf it is a glorious thing”: Januarie’s *Thesis* on Marriage in the *Merchant’s Tale* (IV.1263–1392)

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Januarie’s speech in favour of marriage in Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale has been classified under many different genres. This article presents a new reading of the passage as a classical thesis as it was understood in the late medieval period. Januarie uses biblical exempla and language reflecting the marriage vows to present an argument in favour of marriage. Theophrastus, directly quoted, offers a counter-thesis. Januarie’s rebuttal underscores the chief virtues of marriage, and concentrates especially on the faith of a wife—the very thing that will be challenged as the Merchant’s Tale continues. Through subtle cues, Chaucer invites his audience to compare Januarie’s views on marriage to the marriages of the Wife of Bath and the recent marriage of the Merchant. The audience, familiar with the controlling nature of the Wife of Bath and the sad experience of the Merchant-narrator, sees an erudite and sincere thesis issuing from a naive old man who will soon have cause to reconsider his ideas. When read as a polished piece of scholarly rhetoric, Januarie’s speech directly engages with other portions of the Canterbury Tales’ “marriage group” and evokes new readings of those texts.

With its intricate interplay of genres and use of irony, Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale* poses many questions both for Chaucer’s contemporary reader or hearer and for the modern scholar.¹ G. L. Kittredge placed the *Merchant’s Tale* into a “marriage group” in which several of the *Canterbury Tales* pilgrims debate the “puzzle of matrimony”.² While Kittredge’s theory has been largely dismantled by recent scholarship,³ what the *Merchant’s Tale* has to say about marriage remains no less important. C. David Benson perhaps best sums up the problem of Kittredge’s reading:

the approach ... leads readers to concentrate on what is less interesting and less knowable in the work: the characters of the tellers instead of the poetry itself. The

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²Kittredge, 89.

³For instance, see Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*, ed. Blake, 11; C. D. Benson, 93–108; Cooper, 151–2; Pakkala-Weckström, passim.

special genius of the *Canterbury Tales* is not so much its frame narrative, fascinating as that can be, as it is Chaucer's radical literary experiments.⁴

The complex interaction of genres within the *Merchant's Tale* represents one of these "radical literary experiments".⁵ Chaucer seamlessly blends literary varieties such as allegory, fabliau, *debat*, "mirror" advice literature and sermons and uses a range of sources—mythological, liturgical and biblical—to weave a fictional tale that challenges the perceptions of its multiple audiences at every turn.

Like the rest of the *Tale*, Januarie's marriage "encomium" also pulls its material from a multiplicity of sources and recalls several genres. Modern scholars have struggled to place a label on lines IV.1263–392, in which Januarie presents an argument in praise of marriage. Jill Mann defines this section of the *Merchant's Tale* as a "dramatised version of the *dissuasio de non ducenda uxore*".⁶ Others, citing its ironic anti-feminist undertones, its satirical edge and its exhortations to an audience, see the speech as a mock-encomium.⁷ Noting the passage's didacticism, its establishment of a theme and its direct appeals to an audience, Charles E. Shain argues that it can be most closely described as a homily.⁸ All of these labels have merit. Indeed, Donald R. Benson convincingly argues that this passage resists labelling—all of the genres Januarie's speech represents are intended to provide layers of meaning.⁹

There is one genre at work in Januarie's marriage "encomium" that has hitherto gone unnoticed by scholars, yet it must have been present in the minds of some of Chaucer's contemporary readers and hearers. I refer to the classical *thesis* as it appeared in the later Middle Ages. Informed by contemporary biblical exegesis, Januarie's marriage "encomium" in the *Merchant's Tale* takes the form of an erudite rhetorical *thesis* on marriage, containing the necessary elements of *thesis*, counter-*thesis* and rebuttal. Such a reading, considered within the context of late medieval discourses on marriage, lends a wry irony to this learned passage spoken by a character in a state of aged innocence.

Shain, recognizing the unique relationship of Januarie to his audience, discusses the content of the passage with regard to contemporary preaching practices and the rapport built within homilies between preachers and their audiences. He divides Januarie's speech into four parts which introduce the topic of the homily (a wife is a glorious thing), reinforce that topic and recapitulate it.¹⁰ While Januarie does not

⁴C. D. Benson, 94–5.

⁵Siegfried Wenzel notes (161) that these genres and influences include romance, fabliaux, Boethius, moral tales and contemporary preaching.

⁶Mann, 55.

⁷D. R. Benson; Finlayson.

⁸Shain, 243–5.

⁹D. R. Benson, *passim*, esp. 59–60.

¹⁰(1) A wife is a glorious thing, for when a man is old, a wife will be his greatest treasure (IV: 1267–310); (2) A wife is a gift from God (IV: 1311–36); (3) A wife is man's proof against adversity (IV: 1337–82); (4) An eloquent recapitulation (IV: 1383–92); Shain, 244.

utter a homily per se, Shain's structure offers a foundation from which the same passage can be understood as a *thesis*. Januarie's speech about marriage establishes a direct relationship with the audience of the *Tale*—both the other pilgrims and the readers or hearers of Chaucer's work. Using conversational first- and second-person pronouns and addressing only the men in his audience, Januarie presents a didactic discussion of the virtues of marriage and exhorts his audience to take joy in their wives or pray that they may be given a wife (IV.1350–4).¹¹ In a deft literary move, Chaucer also uses this passage to transcend the boundaries of the *Merchant's Tale*, as Januarie's speech both echoes and offers a counterpoint to the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. While scholars have long recognized the resonance between these two sections of the *Canterbury Tales*, there is a deeper and more specific structure to Januarie's *thesis* that directly engages sections of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, especially lines III.666–802, in which Alisoun tears pages from her husband's "book of wikked wyves". Indeed, Januarie makes use of the source material torn from Jankyn's book, especially Theophrastus' *Liber de nuptiis*, to construct his argument.

Much like Januarie's *thesis*, many late medieval texts on women and marriage discuss whether a wise man ought to marry. Usually these take one of two forms: an argument against marriage altogether or an argument that offers a discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of marriage, ultimately advising for marriage.¹² When considered in its entirety, Januarie's speech falls into the second category. While the only speaker is Januarie, Chaucer, through Januarie, has placed an argument against marriage into the mouth of a second speaker, Theophrastus. Theophrastus' third-century-BCE *Liber de nuptiis* survived into the Middle Ages as quotations preserved within Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*. The *Liber de nuptiis* circulated separately from *Adversus Jovinianum* in Chaucer's day, and Chaucer probably had access to this version, excised from Jerome's longer treatise.¹³

The structure of Januarie's argument follows the template for a *thesis* set out sometime around the turn of the fifth century CE by Aphthonius of Antioch in his primer for public speaking entitled *Progymnasmata*. The *Progymnasmata* contains explanations and exempla for many types of speeches; the terms presented and their attendant speech styles were used throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance.¹⁴ While Chaucer may not have known this particular work, he was most likely familiar with the rhetorical styles presented in it. One late medieval application of the *thesis* as presented by Aphthonius and expanded upon by Cicero in his *De inventione* was in the art of preaching, about which there were numerous late medieval manuals;¹⁵ Chaucer was probably acquainted with one or more of them, especially those from the early and middle parts of the fourteenth century. These include: *Summa de arte*

¹¹All line numbers and quotations from the *Canterbury Tales* are as they appear in *The Riverside Chaucer*.

¹²Schnell, 777.

¹³Hanna and Lawler, eds, 110.

¹⁴Nadeau, 264.

¹⁵For an extensive list of these manuals, see Charland, 2–106.

praedicandi by Thomas of Cobham,¹⁶ *Forma praedicandi* by Robert de Basevorn, *Ars componendi sermones* by Ranulph Higden¹⁷ and *De modo componendi sermones* by Thomas Waleys,¹⁸ all of which were written in England or circulated there.

The *Progymnasmata* describes an encomium, the word most commonly used by modern scholars to describe Januarie's speech, as "a speech bringing out the good points in someone". Its structure begins by establishing the subject and his or its origins and upbringing. The achievements of the subject, divided into three categories—achievements of spirit, achievements of body and achievements of fortune—are then expounded upon. The subject is placed next to another person or thing so that he/it is elevated by being juxtaposed with something less great. The encomium ends with a solemn prayer.¹⁹ The overall effect is one of unremitting praise. With its reference to the anti-marriage stance of Theophrastus²⁰ (IV.1293–308) and its failure to introduce something positive to be compared to married life, Januarie's speech does not fit the classic definition of an encomium. A different word ought to be used in scholarly discourse when describing these lines.

In chapter 13 of the *Progymnasmata*, Aphthonius defines a *thesis* as "a reasoned examination of any thing under consideration". These things can arise from lived experience or can exist solely within the mind. A *thesis* contains one or more counter-theses and the rebuttals to them.²¹ Aphthonius makes a further distinction between a *thesis*, which discusses its subject in general terms, and a *hypothesis*, which uses the same structure to address a subject as it pertains to particular people or places.²² Januarie's words fit somewhere in between these definitions, as his discussion of marriage directly involves himself, but in much the same way as a preacher might give a sermon, he couches his argument in terms of a more generalized and universalizing *thesis*, applicable to all of the male members of his audience.

Curiously enough, the example Aphthonius' provides of a *thesis* considers whether marriage is a good thing. It is couched in pagan terms, but contains many of the sentiments expressed by Januarie, who uses Christian terms to support his *thesis*. Using the second-person pronoun, Aphthonius directly addresses an interlocutor who offers counter-theses. Below is a short summary of Aphthonius' example *thesis*. Where the sentiments of Aphthonius and Januarie align, I have provided line numbers from the *Merchant's Tale*.

¹⁶Thomas of Cobham.

¹⁷Higden.

¹⁸Charland.

¹⁹Nadeau, 273. The encomium Aphthonius has provided as an example praises wisdom and can be broken down into the following parts: all gods have a share in wisdom; wisdom is necessary in peace and in crisis; all things are impossible without wisdom; all superior things are the result of wisdom; when bravery is compared to wisdom, it becomes clear that bravery is defective without wisdom; wisdom has too many good points to discuss them all within this short speech. Ibid., 274–5.

²⁰Ca 372–288 BCE, Hanna and Lawler, 2.

²¹Nadeau, 280–1.

²²Ibid., 281.

Thesis: One should marry.

Marriage came from heaven (IV.1311, 1319, 1327–9, 1352–4) and engendered the gods.

Marriage maintains all mortal things via reproduction.

Marriage produces virtuous men (cf. Januarie on heirs, IV.1271–2).

It imposes self-control and moderation (cf. ideas of binding and stability, IV.1279–85).

Counter-thesis: Marriage is a cause of misfortune (IV.1305–6, contra 1311–15, 1338–9, 1362–74, 1388, 1391).

Rebuttal: You are making a charge against Fortune, not marriage.

Marriage contributes to society things that are not born of cupidity.

Marriage should be marvelled at because of what it encompasses.

Counter-thesis: Marriage brings widow-hood and orphan-hood.

Rebuttal: These are caused by Death, not Marriage.

A second marriage restores the damage Death has done.

Counter-thesis: Marriage is wearisome.

Rebuttal: Marriage is a reliever of boredom.

There is pleasure in the marriage-bed and in children (cf. joy in IV.1273, 1286, 1320–1, 1340–1, 1347–8).

Epilogue: The good things about marriage are too many to name in a short speech.

Marriage produces gods and grants a means of continuing life to mortals.

Marriage guides some in moderation and urges self-control.

Marriage provides blameless pleasures (IV.1264).²³

Aphthonius' *thesis* structure of *thesis*, *counter-thesis*, *rebuttal* and *epilogue* was used in the Middle Ages as a template for the composition of sermons. Thomas of Cobham in his early-fourteenth-century work *Summa de arte praedicandi* refines the *thesis* model and advises that preachers use it to compose sermons. Sermons, he asserts, should have seven parts: an *exordium*, in which the speaker captures his audience; a *narratio* in which the thesis or theme is briefly identified; a *divisio*, in which the speaker identifies the various parts of the theme or identifies the major arguments against the theme; a *confirmatio* and *confutatio*, treated together, which reiterate and reinforce the theme while refuting those authors whose ideas run counter to the theme; and a *conclusio*, a recap of the theme and finally an optional prayer.²⁴

Januarie's speech on marriage builds around a similar structure, presenting a *thesis* or *narratio*, a *counter-thesis* or *divisio*, a *rebuttal* or *confirmatio* and *confutatio* and a final recapitulation and summation or *conclusio*. Throughout the speech, he exhorts his audience to marry by demonstrating repeatedly how wives are "Goddess yifte verrailly" (IV.1311), bringing many advantages. The structure of Januarie's *thesis* follows:

Thesis/Narratio: Marriage is a paradise on earth, a condition preferable to bachelorhood (IV.1263–95).

²³Ibid.

²⁴Thomas of Cobham, chapter 7.1.

- Introduction of *thesis* (IV.1263–68).
- A wife will grace one's old age (IV.1269–73).
- Bachelorhood is a life of instability and woe, whereas the married man enjoys a stable and peaceful life (IV.1274–85).
- Wives are obedient and loyal (IV.1287–92).
- Introduction of Theophrastus (IV.1293–5).
- Counter-*thesis*/*Divisio* of Theophrastus: (IV.1296–306).
 - Servants are better than wives, who are expensive to keep (IV.1296–304).
 - Servants are better in keeping household expenses (IV.1296–300).
 - Servants are better in caring for a man when he is ill (IV.1301–4).
 - Wives will make cuckolds of men (IV.1305–6).
- Rebuttal/*Confirmatio* and *Confutatio*: (IV.1307–88).
 - Theophrastus wrote terrible things and he should be ignored (IV.1307–10).
 - A wife is a gift from God, more lasting than any earthly treasure (IV.1311–18).
 - Marriage was ordained by God and is a terrestrial paradise (IV.1319–36).
 - Marriage is a blissful state (IV.1337–41).
 - A wife is a good keeper of the household (IV.1342–3).
 - A wife is attentive and obedient (IV.1344–6).
- Direct address to Marriage (IV.1347–55).
 - Women's advice results in good fortune; the wise man should listen (IV.1356–79).
 - Biblical exempla of wise women (IV.1362–74).
 - Seneca and Cato recognized the importance of listening (IV.1375–8).
 - Despite being wise herself, a wife will obey her husband (IV.1379).
 - The sick bachelor is unfortunate (IV.1380–2).
 - A wise man will love his wife as Christ loves His Church (IV.1383–8).
- Conclusion/*Conclusio*: Marriage, thanks to the wife, ensures stability and guards against misfortune (IV.1389–91).

The *thesis* structure of this passage is bolstered when Januarie introduces Theophrastus. Instead of simply reporting what he has to say, Januarie directly quotes Theophrastus, as if he were present and able himself to offer his counter-*thesis*. Januarie addresses a personified Marriage in IV.1347–55 as well, lending a learned flavour to his *thesis*, reminiscent of the personifications of abstract ideas present in Late Antique exempla of speeches such as those of Aphthonius.

When Januarie calls on Theophrastus to offer his counter-*thesis*, both the pilgrims and the readers or hearers of the *Canterbury Tales* are encouraged to recall the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, in which Alisoun gains “maistrie” over Jankyn after tearing pages out of Jankyn's copy of Theophrastus. Through direct quotation, Januarie now offers Theophrastus the opportunity to speak, an opportunity denied him by the strong-willed Alisoun, who presents Theophrastus' arguments third-hand by summarizing Jankyn's summary of Theophrastus. Despite being given the advantage of speaking for himself, Theophrastus' views are more staunchly condemned by Januarie's praise of marriage than by the Wife of Bath's deeds. However, the actions of Alisoun and May provide a strong argument in favour of Theophrastus' negative views of marriage, an argument that Januarie's scholarly *thesis* is ultimately unable to overcome. Chaucer presents his audience with the subtle message that polished

erudite rhetoric crumbles in the face of life's realities. This reinforces the journey away from learning and towards wisdom that Januarie makes in the course of the *Merchant's Tale*.

To support his *thesis* with authoritative sources, Januarie does not call upon the mythological examples of Aphthonius and other pagan speech writers. Instead, Januarie uses language that will bring to the mind of the late medieval reader or hearer the religious reasons for marriage that were then in vogue. Biblical references form a large part of his rebuttal of Theophrastus, and Januarie appeals to the Church's arguments in favour of marriage: heirs, faithfulness and a perfect union with his future wife. Ignoring the realities of marriage, Januarie's idealized image is identical to the image of marriage presented by the Church in the form of exegesis, sermons and the marriage vows themselves.

Aside from the writings of Theophrastus, the most readily identifiable source in the *thesis* is the Old Testament. Januarie's citation of biblical women has aroused considerable academic debate surrounding Chaucer's intent in placing these women in Januarie's speech. Emerson Brown argues that the deceitfulness of Rebecca and Judith have been played up such that the reader is encouraged to consider also the deceit of Abigail and Esther. These devious women foreshadow May's deception of Januarie and the downfall of Januarie's blissful ideas of marriage.²⁵ Mann argues against this view, reading the passage as an exposition on the value of a wife's good counsel. This passage "can be ironically interpreted only by the most violent kind of exegetical straitjacketing; that there is nothing inherently suspicious in citing them as positive examples is shown by their being repeated almost verbatim in the sober earnest of Prudence's arguments in Chaucer's own tale of *Melibee*."²⁶ Considering the passages cited and their place in the rebuttal, Mann's impression appears to be the more correct one when one reads Januarie's speech as a *thesis*. Januarie is using the examples of Rebecca, Judith, Abigail and Esther to bolster his argument that wives bring good fortune rather than ill to a household.

When considered in the light of biblical typology and exegesis, the benefits of these Old Testament wives become increasingly clear. Rebecca is a symbol of God's will struggling against evil; Judith, Abigail and Esther are all prefigurations of the Virgin, who intervenes on behalf of mankind, fighting against the Devil's depredations.²⁷ In like manner, Januarie argues, wives defend the interests of their husbands and their husbands' households.

Of the four biblical women listed by Januarie, only Rebecca appears in the marriage ceremony recorded in the Sarum *manuale*, which was the rite commonly in use in Chaucer's day. In a prayer blessing the bride, the celebrant asks:

²⁵Brown, 390–4. See also D. R. Benson, 55–6.

²⁶Mann, 60.

²⁷Brown, 393–8.

*imitatrixque sanctarum permaneat feminarum. Sit amabilis vt rachel viro: sapiens vt rebecca: longeua et fidelis vt sara.*²⁸

[and that she remain an imitator of blessed women. May she be loving towards her husband, as Rachel was, wise like Rebecca and long-lived and faithful like Sarah.]²⁹

As in Januarie's *thesis*, the wisdom of Rebecca is stressed. Rachel and Sarah are skipped over in Januarie's catalogue not because they undermine his argument, but because they represent virtues other than the "good conseil" of a wife, the virtue under discussion in lines IV.1356–79. Chaucer's reader or hearer would already be thinking about marriage. He or she has been clued in to the role of the marriage ceremony through the paraphrase of part of the wedding vows in lines IV.1287–92, the mention of Eve, made as "an helpe unto this man" in lines IV.1324–31, echoing earlier prayers in the marriage service,³⁰ the use of "buxom" in line IV.1333, a word also present in a bride's wedding vows, and Januarie's insistence on the couple being "o flessch" in lines IV.1334–6. With the marriage ceremony in mind, an audience member might easily add Sarah and Rachel tacitly to Januarie's list of good wives because of their inclusion next to Rebecca in the blessing of the bride.

Januarie supplies a counterpoint to Jankyn in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, who

knew of hem mo legendes and lyves
Than been of goode wyves in the Bible (III.686–7).

Januarie offers a short catalogue of the good wives in the Bible which stands in opposition to Jankyn's catalogue of wicked wives (III.715–64), of whom only the first two—Eve and Sampson's wife—are biblical; all others are from mythology and classical antiquity. In Januarie's *thesis*, the pilgrims are offered a list of good wives based firmly in scripture, a list which can be used to argue against the point of view expressed by Theophrastus, Map, Jerome and the other authors in Jankyn's book of "wykked wyves" (III.685).

Another biblical source which Januarie quotes but does not cite specifically is the letter of Paul to the Ephesians. Instead of simply referring to the Bible, as he does when listing the good wives of the Old Testament, at the culmination of his *thesis*, Januarie begins quoting the letter to the Ephesians directly, using the authority of the familiar Biblical passage to help drive his argument home:

I warne thee, if wisely thou wolt wirche,
Love wel thy wyf, as Crist loved his chirche.
If thou lovest thyself, thou lovest thy wyf;
No man hateth his flessch, but in his lyf
He fostreth it, ... (IV.1383–7)

²⁸Collins, 54.

²⁹This and all subsequent translations from the *Manuale ad usum percelebris ecclesie Sarisburiensis* are mine.

³⁰See below, p. 159, and the invocation "*Deus ... qui ... homini ... inseparabile mulieris adiutorium condidisti*" [Lord, who created for man the inseparable helpmate of a woman]. Collins, 53.

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the church and delivered himself up for it. . . . So also ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever hated his own flesh; but nourisheth it and cherisheth it, as also Christ does the church.³¹

The rest of this biblical passage carries messages which are also present in Januarie's *thesis*, that of the perfect union of husband and wife as one flesh and a "ful greet sacrament" (Eph. 5:31–2).³² Chaucer's direct quotation of the earlier verses compels the reader to fill in the rest of the biblical passage, which in its entirety establishes connections and themes which play out throughout the rest of the *Merchant's Tale*. The two biblical passages which appear repeatedly in the *Merchant's Tale*—the Song of Songs and the tale of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 2:18–25)—portray marriage in an idealized, perfect and prelapsarian state, the same image of marriage that Januarie possesses.

Januarie's quotation from Ephesians is the first appearance in the *Merchant's Tale* of text reminding the reader of the Song of Songs. Medieval biblical exegesis and iconography interpreted the Song of Songs as an expression not of the love between a man and a woman, but between Christ and the Church, an idea also expressed in Ephesians. While connecting the New Testament Ephesians passage to the Song of Songs requires an act of reverse typology, in which something in the New Testament signifies something in the Old Testament, the pairing of the two passages would have been a fairly simple connection to make for the medieval reader or hearer of the *Merchant's Tale*. Homilists often expanded upon the allegorical interpretation of the Song of Songs, demonstrating through the use of a very few verses Christ's love for His Church.³³ This love was also reflected in discussions of the sacrament of marriage.³⁴

Marriage stands out among the sacraments as being the only one ordained by God before the Fall.³⁵ When speaking on marriage, nearly all homilists in the late thirteenth century listed marriage's sacramental nature (*sacramentum*) along with children (*proles*) and the faith of the marriage bed (*fides*) as the three "good things" (*bona*) about marriage.³⁶ These three reasons for marrying all make an appearance in Januarie's *thesis*.

The prelapsarian marriage of Adam and Eve, already established via lines IV.1262–5, 1320 and 1324–36, is again touched upon in the passage from Ephesians. The

³¹"Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible Online." Cf. Eph. 5:25, 28–9: "Viri, diligite uxores sicut et Christus dilexit ecclesiam et se ipsum tradidit pro ea. . . . Ita et viri debent diligere uxores suas ut corpora sua; qui suam uxorem diligit se ipsum diligit; nemo enim umquam carnem suam odio habuit, sed nutrit et fovet eam sicut et Christus ecclesiam." Fischer and Weber, eds.

³²Eph. 5:31–2: "propter hoc relinquet homo patrem et matrem suam et adhaerebit uxori suae et erunt duo in carne una. Sacramentum hoc magnum est, ego autem dico in Christo et in ecclesia."

³³For instance, a late-fourteenth-century macaronic homily on the second chapter of the Song of Songs, *Amore languet* . . . , demonstrates that Christ showed all of the symptoms of lovesickness. Wenzel, 212–67.

³⁴D'Avray and Tausche, 103.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 96.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 88.

portion quoted by Januarie reminds his audience that the first married couple was from the same body—Eve was made from Adam's rib. Their literal connection as one flesh is the same figural connection Paul makes in his letter. The following unspoken verses of Ephesians directly quote Genesis 2:24,³⁷ in which God ordains the sacrament of marriage. The marriage ceremony in the late medieval Sarum usage contains a prayer reminding the hearers of Adam and Eve's original marriage and of God's role in it:

*Omnipotens sempiterne deus qui primos parentes nostros adam et euam sua virtute creauit: et in sua sanctificatione copulauit: ipse corda et corpora vestra sanctificet et benedicat: atque in societate et amore vere dilectionis coniungat. Per Christum.*³⁸

[May the all powerful and ever-living God, who created our first parents Adam and Eve through His might and joined them in His holy mystery, Himself sanctify and bless your hearts and bodies, and may He join you in partnership and in the true affection of love. Through Christ.]

Brown argues that there is an ironic twist in line IV.1324, "That womman is for mannes helpe ywrought", when Januarie then cites Eve, the woman who did the most damage to man.³⁹ However, Eve appears here as the original bride, in her paradisiacal form as she was originally created by God. Consideration of Adam and Eve in the garden will eventually bring one to the Fall and its cause, but not before one thinks on God's creation of the sacrament of marriage. There is no hint whatsoever in Januarie's speech of the Fall or its consequences. The passage reflects unsullied man and woman in a time of innocence, just as Januarie speaks from his own innocence. Eve at the moment of and just after her creation helps set the scene for the rest of the tale narrating Januarie's loss of innocence.

At his advanced age and with his wealth, Januarie might qualify as a "good husband" for the Wife of Bath (III.197). However, a match with someone closer to his own age is not what Januarie desires. He cites his longing to beget heirs in lines IV.1271–2 not merely as a reason for marrying a young wife, as Conor McCarthy argues,⁴⁰ but because *proles* are so inextricably connected with the positive aspects of marriage, which he wishes to praise in his *thesis*. However, Januarie does not mention his desire for a young wife again in his *thesis*, perhaps because it is the most damaging to his image and argument. Unequal ages were sometimes cited as a source of marital strife:

If a young wife leads an emotionally and sexually unsatisfied life with her old husband, conflict between the partners—say the authors of the discourse on

³⁷"Wherefore a man shall leave father and mother and shall cleave to his wife: and they shall be two in one flesh." "Douay-Rheims Catholic Bible Online;" "Quam ob rem relinquet homo patrem suum et matrem et adherbit uxori suae et erunt duo in carne una." Fischer and Weber.

³⁸Collins, 50.

³⁹Brown, 388.

⁴⁰McCarthy, 512.

marriage—can hardly be avoided, and she will likely become involved with another, younger man. In that case the blame falls not so much on the wife as on the husband, who entered into such an unequal marriage for egotistical reasons.⁴¹

Januarie is also, according to Andreas Capellanus, at the very cusp of being too old to wed. In *De amore*, Capellanus writes:

Aetas impedit, quia post sexagesimum annum in masculo et post quinquagesimum in femina, licet coire homo possit, eius tamen voluptas ad amorem deduci non potest, . . .

[Age is an obstacle, because after a man's sixtieth year and a woman's fiftieth, one can admittedly have sexual intercourse, but one's sensual pleasure cannot lead to love.]⁴²

We are told in the Merchant's introduction to his tale that Januarie is 60 (IV.1252). Januarie's main reason for marrying, at least according to his initial argument, is the third of the *bona: fides*. This is, of course, the very thing that will be tested in the course of the *Tale*.

Repeatedly, Januarie stresses the undesirable instability of the life of a bachelor. Women, created by God to be a help to men, are necessary for any man seeking happiness. Januarie's audience is told again and again that wives are "buxom" and strive always for their husbands' happiness. Perhaps most important to an aging man, a wife will take care of him when he is ill. A further advantage of taking a wife, according to late medieval marriage literature, was marriage's guard against the lecherous "bodily delyt" (IV.1249) which Januarie had enjoyed for much of his life, but which he ultimately found unfulfilling. Marriage provided the path for Januarie to free himself from the sin of lust. The fourteenth-century homilist Jaques de Vitry, for instance, argued that the miracle of Christ changing water to wine at the wedding at Cana was a signifier of marriage's purifying virtue in this regard.⁴³

Januarie may have been reassured by the marriage vows that a wife would be obedient. The marriage ceremony recorded in the Sarum *manuale* and used in Chaucer's time lists the idealized qualities that groom and bride should show in a marriage. The questions posed by the celebrant to the groom and bride are in Latin, but their vows to one another are in English. There are small, yet significant, differences in wording between the vows of the groom and those of the bride. The groom is asked if he will keep his wife, while the bride is asked if she will obey and serve her husband; her vows also include the extra promise "to be bonere and buxom in bedde and ate borde".⁴⁴ Both the Latin and the English versions of the vows add phrases for the bride in which she promises to be submissive and obedient. It is these

⁴¹Schnell, 777–8.

⁴²Text and translation from Walsh, ed., 38–9.

⁴³D'Avray and Tausche, 97.

⁴⁴N. *vis habere hanc mulierem in sponsam et eam diligere: honorare: tenere et custodire sanam et infirmam sicut sponsum debet sponsam: et omnes alias propter eam dimittere et illi soli adherere quamdiu vita vtriusque vestrum*

qualities which Januarie assumes will be present in a marriage. In lines IV.1287–92, while praising the joys of married life, Januarie echoes the language of the vernacular marriage vows:

For who kan be so buxom as a wyf?
Who is so trewe, and eek so ententyf
To kepe hym, syk and hool, as is his make?
For wele or wo she wole hym nat forsake;
She nys nat wery hym to love and serve,
Though that he lye bedrede til he sterve.

However, Chaucer has turned the vows into a series of questions asked not of the bride, but of the audience. Januarie is asking these questions rhetorically, drawing his audience into his *thesis* and assuming that with the echoes of the wedding vows in the questions, his audience will answer, “No one, except a wife”. Chaucer’s wiser audience, however, has heard the Wife of Bath speak. They know that she is anything but an obedient, caring, attentive wife; she deftly wins the upper hand, even with the most recalcitrant and controlling of her husbands, Jankyn (III.803–25). The poet winks at his wise listeners from behind Januarie’s ingenuous argument.

Even at the end of his listing of wise wives and the advantages for husbands in listening to their wives, Januarie argues that a wife will not be overbearing in the use of her wisdom. Despite having good things to say,

she wole obeye of curteisye.
A wyf is kepere of thyn housbondrye;
Wel may the sike man biwaille and wepe,
Ther as ther nys no wyf the hous to kepe (IV.1379–82).

In these short lines, Januarie has again listed the bride’s promised obligations of obedience and care for her husband. Given the audience’s knowledge of the Wife of Bath’s behaviour—a knowledge Chaucer implies by the Clerk’s invocation of this pilgrim and fictional character in line IV.1170 and Justinus’ invocation of her in line IV.1685—they might see Januarie’s wife keeping his household, but as yet

durauerit? [N. will you have this woman in marriage and love her, honor her, **keep** and watch over her in health and sickness just as a husband should for his wife, and abandon all others for her sake and cleave to her alone while both your lives shall last? (emphasis mine)].

N. *vis habere hunc virum in sponsum et ei obedire et seruire: et eum diligere honorare ac custodire sanum et infirmum sicut sponsa debet sponsum: et omnes alios propter eum dimittere et illi soli adherere quamdiu vita vtriusque vestrum durauerit?* [N. will you have this man in marriage **and obey and serve him**, and love him, honor him and watch over him in health and in sickness just as a wife should for her husband, and abandon all others for his sake and cleave to him alone while both your lives shall last? (emphasis mine)].

I N. take the N. to my wedded wyf to haue and to holde fro this day forwarde for bettere for wers for richere for pouverer: in sykenesse and in hele tyl dethe vs departe if holy chyrche it woll ordeyne and therto y plight the my trouthe.

I N. take the N. to my wedded housbonde to haue and to holde fro this day forwarde for better: for wors: for richer: for pouverer: in sykenese and in hele: **to be bonere and buxom in bedde and atte borde** tyll dethe vs departhe if holy chyrche it wol ordeyne and therto I plight the my trouthe. (emphasis mine) Collins, 47–8.

unbeknown to the old man, declining to obey him; indeed, she may even take some satisfaction in his illness and early demise, even as she cares for him in his infirmity.

Between the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, a significant change in the order of the tales occurred. In the Hengwrt manuscript, the *Merchant's Tale* follows the *Squire's Tale*, and the *Merchant's Prologue* does not appear at all. The Ellesmere order of the tales, with the *Merchant's Prologue* and *Tale* following the *Clerk's Tale*, represents a deliberate editorial choice which took place early in the transmission of the *Canterbury Tales*, perhaps while Chaucer was still living.⁴⁵ The placement of the *Merchant's Tale*, with Januarie's *thesis* at its beginning, directly after the *Clerk's Tale*, as it appears in the Ellesmere manuscript, adds a level of irony achievable only through the juxtaposition of these two sections and the resonance between the tales. Close on the heels of Griselde's unflinching obedience comes the *thesis* of a man who presumes that all wives will hold to their marriage vows and possess the obedience of Griselde. The idea that the patience of Griselde and the expectations of Januarie might be unrealistic ideals is heightened by a passage near the end of the *Clerk's Tale*, in which the Clerk concludes that wives such as Griselde are "ful hard to fynde now-a-dayes" and names the Wife of Bath, praying that she "and al hire secte" remain "in heigh maistrie" (IV.1163–72). May's lack of fidelity is also made the more egregious by the close pairing of these two tales and the placement of her behaviour beside the steadfastness of Griselde in the face of Walter's unreasonable demands. The strife that arises in Januarie's marriage to May, provoked by Januarie's age and May's fickle behaviour, contributes to an argument supporting the realistic impossibility of the idealized image of marriage presented by tales such as the *Clerk's Tale* and documents such as the Sarum marriage vows.

The placement of the story of Griselde close to Januarie's *thesis* may also reflect contemporary thought on the role of Griselde. The anonymous *Ménagier de Paris*, written circa 1393, discusses the story of Walter and Griselde and calls into question the idea of a wife's total obedience:

[The anonymous author] does not demand such obedience from his wife, for he himself is not at all worthy of such submission ("car je n'en suis mie digne"). . . . he casts doubt on the validity of the moral of the Griselda story by calling its factuality into question ("Et croy que ce ne fust oncques vray"). Thus, when man can no longer be an absolute (because he is conscious of his own faults), he can no longer require the fulfilment of absolute norms from woman.⁴⁶

Januarie is a deeply flawed man, as his later blindness in the *Merchant's Tale* signifies. As such, his own image of women must be shattered and replaced with a wiser outlook, one that finds him remaining with May at the end of the *Tale* despite her failure to imitate Griselde and despite his earlier insistence in his *thesis* on the obedience of his future wife, which underscored both his naivety and his failure to

⁴⁵For more information on its place and the ordering of the *Canterbury Tales*, see Frese, 194–233, esp. 203.

⁴⁶Schnell, 779.

acknowledge his own shortcomings as a husband. The final lines of the *Tale* show Januarie's acceptance of both of their faults. "He that mysconceyeth, he mysdemeth", claims May (IV.2410). Januarie has misjudged the realities of wifely faith and obedience, but his reclaimed vision suggests that he won't do so again. May's pregnancy, implied in line IV.2414, symbolizes the new growth of Januarie's wisdom. Perhaps contrary to the expectations of the audience, Januarie accepts May's explanation of what he has seen and reacts to her deceit with joy, recognizing his own development as a man and as a husband.

The prologue to the *Merchant's Tale* (IV.1213–44), a further indictment of idealized marriage added to the Ellesmere manuscript, places the *Tale*—and Januarie's *thesis* along with it—in the mouth of a narrator who has been married for only two months, but who has come in that short time to regret his decision to marry. Behind the allegorized Januarie's ingenuous voice, we see the Merchant himself, two months prior to his journey to Canterbury. Trustingly he marries, but unlike Januarie, who eventually concludes that a flawed marriage is better than being unmarried, the Merchant is forced to conclude that the worst unmarried life is far better than the married life he has led:

And yet, I trowe, he that al his lyve
Wyflees hath been, though that men wolde him ryve
Unto the herte, ne koude in no manere
Tellen so muchel sorwe as I now heere
Koude tellen of my wyves cursednesse! (IV.1235–9)

Immediately prior to telling his tale of Januarie and May, the Merchant announces that

of my owene soore,
For soory herte, I telle may namoore (IV.1243–4),

thus resetting the clock for himself and sweeping away his own misery to clear the stage for Januarie's rosy-coloured depiction of marriage. Januarie's declaration that wedlock is a "paradys" in line IV.1265, and the following line in which the Merchant explains, "Thus seyde this olde knyght, that was so wys", lends a bittersweet sense of irony to the passage that follows. The audience, having heard from both the Wife of Bath and the Merchant, can chuckle at Januarie's foolish innocence while simultaneously feeling a frisson of horror and pity for the poor dotard, who is in for the shock of his life.

Having explored Januarie's sources and inspirations for his positive view of marriage, the counter-*thesis* remains to be examined. Januarie's use of religious precedent and biblical exempla reflect a man who has done some thinking on the topic of marriage; his verbal argument against Theophrastus, which recalls the Wife of Bath's physical rejection of Jankyn's "book of wikked wyves" (III.666–802), is rooted in the greatest authorities of Januarie's day.

Januarie directly quotes Theophrastus, as if he were present to offer a counter-thesis:

“Ne take no wyf,” quod he, “for housbondrye,
As for to spare in household thy dispenche.
A trewe servant dooth more diligence
Thy good to kepe than thyn owene wyf,
For she wol clayme half part al hir lyf.
And if thou be syk, so God me save,
Thy verray freendes, or a trewe knave,
Wol kepe thee bet than she that waiteth ay
After thy good an hath doon many a day.
And if thou take a wyf unto thyn hoold
Ful lightly maystow been a cokewold.” (IV.1296–306)

Lines 1296–304 are a close paraphrase of Theophrastus’ *Liber de Nuptiis*, leaving out a few phrases and slightly rewording the sentiments expressed:

Quod si propter dispensationem domus et languoris solatia et fugam solitudinis ... multo melius servus fidelis dispensat, obediens auctoritat[i] domini et dispen[sationi] eius obtemperans, quam uxor, que in eo se estimate dominam, si adversum viri faciat voluntatem, id est quod placet, non quod iubetur. Assidere autem egrotanti magis possunt amici et vernule beneficiis obligati quam illa que nobis imputet lacrimas suas et hereditatis spe vendat illuviem et sollicitudinem iactans, languentis animum desperatione conturbet (51–9).

[People take wives to manage their household, to care for them when they are sick, and to avoid loneliness. But a faithful servant will manage things much better, one obedient to his master’s authority and complying with his way of running things, than a wife, who thinks herself the mistress in this alone, that she should do the opposite of her husband’s will, that is, what she likes, not what she is told. As for waiting on us when we are sick, friends and household slaves we have bound to us by our kindness to them can do that better than a woman who will weep and blame us, and sell us floods of tears in hope of the inheritance and, by making a great show of her own anxiety, drive her poor sick husband to despair.]⁴⁷

Lines IV.1305–6 are a summation of the part of the *Liber de nuptiis* (lines 30–4 of the Hanna and Lawler edition) in which Theophrastus argues that a wife keeps lovers among her servants. These two lines of the *Merchant’s Tale* are an ominous bit of foreshadowing, as May will find her Damyan not among her own servants, but among Januarie’s.

Januarie’s emotional outburst against Theophrastus in lines 1307–10 is a startling break from the measured tones of what has gone before. Suddenly, Januarie is angered enough to curse the man for his writings. It has the same effect as a change in tone might in a sermon—it jolts Januarie’s audience out of complacency and re-engages them with the meat of Januarie’s argument, which follows. In line 1310, Januarie urges his listeners to “Deffie Theofraste, and herke me”. The audience is exhorted not only to listen, but to

⁴⁷Excerpt and translation, Hanna and Lawler, 152–5.

join Januarie emotionally, actively challenging the words of Theophrastus. They are swept along with Januarie as he launches into the *confirmatio* section of his speech.

Januarie's call to "deffie Theofraste" echoes the actions of the Wife of Bath in her prologue, as she angrily tears pages out of a book containing the writings of Theophrastus (III.666–802). With these words, Chaucer makes his external audience, the readers or hearers of the *Canterbury Tales*, acutely aware of the immediate audience for Januarie's words within the greater narrative, namely, the pilgrims. They also foreshadow Justinus' breaking of the narrative in line 1685, when he references the Wife of Bath directly. Such breaks indicate that the merchant is a practised tale-teller, a salesman who is actively fashioning his tale within his own reality to appeal to his present customers, the internal audience of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Januarie begins his rebuttal of Theophrastus by pointing out that "A wife is Goddes yifte verrailly" (IV.1311) and that she will last longer than the riches Theophrastus claims she will be after. He then turns to the biblical example of Adam and Eve, emphasizing God's role in the creation of Eve and the sacrament of marriage, eventually returning to his praise of marriage, answering Theophrastus by arguing that wives work for their husbands and happily obey them:

If he be povre, she helpeth hym to swynke;
 She kepeth his good, and wasteth never a deel;
 Al that hire housbonde lust, hire liketh weel;
 She seith nat ones "nay", whan he seith "ye".
 "Do this", seith he; "Al redy, sire", seith she. (IV.1342–6)

The good works of wives are further emphasized in the catalogue of wise women. After quoting Seneca and Cato, Januarie ends the *confutatio* and *confirmatio* of his *thesis* with the quotation from Ephesians discussed above.

Chaucer's use of the word "swynke" recalls his last use of the word in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*. The Wife of Bath did not work for her good, old husbands; she took perverse pleasure in making *them* work at night:

As help me God, I laughe whan I thynke
 How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke!
 And, by my fey, I tolde of it no stoor.
 ...
 I sette hem so a-werke, by my fey
 That many a nyght they songen "Weilawey!"⁴⁸ (III.201–3; 215–16)

Furthermore,

They had me yeven hir lond and hir tresoor;
 Me neded nat do lenger diligence
 To wynne hir love, or doon hem reverence.
 They loved me so wel, by God above,
 That I ne tolde no deyntee of hir love!

⁴⁸"Weilawey" also has an ironic twist in lines IV.1843–54, when Chaucer shows Januarie singing on the morning after his wedding while May remains silent beside him; his song may soon become "weilawey".

A wys womman wol bisye hire evere in oon

To gete hire love, ye, ther as she hath noon. (III.204–10)

Alisoun offers a Theophrastian counter-*thesis* grounded in her own hard-won experience. Not only will a wife make one work, she will not care for the household except where her own inheritance is concerned. Moreover, having once gained the assurance of her husband's love, she will abandon any pretence of obedience. The Wife of Bath offers the same advice to women in lines III.209–10 that Januarie offers to men in his *thesis*: the single person who is wise should find a spouse.

The many resonances in Januarie's *thesis* with the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* makes the Wife of Bath loom large in the audience's memory. Alisoun and Januarie are mismatched bookends for the tale of Griselde, each providing a counter-example to Griselde's fidelity. Chaucer has deliberately paired Alisoun and Januarie, despite their existence in different story layers of the *Tales*; the two would make a good married couple, as they are closer in age than Januarie and May, and Januarie's age and wealth particularly appeal to Alisoun (III.197). (Indeed, Alisoun might also find the naive old Januarie as easy to control and deceive as May finds him to be.) Moreover, like a happily married couple, Alisoun and Januarie arrive at a common place by different paths of individual experience and perspective. In this case, their shared territory is disagreement with Theophrastus. Despite disagreeing with the same source in very different ways and addressing members of their own gender, Alisoun and Januarie have come to the same conclusion. Each grapples with Theophrastus, Januarie with rhetoric gleaned from an education commonly available only to men and Alisoun with the feminine weapons she has been given, her frustration, her innate intelligence and her hands. Alisoun's arguments stem from the jaded wisdom gained by experience; Januarie's come from scriptural and liturgical study. Again, despite having the rhetorical tools to argue against Theophrastus and Jankyn, Januarie comes away from this exchange looking slightly foolish. With the Wife of Bath herself offering a counter-example to her own arguments, Chaucer's audience gradually finds itself siding with Theophrastus; readers and pilgrims alike experience an ironic gap orchestrated to show the unintentional outcome of Januarie's learned and rhetorically polished *thesis*: agreement with Theophrastus.

Januarie's *thesis* in favour of marriage, with its evidence culled from ecclesiastical and biblical sources, presents a rosy picture of matrimony. Januarie makes an erudite and impassioned plea for the state of wedded bliss, addressing a male audience and attempting to brush away the objections of those who would argue against marriage, notably Theophrastus. However, as May herself later says, "He that mysconceyveth, he mysdemeth" (IV.2410). What Chaucer's audience sees is an old man singing the praises of a state he knows about intellectually, but of which he has no practical experience. The audience, familiar with the duplicitous nature of the Wife of Bath and the sad experience of the Merchant-narrator, sees a well-constructed and sincere

thesis issuing from the mouth of an ingenuous old man who will soon have cause to reconsider his ideas.

Schnell observes that the responsibility for the success or failure of a marriage within late medieval discourse rested with both partners.⁴⁹ Both partners in the *Merchant's Tale* are complicit in the initial failure of their marriage—Januarie, for expecting Griselde-like obedience from May and May, for straying. The *Merchant's Tale* ends on an indeterminate note, as Januarie's gladness contrasts with the audience's dismay. The couple seems to have come to a balanced arrangement that has neither the one-sided "maistrie" of the marriage of Jankyn and the Wife of Bath, nor the bitter pain experienced by the Merchant, nor the unadulterated joy that Januarie originally envisioned. May and Januarie leave the garden clinging to one another in a scene reminiscent of that of Adam and Eve fleeing Paradise. The garden of Januarie, however, has been a garden of innocence. The blissful ignorance of Januarie's erudite thesis has been swept away with the restoration of his sight. Perhaps Januarie's gladness comes of his optimism and his ability to deceive himself; perhaps it comes of his recognition of both of their faults. Armed with new knowledge plucked from the pear tree, he and May can find a new model for their life together.

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⁴⁹Schnell, 781.

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