

“Ye gete namoore of me”: Narrative, Textual, and Linguistic Desires in Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale*

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A common critical assumption posits that the narrator of Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale* is an active, manipulative, and tyrannical narrator; on the contrary, this essay, using narratology and textual-oriented psychoanalysis, argues that narration is an embattled act that fails to bind sexual and linguistic desire and makes uncontrollable demands upon its narrator. Understanding the ways in which the fabula and the discourses of desire exceed the narrator and narration, the essay calls persistent attention to the fragmented indeterminacy of narrative voice, which is far too divided to be ossified into a psychologically stable entity. This fragmentation ultimately leads to a lack of narrative agency, the inability of the narration to control the fabula, suggesting, contrary to current narrative theory, that the fabula may actually precede the narration and make certain demands upon it and the way in which the fabula is presented. The Merchant-narrator is constantly conflicted about his presentation not only of linguistic and narrative desires but also of the very psychoanalytic displacements of these desires.

KEYWORDS Geoffrey Chaucer, *Merchant’s Tale*, narratology, desire, psychoanalysis, fabula, narration

The expectation that we might trust language to make something clear about desire presupposes that language itself has no vested interests in desire. But if we consider the discourse on desire since Plato, it seems that language is bound up with desire in such a way that no exposition of desire can escape becoming implicated in that which it seeks to clarify. This means that language is always less than “clarifying” when it comes to desire. Desire will be that which guarantees a certain opacity in language, an opacity that language can enact and display, but without which it cannot operate.

(Judith Butler, “Desire” 369)

Analysts' relations to their patients are not simply cognitive but also performative; and the relationship in which they find themselves caught up produces and is produced by the unconscious . . . Transference, together with counter-transference, which occurs as analysts' recognition of the transference, produces involvement in transferential roles, and is, as Freud says, "a factor of undreamt-of importance." Part of that importance is its disruption of the relation of mastery between the analyst, armed with the interpretive metalanguage, and the discourse to be interpreted. The unconscious here is not an underlying narrative the analyst discerns in this discourse but rather what is at work in the drama of the analyst's involvement.

(Jonathan Culler, "Textual Self-Consciousness" 371)

Writing always includes the moment of dispossession in favor of the arbitrary power-play of the signifier and from the point of view of the subject this can only be experienced as a dismemberment, a beheading, or a castration.

(Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading* 296)

I

In his fabliau of prurience, adultery, and the ignorant bliss of marriage, the narrator of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* struggles to put sexual desire into narrative discourse. After delaying May's adulterous sexual intercourse with Damyan for hundreds of lines with a convoluted narrative comprised of writing letters, building gardens, forging keys, hiding in trees, developing a surreptitious sign language, and listening to an old husband's sermon on faithful wives, the Merchant finally proceeds to climax as the "fresshe" May ascends the back of her blind husband, January, a paradigmatic *senex amans*, to jump into a pear tree where the lusty young squire Damyan awaits her. Their encounter, however, is shockingly anticlimactic. Demystifying the accumulating sexual desire between the lovers, the Merchant describes the moment of intercourse as both brief and vulgar:

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. (2350–53)¹

The Merchant apologizes for the sordid act he is about to present, after which he nonetheless speaks of it in the crudest of terms while emphasizing the haste with which the sexual act occurs and the haste with which he narrates. Two of the five words in line 2352, "sodeynly" and "anon," indicate the immediacy of the sexual and narrative act. And any possibilities of a tender narrative treatment of lovemaking — possibilities that might be expected to counteract January's earlier post-nuptial ravishing of May with his "thikke bristles of his berd unsote, / Lyk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere" that "rubbeth hire aboute hir tendre face" (1824–27) — are substituted with thronging.² The principal climax of the poem, which has long

been anticipated, is compressed into one line by an embattled narrator who appears simultaneously eager both to narrate the sordid sexual act and to finish narrating it, as well as anxious about representing its vulgarities.

Seven lines later the Merchant describes the lovers' intercourse in even more embattled terms. January, having regained his eyesight, observes the couple *in flagrante delicto*, while the Merchant, prompted by a newly found propriety, euphemistically reports what January sees:

Up to the tree he caste his eyen two,
And saugh that Damyan his wyf had dressed
In swich manere it may nat been expressed,
But if I wolde speke uncurteisly. (2360–63)

Why is the Merchant suddenly unable to discuss the sexual intercourse that he presented so coarsely moments earlier?³ His apparently conflicting attitudes toward May and Damyan's sexual behavior have created a critical impasse represented by the readerly reception among fifteenth-century scribes, as well as translators and critics from Pope to the present day, that tries to determine or even alter the tone of the poem.⁴ Is the Merchant infected by his own bitterness and misogyny, first indicated in the Prologue of the *Tale*, and thus partial to January's plight, presenting the lovers' intercourse as abject and unsatisfyingly brief, or does his reticence reveal his narrative desire to mystify sexual desire and render it lightheartedly? Or, still yet, is he simply being coy by telling a bawdy story — a dirty joke — and then playing innocent, disguising himself with politeness and extricating himself from narrative responsibility? Does the Merchant want to talk about sex or not?

II

Readers have responded to the *Merchant's Tale* most frequently by discussing the narrator as a direct extension of the acerbic Merchant. In dramatic readings of the tale, the narrator is infected by the Merchant's bitterness and misogyny, first expressed by the Merchant in the prologue to his tale. Such a narrator comes complete with an active personality determined by implicitly preexisting, prediscursive truths about the Merchant. While a minority of readers views this "personality" as boisterously lighthearted, most understand it to be caustic.⁵ George Lyman Kittredge notes that the Merchant "speaks in a frenzy of contempt and hatred" — hatred for women, and contempt for himself and naive men like him who once thought marriage was a good bargain (145). E. Talbot Donaldson considers the Merchant a bitter and cynical man who believes that marriage is a bad deal for the husband and who purposefully juxtaposes beautiful and savage imagery to make our disgust for the tale more intense ("Effect" 30–45). In Donaldson's dramatic reading, the Merchant responds stringently to the preceding tale of Griselda and her wifely obedience to negate the Clerk's entire project: "The dam has given away and the ugly muck that formerly lay hidden beneath the surface of the lake is exposed to the sight of all" (*Chaucer's Poetry* 1084).

Derek Pearsall, along with Jill Mann and many other scholars, argues that the Merchant's hatred, more accurately speaking, is directed toward men like January and himself (Pearsall 193–209; Mann 39–57). Speaking of the Merchant's "bitterness," "cynicism," and "sardonic humour," Pearsall writes: "The vehement denunciation of women which is the apparent object of such writing is thus constantly revealed to be the expression of a self-lacerating disgust" (194). Emerson Brown, Jr, presses the dramatic reading further: "The Merchant hates women, wives, his wife, and May. He also hates foolish husbands, Januarie, and the foolish Januarie in himself. Contempt for Januarie almost leads him to sympathize with May. Contempt for May almost leads him to sympathize with Januarie" (143).

According to this older school of criticism on the *Merchant's Tale*, then, the Merchant is a fallible narrator, whose partial and limited view on the story he tells infects it. Recently, A. C. Spearing has challenged the appropriateness and efficacy of the term "fallible narrator," that insidious character whom we as readers blame for everything we do not like about a text. As Spearing argues, the idea of the fallible narrator has led to the abuse of many texts. Spearing quotes Kittredge's dogma that "Chaucer always knew what he was about" and demonstrates the disingenuous critical convenience such a maxim affords: "If we do not like what Chaucer seems to be about we can use the doctrines of the omniscient poet and of narrative voice to persuade ourselves that it is really a fictional teller who is about it; thus Chaucer will remain blameless, and we shall have the satisfaction of thinking that we agree with him (or perhaps that he agrees with us)" (106). Underlying Spearing's criticism of the critical tool of the fallible narrator is a more forceful disenchantment with the narrator as an *agent* to begin with. In Derridean fashion, Spearing questions logocentrism, the privileging of speech over writing, as the driving force behind narrative. We cannot simply assume that texts are the transposition of speech or an operating human consciousness behind language. As Spearing writes,

[M]y point is not simply that we need not associate the speaker of a tale very closely with what we are told elsewhere about the pilgrim to whom it is assigned, but that we do not have to think of most tales as having a speaker or a voice at all in the sense of a fictional individual to whom the first-person pronouns of the narratorial discourse consistently refer. . . . It is only our assumption of the priority of speech to writing that makes us believe this to be so, and in the medieval period . . . the normal assumption . . . seems to have been not that every story emerges from an individual human consciousness but that stories have an existence in their own right outside human consciousness. (120)

In a similar fashion, this essay separates the Merchant from his tale and, in doing so, removes a good deal of the psychological linguistic baggage that has accreted around the character of the Merchant. Furthermore, this essay demonstrates the ways in which the *Merchant's Tale*, its fabula, and the discourses of textual desire exceed the Merchant-narrator and his narrative manipulation, leaving the Merchant impotent in the face of a tale that takes on an overwhelmingly powerful life of its own, independent of the Merchant's and Chaucer's interventions.

One reader who takes an oppositional stance toward this interpretation is Karla Taylor. Taylor invokes narratology and a structural yet reader-oriented analysis of the plot to answer the questions with which this essay began. As Taylor argues, the Merchant uses hundreds of lines of convoluted narrative to defer the lovers' consummation, as he arouses his audience's desire for sexual and narrative resolution and ensures that, when this double climax finally occurs, the audience's "relief," "release," and pleasure in its knowledge of the plot will be augmented by their waiting for it: "The most powerful way to arouse this desire [for the plot] is to defer its fulfillment; by delaying what comes next, an author can bring the reader to such a pitch of expectation that, when fulfillment comes, the relief and release are correspondingly greater" (198). But, as Taylor argues, because the Merchant presents the much-anticipated lovers' intercourse as anticlimactic, the audience realizes that it has been duped, desiring an ending that is disappointing: "The Merchant, by playing with his audience — arousing, suspending, and fulfilling our basic desire for the plot . . . divides us against ourselves and makes us obscurely aware that we have been drawn into his fiction as subordinate objects, to be manipulated at his will. He is, in short, a tyrannical narrator" (200). Taylor suggests that the Merchant euphemizes May and Damyan's erotic activity in lines 2361–63 (quoted above) to extricate himself from narrative accountability, all the while humiliating his audience for having sordid desires (200). The Merchant approximates the young lovers' sexual pleasure with reticence prompted ostensibly by propriety, which is nonetheless artificial (as it is too late to remain silent about what one has already said), to demonstrate his dominant position in the hierarchy of narrative.

But Taylor takes a false turn. Also using reader-oriented narratological analysis, I shall argue that the Merchant is much more embattled than Taylor's argument would suggest. Nearly all of the criticism of the tale, including Taylor's, indicates an active, manipulative narrator, but narratology demonstrates that the narrator is merely a pawn in his own game, and that, as a result, narration fails to impose meaning upon the fabula. Narratology, the study of narrative, assumes as a fundamental principle that every tale is reported by a narrative agent, or narrator. But Spearing has cogently called even this most basic assumption into question. What does it mean to say that a tale is reported by a narrator? And what exactly is a narrator? Chaucerian narrators have become heavily invested with psychologies, as though they were real characters, or even people. One narratologist, perhaps motivated by the interpretive turns in this direction, declares that the narrator is not a character or person at all, but a linguistic function, and henceforth calls the narrator "it" (Bal 15). Understanding the narrator as a linguistic and textual function of the Merchant, and not the Merchant himself, or a "personality," allows us to avoid ossifying the narrator into a psychologically stable entity, a move with which I sympathize. But, in actuality, this interpretive practice merely transposes the psychology of a character onto the psychology of an inanimate object. I shall argue that what is called for is a separation of the narrator and the text, and, most importantly, a subordination of the narrator to the text. Texts, including their narrative functions constituted by webs of contradictory desires,

can be analyzed psychoanalytically, as Peter Brooks has demonstrated (90–112). The text is pliable, just like language, and subject to what M. M. Bakhtin calls “heteroglossia,” or multivocality. Bakhtin’s original analysis of heteroglossia was restricted to the novel, as opposed to lyrical poetry in which, he argues, “the unity of the language system and the unity (and uniqueness) of the poet’s individuality as reflected in his language and speech . . . are indispensable prerequisites” (264). However, David Lawton has performed invaluable work applying heteroglossia to Chaucer’s narrative poetry. Although he resists the term “heteroglossia” because he finds it too restrictive, Lawton calls attention to an “interaction of languages, a multiplicity of voices, marked and unmarked,” which cannot be ascribed to a single, unified narrator (3). Lawton writes, “We are left not with a speaker but with a tone,” or, as he calls them, “apocryphal voices” (4). A study of the narratological, although dynamically reader-oriented, structures of the *Merchant’s Tale* helps us to speak more accurately of the diversity of linguistically bound narrative voices, but only insofar as they are expressed through a text over which they have no control, which causes the dispersion of narrative voice. Narrative and narrators are the products of the text, not the other way around. All narrators can do is respond to texts, and, in some cases, try to manipulate them, although we see the limitations of this in the *Merchant’s Tale*. The *Merchant’s Tale* becomes so intertwined in contrary attitudes toward narrative and linguistic desires that such a resulting tone cannot be ascribed to a single, tyrannical narrator.

Part of my project involves a kind of psychoanalysis, but it is decidedly a psychoanalysis of the text, not of a person, character, author, or narrator. Brooks has adequately laid the foundation for such an approach (90–112). Still, in dealing with the *Merchant’s Tale*, it may be argued that assigning psychological qualities to the text is merely to transpose and rehash the deeply psychological criticism that has bogged down discussion of it in the past. But, to my mind, ascribing this web of contradictory desires to a text (rather than to a narrator) more acutely reveals the aporia of desire that displaces agency and the fantasy of a characterological analyst-narrator, but also reveals the instability of all desire and all “psychological” traits, which the *Merchant’s Tale* represents on the verge of internal combustion. The term “narrator” is simply too monolithic, stable, and autonomous to depict accurately the vicissitudes of desire in the *Merchant’s Tale* and the demands that they make on an increasingly frustrated narrator. If the narrator is capable of one thing, it is performing the limits of his own narrative. Another important upshot that we gain by attributing psychological phenomena to the text and not to the narrator is textual agency. As we shall see, my reading of the *Merchant’s Tale*, in which agency operates from within the text, does not preclude what might be called a dramatic reading of the tale. It simply calls for the direction in which agency travels to be reversed. The psychological description of the Merchant in his prologue is important, but it does not create the tale. Rather the tale creates the Merchant, retrospectively.

This essay is largely about desire and its power to structure narratives, a topic that has, years after Brooks’s foundational study, received much critical attention, and that informs my argument. In *Philosophical Chaucer: Love, Sex, and Agency in the*

Canterbury Tales, Mark Miller argues that the dominant readings of Chaucer as a love poet and a philosophical poet, once thought to be antinomies, actually coalesce around ideas of desire and normativity. Throughout his study, Miller points to the ways in which desire problematizes the normativity on whose integrity entire narratives, narrators, characters, authors, and critics rely, often citing the "ways erotic energies trouble and cross presumptive borders between the normal and the perverse, even as in many ways they depend on the constitution of such borders" (2). Miller's chapter on the *Miller's Tale*, a close cousin to the *Merchant's Tale*, uncovers the ways in which desires that seem so transparent, so easy, so — in a word — natural, create a plethora of normative problems for the Miller and his tale in ways that open up readings of the *Merchant's Tale*.

Elizabeth Scala's recent article, "Desire in the *Canterbury Tales*: Sovereignty and Mastery Between the Wife and the Clerk," provocatively examines the ways in which Chaucer's narrators are doomed to express that which they have disavowed because of the speaking subject's inability to know what he or she desires and because of the indirectness and opacity of language. Particularly the Wife and the Clerk withdraw from the endings of their tales, just as the Merchant withdraws from various parts of his tale, because they have spoken in excess of what they ostensibly intended. This motif of the return-of-the-repressed is apparently an offshoot of Scala's book, *Absent Narratives, Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure in Late Medieval England*, on the desire for language and narrative, to structure texts, even when those desires are likewise disavowed. Scala writes intriguingly on the haunting presence of absence. Traditionally absent narratives are seen as a sign of the narrator's or author's control: these literary agents omit what they please to manipulate their texts and audiences. But Scala questions this hierarchy, noting that "absent narratives mark the site of contestation between the narrator (or author) and the working of narrative itself" (13). Scala further clarifies, "As Chaucer appears to show from a number of pilgrims' perspectives, the very act of speaking presupposes something unspoken, the emergence of which cannot always be foreseen by a speaker. Rather than showing a narrator in control of a story, these narrative absences mark a site at which a narrative is in control of its speaker" (15). Although my reading of the *Merchant's Tale* does not concern absent narratives, it addresses the elliptical desire that underwrites the text's unconscious longing for the restoration of displaced narratives or language in general, and anticipates my own argument concerning the priority of text to narrator.

Scala's psychological and structural orientation also finds common ground in the work of Paul Strohm on textual unconsciousness. The *Merchant's Tale*, like any text structured by desire, may be said to have an unconscious whose interplay with the analyst (the reader) engages him or her in the structural vicissitudes of desire's drive toward totalization or climax. Strohm writes,

A text may state (and therefore discursively "know") things about itself and it may remain silent on other matters (and therefore not "know" them). In the latter case our interest and our inquiry need not cease, for texts still carry forms of pre- or nondiscursive knowledge within their bounds. I am here presuming the existence of a textual unconscious,

effectively constituted by and extensively correlated with that which the text represses. I will eventually suggest that the fullest understanding of a text must include attention to what it represses, to the gaps, traces, and other derivatives of a textual unconscious. (165)

Strohm essentially argues that a text changes with time — that accretions of the unconscious come into being through cultural and social change, and that, secondarily, the text leaves itself open to such adjustments made through time and space. But I would argue that we need not go even that far to witness the operation of the textual unconscious. The text's instability, derived from a haunted and repressed unconscious, is integral to the very structure of texts, as we shall see in the *Merchant's Tale*.

Spearing asserts the power of the medieval text over its narrator, and his arguments have been anticipated by, among others, H. Marshall Leicester in *The Disenchanted Self: Representing the Subject in the Canterbury Tales*. Leicester argues for a dramatic reading of the *Canterbury Tales* but not in the same way that such a reading is posited by Kittredge and his disciples. Leicester notes that the normative approach to the dramatic reading assumes that each pilgrim's identity has a set of preexisting, prediscursive facts about it that are then manifested in or control the tale that is told. Leicester insists that such views "demand that the voice in a text be traceable to a person *behind* the language, an individual controlling and limiting, and thereby guaranteeing, the meaning of what is expressed. The language of a given tale, or indeed of a given moment in a tale, is thus the end point of that person's activity, the point at which he or she delivers a self that existed prior to the text" (9). Leicester reverses this proposition to argue that various pilgrims create their subjectivities through the tales that they tell, so that language creates people and not the other way around.

Finally, Spearing takes as his starting point his disagreement with the common assumption that behind every narrator (and every narrative act) there must be a coherent subject producing an utterance — that is, a voice that merely gets transposed to writing. This principle, he argues, has been used to abuse many texts, particularly through the creation of the "fallible narrator," as I have discussed above. But what interests Spearing (and me) most is the autonomy that texts in the Middle Ages exert and the precedence they take over narrators and authors. The "encoding of subjectivity" into medieval texts results largely, Spearing argues, from narratives' determination of consciousness (25–26). Though strictly speaking what Spearing means to say is that fabulas determine consciousness (as I shall unpack below), Chaucer exemplifies a medieval author whose consciousness was shaped by stories, sources and analogues of fabulas that in turn shape the consciousness of their narrators.

The power of the text, with its convoluted webs of desire, over its narrator is to my mind well exemplified in the *Merchant's Tale*. In response to Taylor's argument for an omnipotent Merchant-narrator, I shall argue, on the contrary, that the Merchant's unstable presentation of erotic desire and his manipulation of the audience's longing for narrative resolution ensnare him in his own game, as he begins a process of narrative and linguistic displacement of sexual desire from which he cannot extricate himself. Far from being a tyrannical narrator who humiliates his audience's

desires while coyly retreating to the side, the Merchant has textually determined obsessive and conflicting narrative impulses, which he seems unable to control. Throughout his tale, the Merchant emphasizes instances of erotic predilection only to attempt — unsuccessfully — to retreat not only from these scenes of salacity but also from his own linguistic displacements of these desires. Even in the Merchant's apparent dismissal of desire and denigration of sexual pleasure, he is obsessively drawn toward narrative movement toward that end. However, the Merchant continually defers consummation because he wishes to prevent his narrative from reaching climax and extinguishing both narrator and narrative. The Merchant longs to speak repeatedly about sexual desire, the immoral sex of adultery, which both attracts and disgusts him, as long as he can keep speaking textual and sexual desire's name, preserving himself as a speaking subject. The fabula and narrative, however, ultimately resist the Merchant's design. Robert Edwards notes the thematic and doctrinal "points of resistance" in the *Merchant's Tale*, in which the material that the Merchant presents about marriage through various characters resists his own cynical and misogynistic narrative attitudes (351). But a similar misalignment between the Merchant's desire to control his narrative and a fabula that spins wildly out of control occurs, not, as Edwards argues, because it is ossified in doctrine and therefore trumps narrative manipulations, but because language itself fails to bind sexual desire. The fabula has a power that resides outside of the control of both narrative and narrator. The principal problems with this poem lie not in the realm of morality, as J. D. Burnley and other readers have suggested, but, rather, in the realm of narratology and rhetoric.⁶ For if, as Donaldson writes of the *Merchant's Tale*, Chaucer masters the art of making his tales *mean* something other than what their tellers and inscribed pilgrim audience interpret them to mean (*Chaucer's Poetry* 1086), then, I would add, he also masters the art of making his tales *do* something altogether different from what the narrator intends.

III

Narratology as a method of critical engagement is useful for the distinction it draws between the fabula and *sjuzet*, especially when considering which feature of texts is granted priority. A proper analysis of the conundrum with which this essay began considers not what actually happens in the pear tree and how it happens but, rather, why the Merchant expresses two different attitudes toward Damyan and May's sexual encounter, effectively offering opposing accounts of the event. This distinction resonates with a basic principal of narratology, namely that in every text at least two levels of activity are at work. One, dubbed *sjuzet* by early twentieth-century Russian formalists, is theoretically the only one to which the audience has direct access, via the narrator. On this level the narrator shapes meaning. He arranges events in a certain order, chooses which ones he will emphasize or bypass, articulates them through a character's vision which may or may not be his own, and presents this story to an audience through the use of signs (which, in the case of literature, are constituted by

language). The other level, commonly referred to as the *fabula*, is the raw material from which the narrator works. It is the chronological ordering of acts as characters experience them, events that theoretically occur independently of the narrator's intervention (although this notion itself is problematic) and below the level of the audience's consciousness as events they can decipher only indirectly through a chronological reconstruction of the events.⁷ The summary of a *fabula* is often stated, rather baldly, in a sentence: In his old age, January marries the young May for sexual pleasure, but she is unsatisfied with their lovemaking and commits adultery with Damyan in a pear tree while January is temporarily blinded. A text is more than the sum of its fabulous elements, however, because of the *sjuzet*, or narration, which is a manipulation — a “handling” — of the *fabula*.

Assessing the transformation of *fabula* to narrative discourse, narratologists frequently call attention to the narrative manipulation inherent in this process. The forms of manipulation are many and include sequential ordering or reordering, rhythm, frequency, focalization (often called point of view), creation of characters and locales, levels of narrative discourse (direct or indirect), and, when language is the medium of the narrative, text (rhyme, alliteration, diction, etc.). Narration engenders meaning by reporting preexisting elements of the *fabula* (e.g., May and Damyan's plans for sexual intercourse) and by imposing its own version of meaning onto the *fabula* (e.g., the sordidness of their desire).

The distinction between the *fabula* and *sjuzet*, however, is often unclear. Through its manipulations, narrative discourse often changes the very nature of the *fabula*, suggesting, as narratologists have pointed out, that the narration or *sjuzet* may actually precede the *fabula*: the notion of a preexisting and untainted *fabula* may be a fantasy as the audience becomes aware of the *fabula* only through the narrator's discourse. As Brooks suggests in his assessment of the “double logic” of narrative, narration presents a version of the *fabula* that theoretically precedes the narration but that nonetheless conforms to the narrative's own requirements or interpretive agenda: “[A]t certain problematic moments story events seem to be produced by the requirements of the narrative discourse, its needs of meaning, rather than vice-versa, as we normally assume. In other words, the apparently normal claim that *fabula* precedes *sjuzet*, which is a reworking of the givens of *fabula*, must be reversed at problematic, challenging moments of narrative, to show that *fabula* is rather produced by the requirements of *sjuzet*” (28).⁸ Despite this power of narration assumed by narratologists, I shall reverse course and argue that the *fabula* of the *Merchant's Tale* precedes its narration by making certain demands on the Merchant-narrator and directly influencing the way he renders the story.

A reading of the *Merchant's Tale*, in which desire for pleasure is present at the level of *fabula* and narration, requires that the analogy of erotic and textual desire — the desire for sexual and narrative resolution — be teased out. Discussing the desires that structure texts, Brooks mentions desire as both a subject matter of narrative and a motor that propels a narrative forward, from beginning to end, through a highly charged middle filled with dilations of the plot. This middle

represents a "system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires" (xiv). These narrative detours delay the ending, prolonging the desire for narrative resolution insofar as they are metonyms.⁹

As denoted by the term *metonymy*, the part stands in for the whole, the whole being, in psychoanalytic terms, pleasure, and the part being inchoate fragments of desire that the analysand substitutes for the whole. Drawing on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Lacan considers metonymy a signifier (language, for example) that fails to attach itself to or elucidate that which it ought to signify, the signified: "The major scheme of this science is thus based, in effect, on the primordial position of the signifier and the signified as distinct orders initially separated by a barrier resisting signification" (141). Metonymy results in a search for meaning (linguistic, narrative, sexual, or otherwise) that only proliferates signifiers, what Lacan calls a signifying chain, with links of meaning that continually approximate the signified but never speak its name with precision.

Metonymies give narratives much freedom to say one thing and mean something else. Brooks echoes Lacan's notion of slippery language as he discusses ways in which both psychoanalysis and literary texts elicit a chain of language and images that evades meaning:

The analyst, for instance, hears in the analysand's language the pressure toward meaning, which is never pinned down or captured since there is a perpetual sliding or slippage of the signified from under the signifier. . . . If narrative desire keeps moving us forward, it is because narrative metonymy can never quite speak its name. . . . Narrative is hence condemned to saying other than what it would mean, spinning out its movement toward a meaning that would be the end of its movement. (56)

In Brooks's language, metonymies are a method of narrative self-preservation, a narrative technique that dilates the plot, creating distractions and digressions, in order to resist meaning, keeping the narrative and its textual energy alive. Desire, in the form of its narrative impulse toward resolution, is metonymy.¹⁰ This metonymic drive for meaning, a drive for narrative resolution and, in the *Merchant's Tale*, sexual pleasure, paradoxically attempts to avoid a narrative resolution — one that would terminate the narrative process — by interrupting the flow of narrative and delaying sexual consummation. Metonymy defers pleasure and prolongs desire. But these linguistic displacements of desire and pleasure nonetheless contain their own forms of desire and pleasure from which the narrator cannot retreat.

Although the Merchant may manipulate his audience's voracity and his audience's perceptions of this voracity, he mostly struggles to negotiate his own attraction to and disgust with narrative and erotic pleasure. Admittedly, the Merchant plays manipulative narrative games with his audience. Time and again he introduces longings for, on the level of fabula, a resolution of sexual tension and, on the level of narration, knowledge of the plot achieved through narrative resolution, only to dilate both repeatedly. Repetition — the persistent insertion of digressions and metonymies — delays narrative and sexual progress, as Taylor argues, which is certainly true in the

Merchant's Tale. But just as important is the fact that delays repeat themselves. Repetition, as Brooks and Freud suggest, is not so much a form of mastery or manipulation, as Taylor would have it, but rather a sign of possession, of the demonic or “uncanny,” in which the Merchant, having little or no control over his narrative actions, feels compelled to repeat with no resolution of sexual or textual desire in sight.

The Merchant's embattled relationship to sexual and textual desire ultimately reveals the way in which he attempts to avoid the very fabula of adulterous sexual desire that he is compelled to tell: the narrator is, in short, disgusted by both the sexual activity of May and Damyan and the very narrative process that leads to their sexual activity. Although the Merchant attempts to impose a vision on the fabula that will displace sexual desire, he becomes caught in the thrust of his own manipulative desires, obsessing over and repeating desire in various narrative forms. His narration can neither control nor contain the fabula, which, contrary to current narrative theory, precedes and determines its narration.

IV

Desire structures the *Merchant's Tale*. The *Tale* both presents characters who experience desire and creates in its narrative structure a force field — that previously mentioned “system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires” (Brooks xiv). Eschewing stagnant structural analyses of narratives, Brooks urges a consideration of the dynamic nature of plot, a term he uses to cut across the traditional distinction between fabula and *sjuzet*.¹¹ Plot and its gerund, *plotting*, are for Brooks narrative actions that turn the fabula into *sjuzet*, an ordering process that produces meaning by showing the relationships among events of the fabula.¹² The reader's search for narrative resolution continues through a force field of desire but is constantly frustrated by the contours of the plot that delay the fulfillment of desire to know what comes next. However, once one's desire for the plot has been fulfilled, when meaning becomes clear, the narrative loses its textual energy and self destructs, or ends.

The narrative middle, through the agency of its contours, twists, turns, and frustrations, formalizes textual energy, the longing for narrative meaning. Before this formalization occurs, however, characters in narratives initially experience desire as a nebula, which is, as Freud hypothesizes, comprised of (usually) opaque objects and aims (*Three Essays* 2–3). The Merchant begins his tale by presenting January in a similar manner, as a bundle of desires that lack form:

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. (1253–57)

January experiences "corage," and although he sketches a few requirements for a wife — that she be young and one on whom he can "folwe ay his bodily delyt" (1249) — his desires seek satisfaction in the idea of a generic woman rather than in the specific person of May, as is also reflected by the fact that his choosing May to be his bride is relegated to five lines (1691–95) after spending over four hundred lines pondering and conversing with his male friends about his desire for a wife. As Elaine Tuttle Hansen writes, "At the narrative level, there is literally no May before January marries her; that is to say, she enters the story quite explicitly as the product of the old man's warped imagination, the 'heigh fantasie' of a male who is anxious about his waning manliness and wants to see his own lost youth and powers of discernment reflected in the image of a young wife" (250). The relationship of May and January offers the latter a chance to expend his initiatory bundle of desires on a woman who offers him a chance to project his ideas of women and himself onto her. In January's eyes, May as a character is inconsequential to his desires.

Nonetheless, narratives must find a way to formalize these bundles of desire, giving desire a particular shape that connects beginning to end. Brooks writes, "As the word 'binding' itself suggests, these formalizations and the recognitions they provoke may in some sense be painful: they create a delay, a postponement in the discharge of energy, a turning back from immediate pleasure, to ensure that the ultimate pleasurable discharge will be more complete (101–2).¹³ But as Taylor points out, desire fails to work this way in the *Merchant's Tale*. The delayed and thus augmented pleasure of consummation that Brooks would expect is instead rendered disappointing (198–99).

Freud's discussion of the pleasure principle complements Taylor's analysis by offering a possible explanation for a prolonged anticipation of desire that terminates in unpleasantness. Happiness, according to Freud, arises from the "experiencing of strong feelings of pleasure"; as a permanent condition, it is fundamentally impossible (*Civilization* 25). Rather, it must be an episodic sensation, something we experience only as ephemeral pleasure when we suddenly satisfy desire. But the damming up of desire works against itself. If anticipation prolongs the "(preferably sudden) satisfaction of needs" for too long, it curtails the intensity of pleasure, producing as Freud argues, a mere "mild contentment": pleasure derives from contrast rather than stasis (*Civilization* 25). The formalization of desire appears to have unpredictable outcomes. At what point does the dilation of narrative desires — this "postponement in the discharge of energy" — result not in more intense pleasure, but rather in mild relief?

The Merchant formalizes desire to produce effects that both Taylor and Freud propose: sexual desire is dammed up only to be curtailed by a digressive narrative that obstructs narrative and sexual resolution, finally eliciting disappointment. The Merchant plays such a "prolong and defer" game at the end of the tale when he suspends the action of the fabula to shift attention to an ostensibly unrelated scene, halting the momentum of sexual desire. Desire is prolonged, and pleasure is deferred. Signaled by May, Damyan climbs the pear tree; he sits upon the "pyrie" while January

and May roam beneath him “myrie.” Damyan and May’s intricately plotted desire for intercourse is about to be fulfilled. But at this point the Merchant leaves characters and audience hanging in suspense, abruptly shifting the focus to precisely one hundred lines of Pluto and Proserpyna’s arguing over what the outcome of this predicament should be, while the other characters remain frozen in their sexual desires (and the audience, frozen in its narrative desires), anxiously awaiting the Merchant’s return and resolution. When both of these finally come, of course, as May jumps onto the back of her husband and into the pear tree, they are brief and disappointing.¹⁴

The Merchant practices a more subtle form of this craft on January and May’s wedding night. Injecting into the narrative urgent desires — desires for sex, on January’s part, and desires for a knowledge of the plot, on the audience’s — the Merchant thwarts formalized sexual and textual energy by suspending the plot, distracting attention from it, and causing characters and the audience to wait for the fulfillment of pleasure and knowledge. Taylor writes aptly of the Merchant’s handling of their wedding night, “Knowing what is coming, we are left dangling in suspense as Chaucer skips over the entire terrain of the Western literary tradition: from Orpheus, Amphion, and Thebes to the *Marriage of Mercury and Philology*; from Esther to the Trojan War to the extended apostrophe to Damyan, now also stricken with May’s beauty. And the stalled plot *keeps* disappointing” (198). In fact, this has been the Merchant’s *modus operandi* all along. After introducing January’s nebulous desire in the first few lines of the tale, the Merchant delays any indication that January will fulfill his desire for nearly five hundred lines with his longwinded marriage encomium and the advice of his loquacious advisers, Placebo and Justinus.¹⁵ The delay of the narrative process here is similar to the delay that January (in the fabula), still a bachelor in his old age, has experienced in his deferment of desire. But when January sees the possibility of sating his sexual appetite with May on their wedding night, after the Merchant has occupied us with a good portion of the canon of Western literature, January’s desire is so urgent that he is ready “to haste” all of the wedding guests from his palace:

This Januarie is ravysshed in a trauce
At every tyme he looked on hir face;
But in his herte he gan hire to manace
That he that nyght in armes wolde hire streyne.
.....
“Now wolde God that it were woxen nyght,
And that the nyght wolde lasten everemo.
I wolde that al this peple were ago.”
And finally he dooth al his labour,
As he best myghte, savyng his honour,
To haste hem fro the mete in subtil wyse. (1750–54, 1762–67)

As January “dooth al his labour” to rid himself of wedding guests, the Merchant expends another fifty-four lines, frustrating January’s haste again, this time by the biological restrictions of his resistant sexual equipment. The Merchant catalogues the

entire biomedical process the "hastif Januarie" (1805) must undertake in order "t'enceressen his corage" (1808) and be up and running.

By delaying sexual and narrative pleasure, the Merchant calls attention to the momentum that audience and characters experience. It merits mentioning at this belated point that Brooks's model of desire, with which I am working, is an unapologetically masculine structure of sexual arousal, stall, and climax. To read the *Merchant's Tale* is, I believe, to be put in the subject position of a man, which is one reason, it seems, Hansen finds the "horrifying possibility" that May, January's creation, might have uncontrollable sexual desires of her own, unbeknownst to him, so disconcerting for readers (249). At the same time that audiences and characters experience these desires, the Merchant appears to be just as eager to reach the narrative resolution of January and May's lovemaking. Announcing that January will not be persuaded against marrying and that May "shal wedded be unto this Januarie," the Merchant not only jumps right to their wedding, eliding all of the fabula that occurs between the announcement of marriage and the marriage ceremony, but also calls attention to this elision:

They wroghten so, by sly and wys treetee,
That she, this mayden which that Mayus highte,
As hastily as evere that she myghte
Shal wedded be unto this Januarie.
I trowe it were to long yow to tarie,
If I yow tolde of every scrit and bond
By which that she was feffed in his lond,
Or for to herkennen of hir riche array.
But finally ycomen is the day
That to the chirche bothe be they went
For to receyve the hooly sacrament. (1692–702)

Elision, a common and necessary task for any narrator, is by definition a narrative process that the reader cannot perceive. It is an omission of some part of the fabula. The Merchant, however, creates a perceptible elision — the absence of narrative discourse on "scrit[s]" and "bond[s]" — or what is really a mini-summary, and, accentuating the small amount of attention his narrative will devote to what could be a lengthy component of the fabula.¹⁶ The Merchant is in a hurry and wants his audience to know it.¹⁷

Roughly forty lines later, the Merchant again emphasizes his manipulative powers by threatening to slow down the time of the fabula — thereby producing a narrative delay — only to resume a rapid pace. Acting as though he will commence a *blazon* of May, the Merchant skips the details of her beauty to focus once again on January's erotic desires:

Mayus, that sit with so benyngne a chiere,
Hire to biholde it semed fayerye.
Queene Ester looked nevere with swich an ye

On Assuer, so meke a look hath she.
 I may yow nat devyse al hir beautee.
 But thus muche of hire beautee telle I may,
 That she was lyk the brighte morwe of May,
 Fulfild of alle beautee and plesaunce.
 This Januarie is ravysshed in a traunce
 At every tyme he looked on hir face. (1742–51)

Hovering over May's beauty, the Merchant begins what Mieke Bal would characterize as a slow-down, the converse of summary, which occurs when the time of the narration is greater than the time of the fabula. As Bal argues, in the case of slow-down the relevant element of the fabula is subordinated to the "nuances of perception that accompany it" (106). For a moment, the Merchant appears to have become distracted by these "nuances of perception," but tells the audience he will not indulge in them; the Merchant must continue to pursue the relevant event of the fabula, which is, as the following line suggests, sexual desire. The Merchant may manipulate the fabula and create a sense of urgency for characters and audience, but he too shares that sense of urgency, as he is caught up in the text, as it were.¹⁸

The Merchant not only digresses but also distracts attention from the narrative to halt January's, the reader's, and his own momentum, which would otherwise arrive at a sexual and narrative resolution. After the palace is cleared and May is brought to January's bed, the moment is apt for intercourse, but the Merchant continues to defer their sexual pleasure by focusing, instead of on the lovers, on other anonymous people in the bedchamber quickly making their way out. The Merchant briefly suspends the momentum of January's and his desire, distracting the audience's attention:

The bryde was broght abedde as stille as stoon;
 And whan the bed was with the preest yblessed,
 Out of the chambre hath every wight hym dressed,
 And Januarie hath faste in armes take
 His fresshe May, his paradys, his make. (1818–22)

As husband and wife lie next to each other in bed, the Merchant shifts attention to the priest and his blessing of the bed. The syntactical contingency of the priest's action — a dependent clause that anticipates an independent clause — almost excuses the Merchant's playfulness. The blessing of the wedding bed is a common enough occurrence in medieval literature and is therefore not gratuitous in this scene; the priest's actions are, syntactically, exactly where they should be — subordinate to the married couple's lovemaking.¹⁹ The first line of the independent clause, however, is not lovemaking but still another distraction, this time following all of the people out of the bedroom doors: it appears that the Merchant has introduced a distraction (in a dependent clause) only to introduce syntactically another distraction, the voiding of the room, which is the first line of the independent clause. A formally balanced structure of these lines would produce a slightly different syntax. The subordinate

plot, the actions of both the priest and bedroom occupants, would be in the dependent clause while physical intimacy, January's "paradys," would be given exclusive attention in the main clause, since it is what everyone has been waiting for, and the sentence would in Modern English read something like this: "And when the priest had blessed the bed / And every person had left the room / January took May in his arms." Instead, where we would expect to find meaning, we find another delay. Momentarily suspending January's sexual energy and forcing the reader to push it aside while watching a priest and nameless guests leaving the room, the Merchant delays erotic activity in this excruciatingly long scene by one more line.

All of the dilations, digressions, distractions, and urgencies end in disappointment. January's resistant sexual equipment and invocation of marriage law continue to delay intercourse, and the sexual resolution, which has been anticipated for nearly six hundred lines, is compressed into one oblique line: "Thus laboureth he til that the day gan dawne" (1842). In Freud's terms, the damming up of desire that finds pleasure in immediate gratification has lasted too long to procure anything more than mild relief, if that. January's desires are urgent while he waits for the apt moment for physical intercourse, but it is never clear that successful intercourse — or "significant, ultimate pleasurable discharge" of tension, in Brooks's terms — occurs. The one line the Merchant devotes to January and May's intercourse only mentions that he labors all night. For the sexually challenged January, climax may never occur, though, and the only pleasure he may be capable of attaining is that which he procures in the process of waiting for something that will never reach fruition. Waiting itself and the discourses of dilation engender the sexual energy that dissipates in moments of sexual intercourse. Although January, the Merchant, and the reader desire the fulfillment of pleasure, resolution is impossible in the Merchant's handling of the narrative.

I must stress that my point here is not that the Merchant is playing games with us — in fact, quite the opposite. The frustration of desire is built into the text. The Merchant becomes like the Miller and his surrogates, who, as Mark Miller aptly notes, pathologically erect barriers to their own pleasurable experience — barriers that also seem built into the text. Nicholas constructs an elaborate plan to bed Alison when he could have simply had her when he first grabbed her by the "queynte" (3276) while her husband was out of town. Absolon sublimates and idealizes love until he is brought into unmistakable contact with "the real nature of what he sought" (Kolve 158). And the Miller, as Mark Miller argues, is more careless than he needs to be — so careless that we begin to suspect a hint of anxiety — in, for example, his defending himself against the need to fret about being a cuckold to the Reeve (and setting the Reeve up), and in his description of the long-anticipated climax of Alison and Nicholas:

Ther was the revel and the melodye;
And thus lith Alison and Nicholas,
In bisynesse of myrthe and of solas,
Til that the belle of laudes gan to ryng,
And freres in the chauncel gonne synge. (3652–56)

Mark Miller writes of this extended euphemism:

[A]fter all the queynte-grabbing and talk of touching people's things that has come before, this quadruple euphemism for the tale's sole moment of erotic satisfaction is a bit surprising, and more so since erotic satisfaction is the tale's prime example of the gratification of human desire. It would not take much to say, as the Merchant for one is quite willing to say, just what is involved in this "solas" in a way that would drive home the Miller's point about desire. (74)

But the Miller and the Merchant are not as diametrically opposed as Mark Miller would suggest, given the Merchant's own tendency to erect barriers to pleasure. Unlike the Miller, who, as Mark Miller argues, resorts to euphemism because he literally has no words to express intimacy according to the ethos of his tale, the Merchant resembles Freud's famous child who throws the toy from his crib to create an unpleasant circumstance over which he has the illusion of mastery. The Merchant is not simply a tyrannical narrator who plays with his audience by deferring desire; he himself is caught in the thrust of textual desire to which he remains subject.

V

As I have begun to argue, the Merchant has an even more complicated relationship to desire and pleasure than I have thus far unpacked. As the text demonstrates, Damyan and May's adulterous sexual appetites offend the Merchant. But desire nonetheless inheres in the very discourses the Merchant uses to denigrate and dismiss lasciviousness: the Merchant is disgusted by and simultaneously attracted to the lovers' salacity — attracted to such a degree that he cannot stop talking about it. The Merchant overemphasizes the sordidness of Damyan and May's erotic activity only to retreat from the subject matter — only to be drawn back to it again as though such obsession were against his narrative will. Finally, attempting to retreat from linguistic displacements of desire and the narrative process that leads to the consummation of desire, the Merchant only finds himself trapped, like the obsessive analyst, using both language and narrative to speak of a sordidness he is determined — unsuccessfully — to dismiss.

Paradoxically, obfuscation expresses desire in the *Merchant's Tale*. When May visits Damyan in bed, the Merchant injects their interaction with sexual language, which he pulls back from, calling attention to his unwillingness to pursue the narrative of the adulterers' intimacy any further, effectively delaying explicit sexual intimacy for hundreds of lines:

Doun by his beddes syde sit she than,
 Confortynge hym as goodly as she may.
 This Damyan, whan that his tyme he say,
 In secree wise his purs and eek his bille,
 In which that he ywriten hadde his wille,

Hath put into hire hand, withouten moore,
 Save that he siketh wonder depe and soore,
 And softly to hire right thus seyde he:
 "Mercy! And that ye nat discovere me,
 For I am deed if that this thyng be kyd."
 This purs hath she inwith hir bosom hyd
 And wente hire wey; ye gete namoore of me. (1934-45)

The sexual tension in this scene announces itself in oblique ways: in the close positioning of May to Damyan lying in bed, in May's nondescript "confortynge," in the conventional sighing of the lover, and most conspicuously, in Damyan's placing his "purs" in May's hand, which she in turn places in her bosom — the apparently erotically charged gesture that finally elicits the Merchant's reticence, his attempted refusal to discuss this topic anymore. The sexual connotations of *purs* are well attested. The *Middle English Dictionary* lists contemporary uses of *purs* as scrotum (or "bag-like receptacle"). Chaucer uses *purs* to mean "scrotum" in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, as she brags about her five husbands' physical equipment: "Yblessed be God that I have wedded fyve! / [Of which I have pyked out the beste, / Bothe of here nether purs and of here cheste]" (43-44b). At the same time, desire in this scene of the *Merchant's Tale* is not entirely able to be pinned down: there is no demystified "thronging," and desire, insofar as it remains elusive, functions metonymically in this passage.

The Merchant enhances by mystifying desire, supplying only fragments that substitute a whole never present. The Merchant speaks in metonymies, a signifying chain of language that pushes toward meaning but never arrives, transferring May's sitting next to Damyan in bed to sighing to May's placing Damyan's "purs" and letter in her bosom. Language keeps moving with the progression of each image, but the meaning, or the signified — in this case, sexual desire — remains oblique. The Merchant must continue to speak of desire metonymically to avoid short-circuiting the narrative process.

One of these metonymies clearly demonstrates the narrative impulse to say something different from what one means and offers a possible explanation for the Merchant's abrupt unwillingness to pursue his tableau any further, as May hides Damyan's "purs" and his letter in her bosom. In all of Chaucer's extant works, the word *bosom* appears only six times (Benson 93), and only once is it morally and sexually neutral.²⁰ In the four other instances *bosom* is the source from which evil and trickery, not sexuality, spring. In the *Summoner's Tale* (1994-96) and elsewhere in the *Merchant's Tale* (1785-87), it is the seat of human evil, a site on the human body where the Serpent may dwell. And in the two remaining instances (in the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*), the bosom is the space from which the canon pulls a crucible (1118) and a piece of coal (1160), both of which he uses as props to perform pseudo-alchemy and hoodwink the priest. If Chaucer uses *bosom* explicitly to connote sullied actions or morals at least four of six times, it can likely be concluded that it suggests something more repugnant than sex in this passage. The Merchant can no longer

contain his reaction to his own narrative. Metonymy stops dead in its tracks. The Merchant pulls back and is unable to proceed any further: “ye gete namoore of me” (1945). Reticence follows a chain of metonymies that curiously supply excessive and insufficient information, and the language of metonymical evasiveness has approximated desire more closely than perhaps the Merchant may have anticipated, as he retreats from and is disgusted by his own linguistic displacement of desire.

But, indeed, we do get “moore” of the Merchant. Although the Merchant is disgusted by not only the lovers’ adulterous intimacy but also the very process of the narrative, which he is compelled to tell, the narrative continues. By approximating desire through metonymies, the Merchant avoids short-circuiting the narrative process and thus can continue talking — elliptically — about desire. The Merchant is caught in a circular trap. The events of the fabula insist that he speak of an adulterous desire, which disgusts him, yet when he begins to repeat and approximate desire, he seems unable to stop. He has the opportunity to short-circuit the narrative process by presenting sexual and narrative resolution in Damyan’s bedroom, yet he must proceed to fulfill the terms of the fabula: in Brooks’s terms, the time for “totalization” has not yet come and is not yet mandated by the fabula. Yet in that very procession, the Merchant’s negotiations of desire start all over. The Merchant is compelled to tell “moore,” but must not say too much.

“Ye gete namoore of me”: part of the typically Chaucerian humor of this line lies embedded in the fact that the Merchant attempts to shore up authority over a tale that has left him behind a long time ago. With these words, the Merchant cries out against his utter lack of control over the fabula. Scala has considered a similar phenomenon in the *Wife of Bath’s Tale* and the *Clerk’s Tale*. Scala traces the contours of the two pilgrims’ desires in their tales and concludes that they both withdraw rather dramatically from their posited endings because they realize that they have spoken in excess of what they meant — that what they thought their desires were seeking were not so at all: “Both pilgrims’ closing gestures withdraw from the powerful position of mastery that each of their tales has advanced” (“Desire” 86). The Wife’s rhetoric of mastery “covers over a wish to submit to masculine power” in her fairytale ending, from which she rapidly withdraws, and which she rebukes, while the Clerk turns Griselda’s efficacious and numinous power into watered-down allegory and apology for female mastery: “In their structural similarity, then, the Wife’s and Clerk’s tales momentarily reveal a desire . . . for what each speaker seems most desperate to deny.” Scala writes, “In shifting from the ordinary sense of desire to the more linguistically constitutive one at stake here, the significance of the particular object of desire gives way to the persistence of desire itself and the telling symptom in which it is manifested” (“Desire” 85). And this symptom is the narrators’ embattled attitudes toward the endings of their stories — their inability to let them go, the fear that they have said not enough or too much, their obsession with evading the end. Like the Wife and the Clerk, the Merchant can only cry out against and futilely try to resist the inevitability of his fabula and the demands of desire.

The Merchant’s retreat reveals an underlying anxiety about tale-telling, as he approximates desire until narrative threatens to spin out of control. In the pear-tree

debacle, the Merchant is not simply being coy, telling a bawdy story and retreating from sexualized scenes to extricate himself playfully from narrative responsibility. The Merchant's paradoxically aggressive retractions, his disdainful attitude toward May and Damyan's adultery, and his compulsions to manipulate the destiny of the fabula suggest that, as he pulls back from the sordid details over which narration has no control, he loses narrative agency. This is not because of the "personality" of the Merchant, but because of the slipperiness of language itself, of which the Merchant is merely a function. In retreating from moments of desire and pleasure, the Merchant attempts to defer — retroactively — the consummation of a sullied desire and the mentioning of that consummation, while simultaneously betraying the discursive desire already encoded into the delay tactics. But the text is already far ahead of him.

The Merchant's retractions are specialized examples of a rhetorical strategy, the *occupatio*, which Chaucer frequently uses but rarely with as much aggression as in the *Merchant's Tale*. An *occupatio* is, as Jennifer Strauss reminds us, an invocation of language that calls attention to the very absence of language: it "in its strictest sense means the mention of a topic only in order to declare that it will not be pursued, but . . . in practice was regularly applied to any statement of intent to avoid, summarize or truncate a description or narrative" (166–67). Chaucer often places an *occupatio* in the speech of a narrator, such as the Knight who modestly denies his capacity as a storyteller (885–89) or the Man of Law, who eschews the capability of language to express the grandeur of a setting or the wickedness of a person (778–81). The narrator uses it in *Troilus and Criseyde* to evade responsibility for supplying meaning, allowing the audience to construct it in the narrator's absence. Chaucer's use of the *occupatio* famously calls attention to the possibilities of erotic intimacy between Pandarus and Criseyde, when the narrator injects a bedroom scene with sexual energy, places Pandarus and Criseyde alone in it after Troilus and Criseyde's lovemaking, and then, after Pandarus thrusts his hand underneath the sheet that covers Criseyde's naked body and kisses her, bluntly says, "I passe al that which chargeth nought to seye" (3.1576).²¹

But the Merchant uses *occupatio* differently. Although he promises to remain silent about sex in the garden scene, he has not. He is complicit in the audience's production of meaning more explicitly than is the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde*. The Merchant supplies too much information and then retreats, which produces a tone that is altogether different from that evinced by the playfully coy narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde* who merely hints at sexual desire before withdrawing. The latter leaves room for the audience to participate in the narrator's meaning, while the former leaves the audience with no room to maneuver. It is a harsh example of what Strauss labels the "subverted *occupatio*" and defines as "an avowed refusal to tell what has already been or is about to be told at length" (172–73). Having already "expressed" how Damyan has "dressed" May, the narrator's *occupatio* coerces the reader and leaves nothing to the imagination.

The Merchant's use of *occupatio* thus works differently from Chaucer's other silences. It is, as Taylor suggests, a pseudo-reticence, but is not then also a sign of the narrator's control, nor is it an invitation to the audience to construct meaning out of ambiguities. Instead of opening up the possibilities of language like the narrator of *Troilus and Criseyde*, the Merchant tries to stifle the desire of the fabula by denying it language. But, as narration loses control over the fabula, the Merchant's efforts come too late. The Merchant's multiple metonymies have approximated desire too closely, and his description of the consummation scene is too explicit to allow for suppression, hard as he may try. The narration has failed to impose meaning on the fabula.

VI

The Merchant's lack of control over the fabula becomes most evident in the *repetition* of his delay tactics. Repetition takes different forms — metonymy, digression, dilation, and deferment — and the frustration that results from a series of delays is more than the sum of its parts because of the synergy inherent in repetition. Repetition is a binding together of textual moments that calls attention to their similarities. In an analysis of repetition, Brooks's approach would support a reading of the Merchant's manipulative agency — similar to the reading of the *Merchant's Tale* that Taylor proposes — by calling attention to the mastery over textual material a narrator must have to bind it together in repetitions. This compulsion to repeat is problematic, however, because it runs contrary to Freud's notion of the pleasure principle, the fundamental human desire for episodic pleasure: like the child in Freud's observations, who repeatedly causes his mother to disappear by throwing a toy out of the crib, the Merchant consistently creates unpleasurable circumstances through repetitions that defer sexual and narrative resolution.

Repetition, rather than being a matter of quantity, is a matter of effect. The audience begins to feel as though it were trapped indefinitely in a narrative that will never fulfill its desire for resolution or the characters' desires for sexual pleasure. This sense of entrapment is due largely to the ambiguity of repetition. Repetition can, according to Brooks, signify a forward motion, a "return *to*" an earlier moment to clarify it or provide a new perspective. But repetition can also signify a backward movement, a "return *of*" narrative material, such as dilation and desire, which has already been presented and through its repetition only impedes narrative resolution.²² Brooks distinguishes recalling the past from repeating the past by invoking Freud's observation of patients who obsessively repeat past actions rather than adopting the healthier mental activity of remembering their past, or seeing their actions as belonging to the past. This ambiguity of hovering between two opposing motions allows the audience to feel manipulated or trapped, as Brooks suggests. Again following Freud's lead, Brooks goes so far as to suggest that this feeling of compulsive recurrence is symptomatic of possession or the demonic (98–99). But this feeling of possession lies not solely with the audience. The text itself can be possessed, and the narrator may

very often be subject to the demonic. Psychoanalysis, after all, pays attention to the narrator's or analysand's possessed linguistic obsessions.

Far from being a tyrannical narrator, the Merchant is trapped in the very repetitive articulation of delay and desire, unable to contain their direction, hovering between forward and backward movements. The deferral of pleasure *repeats* itself throughout the *Merchant's Tale* from the marriage encomium, to January and May's wedding party (in which momentum and curtailment of desire are juxtaposed), to May's visit to Damyan's bedside where inorganic and somatic objects and language displace the Merchant's obsession with a desire that nonetheless speaks its name, to the young lovers' brief sexual pleasure in the pear tree that is preceded by hundreds of lines of scheming and trickery, arousing desire by deferring pleasure. Chaucer represents repetition as a form of narrative possession as the Merchant reveals his obsessive disgust with Damyan's sexual desire for May. During the wedding party, once again interrupting the momentum of January's desire for May and the audience's desire for resolution, the narrator introduces Damyan, the young squire, whose desire for May is so strong that for his "verray peyne he was ny wood" (1775). Standing, Damyan sighs and nearly swoons, after which the Merchant begins his stage directions. He makes clear that Damyan has parted not only from the wedding party — as he goes to bed pining for May — but also from his narrative discourse. The Merchant declares that he will leave Damyan to the side — "But there I lete him wepe ynogh and pleyne" — so the narrative can continue, leading us toward January and May's lovemaking:

And to his bed he [Damyan] wente hym hastily
 Namooore of hym at this tyme speke I,
 But there I lete hym wepe ynogh and pleyne
 Til fresshe May wol rewen on his peyne. (1779–82)

But in the very next line, after the Merchant has established his intent to refrain temporarily from speaking about Damyan's desires for May, he becomes drawn again to the sordid nature of sex, using the Christian apostrophizing trope of the "famulier foo" and "naddre," the Serpent, as a symbol of Damyan's base intentions of seduction:

O perilous fyr, that in the bedstraw bredeth!
 O famulier foo, that his servyce bedeth!
 O servant traytour, false hoonly hewe,
 Lyk to the naddre in bosom sly untrewre,
 God shilde us alle from youre aqueyntaunce! (1783–87)

Using a subverted *occupatio* to dismiss Damian — the very person of whom he is about to speak — the Merchant is nonetheless compelled to cry out against sexual arousal. In his obsession with what disgusts him, the Merchant once again reveals an embattled relationship to desire. If the repetition of desire in all of its forms is, as Taylor suggests, a tool used to manipulate and humiliate the audience, then the

Merchant becomes caught in his own game as he repeats desire apparently against his narrative will, as though he were himself textually possessed.

VII

In the *Merchant's Tale*, Chaucer experiments with the narrator's inability to control the fabula. From the beginning of the *Tale*, the Merchant seems overly determined to establish himself as an authority as if he were anxious about the reality of his contingency as a storyteller. He introduces January, giving him three lines to talk about his desire for a wife, and then interrupts the tale for 126 lines to put forth his opinions on marriage in the pseudo-encomium (no doubt filtered through January's naivety), causing one to wonder if this tale of marital woe is about January or the Merchant.²³ The Merchant uses the encomium to cite authorities on marriage only to undermine them, to emphasize the fact that his audience should listen to him — not to Theofrastus, not to January, but to him: "Deffie Theofraste, and herke me."

And, in a rhetorical move that is unique to the *Merchant's Tale*, the Merchant struggles to control the actions of his characters in the fabula. Directly addressing January in one section, the narrator tells him to become aware of Damyan's adulterous desire for his wife, an awareness that the Merchant is unable to provide January through the fabula:

O Januarie, dronken in plesaunce
 In mariage, se how thy Damyan,
 Thyn owene squier and thy borne man,
 Entendeth for to do thee vileynye.
 God graunte thee thyn hoonly fo t'espye! (1788–92)

The Merchant rhetorically attempts to impose what the fabula will not permit, suggesting the limits of narration and the precedence of fabula. While a few other narrators in the *Canterbury Tales*, such as the Man of Law, speak in apostrophes to their characters to delineate them, the Merchant is, as far as I can tell, the only narrator of the Canterbury collection to speak imperatively to his own characters, telling them what to do as if he otherwise had no control over them. And indeed, he does not, for January does not, cannot, see Damyan ravishing May until the gods intervene and restore his eyesight. If only the Merchant could make January see the desire that lies in Damyan and May, it could all be prevented; the fabula could be irreparably manipulated. This scene resonates with January's vision of his wife and Damyan's intercourse in the pear tree (2360–63), to which I alluded in the opening of this essay. At the moment January regains his eyesight, the Merchant euphemizes the lovers' erotic activities. The Merchant refuses to express what he sees because he retreats once again — this time too late — from desire, while also refusing to express what January sees, as though he were protecting January by denying him the language necessary to articulate the sight of his wife's adultery. The Merchant perhaps hopes that his narrative manipulations can once more obscure erotic desire and pleasure

— if not for him, at least for January. As A. S. G. Edwards reports, some scribes even omit the pear-tree debacle completely, as though they needed to protect January as much as the Merchant wants to (411).

The Merchant's self-delusion aligns itself with January's by the poem's end. Leading his wife home to his palace, ignorantly assured of her fidelity, thanks to May's smooth talking, "this Januarie, who is glad but he?" asks the Merchant rhetorically (2412). Although most readers have assumed that the Merchant delivers this line ironically, making fun of January's ignorance and amplifying the tale's rich, if pointed, humor, it seems just as likely that the Merchant, who has unsuccessfully fought for control over the fabula throughout the entire poem — attempting to dismiss desire only to find himself calling attention to it in the very process and ordering his characters to see things that he is unable to make them see — may be trying to avoid the reality of desire one last time. In a self-imposed state of blindness, the narrator may extract his own distorted meaning from the tale, as the Host of the *Canterbury Tales* and a host of other pilgrims are so apt at doing, and share in the false joy of January. As in so many of Chaucer's tales, the subject material of the *Merchant's Tale* is a hybrid of much that is borrowed from other sources and a little of his own originality.²⁴ But Chaucer's contribution to this tale lies less in the fabula than in the contested possibilities, or impossibilities, of narrative. The Merchant, whose narration ends up having little control over the fabula, may be guilty of manipulation, but he is himself most principally manipulated.

Although I began this essay by distancing my reading of the *Merchant's Tale* from overly psychological readings of the Merchant, largely because they assume that the Merchant is vested with narrative power and that he does what he does because of preexisting, prediscursive truths about his character, my approach of separating the Merchant from the text does not preclude a dramatic reading of the tale, so long as we begin with the tale and not the Merchant. What happens in the *Merchant's Tale* happens because of narrative, especially a narrative that tries to speak about desire, trying futilely to impose order upon the fabula, and not because it supposedly reflects some preexisting truth about the Merchant. But it is also false to say that Chaucer did not go to the trouble of giving the tale to the Merchant, one who has recently married a young wife (not so important), and one who desires not to discuss that or himself any more, which is much more relevant. The *Merchant's Tale* enacts the desire to repress the unconscious of the text in a way that creates the Merchant's own repression (or failure of repression) of his life. The Merchant is illuminated by his tale. He does not create his tale, but his tale creates him.

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Notes

¹ All citations of Chaucer are drawn from *The Riverside Chaucer*.

² Consider, for example, the many lines the *Troilus*-narrator spends detailing the beautiful lovemaking of Troilus and Criseyde, a scene whose circumstances are not all that different from Damyan and May's, as the lovers in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* make love surreptitiously and through the external agency of Pandarus and the foul weather, with the notable exception, of course, that Chaucer is telling a romance in the former instance and a fabliau in the latter.

³ To complicate matters, the Merchant appears to be reporting two different visions. In the first passage, he reports what he sees and, in the second one, reports — or fails to report — what January sees. Who is unable to “express” the lovers’ sexual act? Is it the Merchant — certainly, lest he be an impolite narrator, as he claims — but is January also rendered speechless by what he sees? The technical distinction to be made here involves the narratological concept of focalization. The focalizer is the one whose vision is represented by a speaker who may or may not be the focalizer as well. In the first passage, the Merchant is both the speaker and the focalizer: [I narrate]: [“I see . . .”]. In the second passage, the Merchant is the speaker, and January is the focalizer: [I (the narrator) narrate]: [“January sees . . .”]. The syntax of the passage suggests that January does the seeing (2361) and the Merchant-narrator does the speaking (insofar as he says he will not speak) (2363). The ambiguous syntax, which places the line regarding the inexpressibility of the lovers’ actions (2362) between January’s vision and the Merchant-narrator’s discourse, may suggest either that the Merchant-narrator and January are unable to speak of the lovers’ intercourse or that the Merchant-narrator is protecting January. For discussions of focalization, see Bal 145–64, and Genette 189–198.

⁴ For fifteenth-century scribal emendations that apparently sought to “humanize the bleakly pornographic to the merely bawdy,” see A. S. G. Edwards 412. See A. S. G. Edwards also for eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early twentieth-century criticism, 413ff. Karla Taylor ably handles critical discussion of the pear-tree debacle, 189–205.

⁵ Nearly all of the modern criticism on the *Merchant's Tale* argues that the poem is either a lighthearted, bawdy story — like its many analogues — or a dark satire; these two camps of criticism have not added much to an understanding of the *Merchant's Tale* beyond their attention to the unanswerable question of whether the Merchant-narrator is ironic in his marriage encomium and the tale’s ostensibly lighthearted ending. For accounts of the tale as a dark

and ironic one told by a distinctly bitter and fictitious Chaucerian narrator, see Brown, Harrington, and Donaldson, “The Effect of the *Merchant's Tale*.” Additionally, Tatlock writes, “For unrelieved acidity the *Merchant's Tale* is approached nowhere in Chaucer’s works, and rarely anywhere else; it is one of the most surprising pieces of unlovely virtuosity in all literature” (367). Those who doubt the existence of an uncharacteristically bitter and fictional Chaucerian narrator separate from the narrators of the other tales uphold the tale’s comic features and include Beidler, Stevens, and Burger.

⁶ Regarding the morality of the *Merchant's Tale*, Burnley argues that it lacks any moral perspective (183). Donaldson writes that the tale “confuse[s] our moral judgment” because of its endlessly shifting signifiers (“Effect” 35). Pearsall insists that the tale is a “parody of the operation of moral consciousness” insofar as it calls attention to its own impotent morality (197). But A. S. G. Edwards argues that while editors and commentators seek to tweak the tale to impose some kind of moral order, it resists such efforts and remains “morally neutral” (410).

⁷ The terms *fabula* and *sjuzet* have undergone many permutations but originally appeared in the discourse of early twentieth-century Russian formalists such as Boris Eikhenbaum, Roman Jakobson, Victor Shklovskij, Boris Tomashevskij, and Yuri Tynjanov, as a method of distinguishing these narrative levels. Victor Erlich credits the terms specifically to Eikhenbaum and Shklovskij, who were guided by the conceptual framework of Aleksandr Veselovskij (240–42). In French structuralist thought, the equivalent terms are, respectively, *histoire* and *récit*, or *discours* as Genette discusses (1–32). The English terms are the oft-contested and humdrum *story* (*fabula*) and *plot* (*sjuzet*) (Brooks 12–15, 326).

Bal distinguishes three levels at work in a narrative: a *fabula*, a story, which is a vision and ordering of events, and a text, which is the articulation of that vision through a medium of signs (e.g., language, music, art, television, etc.). Bal is right to insist on this third level of text, which suggests that the manipulation of rhyme or repetition of words (on the level of linguistic text) or the use of shadows and light (on the level of visual text) occurs on a different level from the manipulation of chronology or of the narrator’s attitude, which could both remain the same in different media. In my discussion of the *Merchant's Tale*, however, I have no use for distinguishing between the text and the story, as I focus mainly on the narrator’s manipulation of the *fabula* whatever form that might take. To clarify my taxonomy, I use *fabula* and narration, narrative, or narrative discourse to distinguish the two levels of the *Merchant's Tale*. These are basically synonymous

with *fabula/sjužet*, *histoire/discours*, and Bal's *fabula*/combination of story and text. Since the term *fabula* has a common currency in American English, I Anglicize it throughout while keeping *sjužet*, the few times that I refer to it, in italics.

⁸ Brooks refers to Jonathan Culler's discussion of "double logic" (178).

⁹ A few notes on terminology: it is important to distinguish between desire and pleasure. Pleasure, in the Freudian sense that is developed later, is the necessarily brief experience of a "satisfaction of needs"; one desires or anticipates pleasure. Desire is the process, and pleasure is the event — although arguably there can be pleasure in desire. I use *narrative resolution*, *narrative meaning*, and *plot* interchangeably because it is usually only at the end of a narrative (i.e., at the moment of resolution) that its full meaning can be known. Desire for narrative resolution is a desire for the pleasure of narrative meaning, or plot.

¹⁰ Brooks writes, "Desire necessarily becomes textual by way of a specifically narrative impulse, since desire is metonymy, a forward drive in the signifying chain, an insistence of meaning toward the occulted objects of desire" (105).

¹¹ Although Brooks's explanation of the dynamic elements of plot is a useful addition to the study of *fabula* and *sjužet*, I insist that this dynamic ordering process may also be referred to as narration or narrative.

¹² Good examples of this dynamic include the "Wandering Rocks" chapter in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the film *Magnolia*, written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson (1999), and the film *Thirteen Conversations about One Thing*, written and directed by Jill Sprecher (2001), in which the "narrator" develops characters who live seemingly disparate lives, often even unaware of the others' presence, only to plot out their relationships — to show the ways in which they are related to each other and the significance of these relationships — an awareness of which exists only at the level of narration and not of *fabula*.

¹³ Brooks appears to use his rhetoric throughout as an argument for his own analogy of sexual and narrative pleasure. Using phrases like "pleasurable discharge" to speak of narrative satisfaction suggests that, for Brooks, the act of reading is extremely sexually and masculinely charged.

¹⁴ My reading of the narrative's digressions in the garden at the end of the poem is indebted to Taylor's reading of the same scene (199–201).

¹⁵ The "longwinded" marriage encomium is the subject of much of the scholarly debate on the poem. The encomium is, depending on whose analysis one reads, the Merchant's ironic discourse, or the Merchant's serious discourse, or January's ironic discourse, or January's serious discourse. Donaldson

suggests why the encomium has proven so problematic when he speaks of its absurdity: "Readers have often observed that this passage has nothing in it to show that it is ironical beyond its context, and some have even described it as a perfectly straightforward exposition of the medieval ideals of marriage. But . . . its sense, whatever its context, is absurd. Indeed, it represents a kind of double distortion of reality: a rebuttal of antifeminism erected on the same bases as antifeminism" ("Effect" 38).

¹⁶ Bal addresses narrative tempi — ellipses and mini-summaries — and the slight differences between the two (101–3).

¹⁷ That the "scrit[s] and bond[s]" end up being meaningless in light of May's adultery only reinforces the point that the mention of them represents a dilatory formal quality (perceptible elision) of the text more than a thematic one. Christian Sheridan offers an engaging analysis of the various textualities within the *Merchant's Tale* (esp. 36 on the "scrit[s] and bond[s]").

¹⁸ For a useful discussion of the various narrative tempi, consult Bal's discussion of the time of the *fabula* and the time of the narrative. One particularly provocative point she makes is that, as the narrative time increases and the time of the *fabula* decreases (e.g., in a "slow-down" or "pause"), a new mini-*fabula* is created and very often the audience can be tricked into believing that the narration is in fact the *fabula* (98–109).

¹⁹ The blessing of the newlyweds' bed, as in Marie de France's *Le Fresne*, is a common occurrence in medieval literature: "Un cofre ovri, sun paille prist, / sur le lit sun seigneur le mist. / Pur lui honorer le faiseit: / kar l'erceveskes i esteit / pur els beneistre e seignier; / ceo afereit a sun mestier" (413–18; "She opened a chest, took out her birth garment, / And put it on her lord's bed. / She did it to honor him; / The archbishop would be coming there / To bless the newlyweds in bed. / That was part of his duty" [403–8]). But to be clear, I am not arguing that the blessing of the bed is unusual or a distraction, merely that what follows the blessing of the bed is syntactically unusual.

²⁰ Pandarus places the letter from Troilus into Criseyde's "bosom" (II. 1155). Some scholars argue for a sexual relationship between Pandarus and Criseyde, about which see note twenty-one below, but this passage, to my knowledge, never appears as a locus of sexual suggestiveness in such scholarship. It may be inappropriate playfulness, although Criseyde does not seem to think so, but it seems not to be sexual foreplay in the context of the passage.

²¹ For the past fifty years scholars have been calling attention to the sexual possibilities between Pandarus and Criseyde in this scene. See in particular Donaldson, *Chaucer's Poetry* 972; Rowland 3–15; Dinshaw 47–50; and Carton 235–37.

- ²² On the ambiguity of repetition, Brooks writes, "An event gains meaning by its repetition, which is both the recall of an earlier moment and a variation of it: the concept of repetition hovers ambiguously between the idea of reproduction and that of change, forward and backward movement . . . Repetition creates a *return* in the text, a doubling back. We cannot say whether this return is a return *to* or a return *of*: for instance, a return to origins or a return of the repressed. Repetition through this ambiguity appears to suspend temporal process, or rather, to subject it to an indeterminate shuttling or oscillation that binds different moments together as a middle that might turn forward or back" (99–100).
- ²³ Cooper writes that there is "no simple equation to be made" between January and the Merchant-narrator (202). Pearsall speaks of a "narratorial conspiracy" wherein the Merchant-narrator conspires to make January look as ridiculous as possible (195). Mann argues that the encomium embodies the Merchant's experience speaking through January's innocence (50). Hansen notes that the narrator constructs January, like May, out of an "equally

determining discourse": antifeminism. Arguing that the Merchant-narrator identifies with Justinus, Brown writes, "The traditional explanation is that the Merchant identifies with Januarie and transfers his own self-hatred to his surrogate. Now one must not go so far as to suggest that the Merchant consciously models his contemptible hero on himself. The Merchant is at pains to convince us of his great superiority to the foolish and doting husband. But he cannot deal with Januarie objectively, for he sees in him his own earlier self. The Merchant hates women, wives, his wife, and May. He also hates foolish husbands, Januarie, and the foolish Januarie in himself. Contempt for Januarie almost leads him to sympathize with May. Contempt for May almost leads him to sympathize with Januarie" (143). Robert Edwards argues that the encomium is January's thoughts infected by the Merchant's cynicism, although he ultimately argues that no one can claim authorial power (351).

- ²⁴ Cooper summarizes sources and analogues of the *Merchant's Tale* (204–6), as do Correale and Hamel (479–534).

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