

Very different in tone from the N-Town plays are the two versions of the Norwich Grocers' Pageant, the only extant mystery play of which we have pre- and post-Reformation versions.²⁷ The second version, written in 1565, purports to be "revised" according to Scripture; but its general tone is much more Renaissance than biblical. Both of the pageants, sole survivors of the Norwich cycle, are in rime royal; and there is an echo of the *Jeu d'Adam* in the serpent's addressing Eve, "O gemme of felycyté and femynyne love" (A, 155). As Eve defiantly takes the apple in the first version, written before 1533, the lines shorten by one stress (an indication of tension?):

Nowe wyll I take therof; and I entend,
To please my spowse, therof to fede,
To knowe good and ylle for owr mede.
(A, 69–71)

Unfortunately, a large gap in this first manuscript omits the judgment scene, and the play ends rather ludicrously with:

And so thei [Adam and Eve] xall syng, walkyng together about the place, wryngyng ther handes:

Wythe dolorous sorowe, we may wayle and wepe
Bothe nyght and daye in sory sythys full depe.
(A, 89–90)

This is set to music and sung twice over again, for a chorus of four parts.²⁸ The second version, belonging to the seventh year of Elizabeth's reign, strongly emphasizes physical love as well as music:

Man: Most lovyng spowse, I muche do here rejoyce of the.
Woman: And I lykewyse, swete lover, do much reioyce of the.
(B, 28–29)

As Adam makes his by now characteristic walking-to-see-the-garden-speech, leaving Eve defenseless to the serpent, he says:

Man: Farewell, myn owne swete spouse, I leave the to remayne.
Woman: And farewell, my dere lover, whom my hart doth conteyn.
(B, 34–35)

Here Adam's "uxoriousness," as Milton later emphasized it, is extreme; and rather than Adam and/or Eve speaking the prophecy of the seed,

²⁷ *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, ed. Norman Davis, EETS s.s. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).

²⁸ *Non-Cycle Plays*, ed. Davis, 11.

the lines are God's as in Genesis. Even after their dismissal from Paradise, Adam and Eve address each other fondly; there are no quarreling scenes in this play. But its purporting to cleave to scripture seems comical as two abstractions, Dolor and Myserye, enter to lead man into bondage; and even the Holy Ghost appears to give a didactic little echo of God's promise. The Adam and Eve of the Grocers' Play are indeed those cast out, but their final song (to the same music as before) is now "With hart and voyce / Let us reioyce," (B, 154–155)—a return at least to the prophetic vision of a savior.

CONCLUSION

The French Eve, then, received full development after the twelfth century only in the *Mistère du Viel Testament*; but as she grew in womanliness, she lost her function as prophet of Redemption. The English Eve not only surrendered her prophetic function to Adam and even the Seraphim, but also failed to develop as a living woman at all in any of the English cycles; indeed, from the beginning she was little more than the butt of male humor. In France, Eve evolved as mother of the race, but died without believing in her own salvation; in England, too, Eve seemed to forget God's promise of the destiny of her seed. In neither country, certainly, does she ever again appear as she does in the Anglo-Norman *Jeu d'Adam*, as both psychologically believable and prophet of Christ. The *Jeu d'Adam* remained unsurpassed for four centuries, even by the *Viel Testament*, in sprightliness of dialogue and seriousness of tone.²⁹

²⁹ This article is an edited version of Maureen Fries' conference paper presented at the 1998 meeting of the Southeastern Medieval Association at Agnes Scott College. I have expanded the original apparatus only as much as necessary to update the work as Fries had intended to do herself and have honored the author's handwritten corrections on the manuscript. I have added section titles and rearranged the sections for ease of reading (Fiona Tolhurst, Alfred University).

The Mercantile (Mis)Reader in *The Canterbury Tales*

by Roger A. Ladd

THAT *The Canterbury Tales* has a great deal to tell us about the theory and practice of social class and estate in the late fourteenth century is by now a commonplace. The Franklin and the Knight have both been the subjects of book-length studies, as has the estates satire form.¹ Examinations of individual estates as manifested outside *The General Prologue*, however, have generally focused on single tales, often seen through the estates-satiric lens of the appropriate *General Prologue* portrait. This approach is particularly noticeable with the estate of merchants, which is significant because of merchants' problematic position in late-medieval theories of estate and the ambiguity of the *General Prologue* portrait of a merchant.² That the most important recent work on Chaucerian merchants has abandoned the focus on a single tale argues strongly for the value of following this single problematic estate through *The Canterbury Tales*.³ While such work has done

¹ Henrik Specht, *Chaucer's Franklin in the Canterbury Tales: The Social and Literary Background of a Chaucerian Character* (Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1981); Terry Jones, *Chaucer's Knight: The Portrait of a Medieval Mercenary*, rev. ed. (London: Methuen, 1994); Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire: The Literature of Social Classes and "The General Prologue" of "The Canterbury Tales"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

² On merchants as a problematic estate, see Sylvia L. Thrupp's magisterial *Merchant Class of Medieval London, 1300–1500* (1948; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962). For more recent historiography on the estate of merchants, see Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England, c. 1200–1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Steven A. Epstein, *Wage Labor and Guilds in Medieval Europe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991); Edward Miller and John Hatcher, *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce, and Crafts, 1086–1348* (London: Longman, 1995); Pamela Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community: The Grocers' Company and the Politics and Trade of London, 1000–1485* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); and Edwin S. Hunt and James M. Murray, *A History of Business in Medieval Europe, 1200–1550* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³ Kenneth S. Cahn, "Chaucer's Merchants and the Foreign Exchange: An Introduction

much to explain merchants' financial practices and to explore the ideological discontinuities of the merchant estate, it has not fully explored the rhetorical significance of Chaucer's semi-satiric approach to merchants, or more importantly, those moments when Chaucer's treatment of merchants is consistent but unrelated to the estates satire tropes of merchants. Perhaps because Paul Strohm has argued quite clearly that merchants were *not* part of Chaucer's actual historical audience, and thus critics have not tended to think of merchants in terms of Chaucer's rhetoric, no one has explored Chaucer's treatment of merchants as part of his larger concern with the power of discourse and with the efficacy of satiric writing.⁴ This omission is unfortunate, because when one does read merchants in terms of their relationships to discourse in *The Canterbury Tales*, it becomes clear that Chaucer fits merchants directly into his larger exploration of the relationship of *sentence* to *solaas*. Specifically, he uses them to test the limits of the satiric form that had dominated previous literary discussions of trade. While there are self-interested narrators in *The Canterbury Tales* who are not merchants, such as the Pardoner, and poor readers who are not merchants, such as the Franklin, no one seems to have asked why Chaucer portrays merchants outside *The General Prologue* as consistently failing to receive or produce the truth value of reliable discourse.

It is increasingly accepted that Chaucer's borrowing from estates satire challenges the form in general. However, this understanding has not penetrated to study of the estate of merchants in relation to Chaucer. Outdated monolithic readings of *The General Prologue* Merchant continue to be used as keys to the merchants in *The Man of Law's Tale*, *The Merchant's Tale*, and *The Shipman's Tale*. Chaucer's invocations of satiric anti-mercantilism in *The General Prologue* have led critics away from an analysis of Chaucer's construction of merchants as targets of discourse. The definitive reading of satire in *The General Prologue* remains Jill Mann's, and while she argues generally that Chaucer complicates and modifies the estates tradition, she places the Merchant strongly within that tradition. Her reading is particularly conservative in its emphasis on the common satiric linkage of the terms *exchange*, *usury*, and

to Medieval Finance," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 2 (1980): 81–119; Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 322–66.

⁴ Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 64–68. Strohm argues elsewhere, however, for the possibility of a merchant audience ("The Social and Literary Scene in England," in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986], 10).

chevisance (99–103).⁵ Limitations of space prohibit a full reading of the *General Prologue* portrait here, but I see the highly conflicted critical tradition on it, including Mann's work, as the result of Chaucer's deliberate ambiguity. The details of the portrait carefully provide enough familiar estates material to suggest the familiar anti-mercantile satire, but he carefully softens those details, as when he replaces the usury associated with *exchange* and *chevisance* with the much vaguer *bargaynes*.⁶ Critical resistance to this ambivalence, as well as over-reliance on *The General Prologue* as a guide to the tales, has led critics to overlook a theme reiterated throughout Chaucer's uses of merchants in the tales themselves, that misreading by merchants leads to flawed transmission of narrative *sentence*. Beginning with the construction of *The Man of Law's Tale* as a "mercantile" narrative through its source, continuing through the Merchant's inept narrative in his own tale, and concluding with the flurry of puns at the end of *The Shipman's Tale*, Chaucer consistently presents merchants outside *The General Prologue* as unable to pull *fruyt* from narrative *chaf*. Through this pattern Chaucer ultimately questions whether satirizing merchants can reform them and thus challenges the very basis of the satiric form.

The Man of Law's Tale is not about merchants, but it does present itself as a "mercantile" narrative. Merchants are identified as a source of the tale, and within the tale, bring the news of Custance's virtues to the Sultan; but the Man of Law's merchants seem extraneous to the story of Custance herself, whose international saintly career enacts the fantasy of a universal faith and an overt denial of material necessity.⁷ It is

⁵ See Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, 7–16, 99–103.

⁶ For debates over the Merchant's portrait, see Thomas A. Knott, "Chaucer's Anonymous Merchant," *Philological Quarterly* 1 (1922): 1–16; Gardiner Stillwell, "Chaucer's 'Sad' Merchant," *Review of English Studies* 20 (1944): 1–18; B. A. Park, "The Character of Chaucer's Merchant," *English Language Notes* 2 (1964): 167–75; John Kenny Crane, "An Honest Debtor? A Note on Chaucer's Merchant, Line A276," *English Language Notes* 4 (1966): 81–85; Cahn, "Chaucer's Merchants and the Foreign Exchange"; Wight Martindale, Jr., "Chaucer's Merchants: A Trade-Based Speculation on Their Activities," *Chaucer Review* 26 (1992): 309–16; Nancy M. Reale, "A Marchant Was Ther with a Forked Berd," in *Chaucer's Pilgrims: An Historical Guide to the Pilgrims in "The Canterbury Tales,"* ed. Laura C. Lambdin and Robert T. Lambdin (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1996), 93–107; Laura F. Hodges, *Chaucer and Costume: The Secular Pilgrims in "The General Prologue,"* *Chaucer Studies* 26 (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000).

⁷ For *The Man of Law's Tale* as a story of Christendom's successful world conquest, see Christopher Bracken, "Constance and the Silkweavers: Working Women and Colonial Fantasy in Chaucer's 'The Man of Law's Tale,'" *Critical Matrix* 8 (1994): 13–39; and Susan Schibanoff, "Worlds Apart: Orientalism, Antifeminism, and Heresy in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 8 (1996): 59–96.

this very internationality and romance exoticism, however, that links the “Surryen marchantz” (II.153) to the satire tradition’s concern with the crossing of borders, at the same time that the Man of Law’s brief paean to merchants presents a highly ironic view of the dangers which justified merchandise:

O riche marchauntz, ful of wele been yee,
 O noble, o prudent folk, as in this cas!
 Youre bagges been nat fild with ambes as,
 But with sys cynk, that renneth for youre chaunce;
 At Cristemasse myrie may ye daunce!
 Ye seken lond and see for yowre wynnynge;
 As wise folk ye knowen al th’estaat
 Of regnes; ye been fadres of tidynge
 And tales, both of pees and of debaat.

(II.122–30)⁸

While this description of merchants ostensibly represents them as positive, its irony directly refers to the satiric tradition by undermining a fundamental defense of trade. Echoed even in *The Parson’s Tale*, the moral defenses of a profession which did not produce anything were that merchants’ risks justified profit and that merchants performed a service by operating internationally, by bringing commodities where they were needed.⁹

Despite the conciliatory, positive tone of this passage which labels the merchants’ estate as “noble,” “prudent,” and “wise,” the description of merchants’ risk in terms of “ambes as” and “sys cynk” directly undercuts that positive tone. As a note in *The Riverside Chaucer* points out, John Gower uses the dicing term “ambesaas” in a satiric discussion of “the covetousness of lawyers,” and Chaucer elsewhere codes dice as negative in their appearance in *The Pardoner’s Tale* in conjunction with the “fruyt” of the “bicched bones”: “Forwsweryng, ire, falsnesse, [and] homicide” (VI.657–58).¹⁰ The punning description of earnings as “wyn-

⁸ Citations of Chaucer’s works refer to *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson, 3d edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

⁹ Joel Kaye explains how emphasis on risk was shared by theorists of exchange, such as Duns Scotus (c. 1266–1308) (he shared the term *pericula* with Thomas Aquinas), though more complex theories of exchange, such as that of Peter John Olivi (1248–98) agreed that the mental labor of the merchant, including his judgment about risk-taking, could also be legitimately quantified as profit (*Economy and Nature in the Fourteenth Century: Money, Market Exchange, and the Emergence of Scientific Thought* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 139 ff., dates on 117).

¹⁰ *The Riverside Chaucer*, 856 n. The notes cite the *Mirour de l’Homme*, ll. 24226–28, and di-

nynges" (II.127) and the money-"bagges" representing avarice then complete the passage's writing of profit as ill-gotten gain.¹¹ By constructing the merchants' self-defense of risk in such negative terms, the Man of Law in his *Prologue* reduces the ambivalence of the *General Prologue* portrait to bare irony, which codes surface reading as inadequate. While the superficially positive tone encourages a pro-mercantile reading, a more thorough reading attentive to the connotations of "ambes as" ties this praise of merchants to the satire tradition and anti-mercantilism (although, as we will see, the Man of Law's critique of merchants will rebound on him just as the Merchant's satire of January will ultimately reveal his own shortcomings). *The Man of Law's Prologue* further damns merchants with misplaced praise. As the Man of Law tells rich merchants that "As wise folk ye knowen al th'estaat of regnes" (II.128), he subtly reminds a reader of merchants' primary interaction with reigning monarchs: lending them money. Certainly English merchants were not in general guilty of usury as such to the Crown, if for no other reason than that the Crown possessed and had executed the power simply to refuse to pay (to the cost of the Italian banking houses of the Bardi and Peruzzi, ruined in this manner by Edward III).¹² "Th'estaat of regnes" can represent in this context a simple and no doubt truthful description of how merchants go everywhere and are thus expert on conditions in a variety of kingdoms, but it also reminds the reader that merchants' access to royal finances allows them to know the financial secrets of kings and perhaps exert control beyond their own estate.

Given this ironic challenge of merchandise, the assertion that merchants "been fadres of tidynge / And tales, bothe of pees and of debaat" (II.129-30) is difficult to read as clearly positive. Certainly tale-telling

rect the reader to *The Pardoner's Tale*, VI. 653. See John Gower, *Complete Works*, ed. G. C. Macaulay, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899-1902) vol. 1; John Gower, *Mirour de l'Omme* (*The Mirror of Mankind*), trans. William Burton Wilson, rev. Nancy Wilson Van Baak, foreword by R. F. Yeager (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1992).

¹¹ The *OED* supports the pun on "earnings" and modern "winnings." Lester K. Little points out that money bags were part of the earlier iconic representation of avarice in ecclesiastical art (*Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978], 36).

¹² The entire Staple system funneled wool exports through Calais and relied on a mechanism by which merchants would make loans to the Crown which they could recoup through the right to collect customs income in Staple cities. A significant proportion of the Crown's income was farmed out in this way, as it allowed the Crown to gather its customs monies up front. Miller and Hatcher describe how this policy was established by Edward III in mid-century (*Medieval England*, 238); see also Pamela Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile Community*, passim.

by merchants plays a foundational role for this particular tale, since the Man of Law informs us that “a marchant . . . me taughte a tale” (II.132–33), but for such tale-telling to be unequivocally positive, *The Man of Law’s Tale* would need to be thoroughly beyond reproach.¹³ To determine the extent to which this last component of the Man of Law’s praise of merchandise is ironic, it will be necessary to compare the general “tidynges” of *The Man of Law’s Prologue* to the specific “tidynges” within the tale. On this subject David Wallace presents the most coherent reading: he argues that because the Syrian merchants in the tale resist the conversion they experience in analogues of *The Man of Law’s Tale*, they reduce the story of Custance’s virtue and piety to a commodity. The tale’s merchants match those of its prologue in that the Sultan values these merchants for their “tidynges” of “th’estaat of regnes.” According to Wallace, *The Man of Law’s Tale* shows that the primary asset of those merchants is their reliability, since unlike other travelers, “a merchant’s entire business depends on creauncing, the ability to attract capital by being creditworthy.”¹⁴ For Wallace’s Syrian/Muslim merchants, with no devotional interest in a Christian woman’s example, the narrative of Custance’s piety and beauty can only be another commodity, like their reputability and an audience’s willingness to believe them. If their carrying of “tidynges” is part and parcel with their transportation of any other commodity, then the role of merchants as sources of information remains subject to the same critique as their role as sources of exotic goods.

What, then, is the significance of this brief appearance of merchants in the tale, other than their enabling role in linking Custance to the Sultan? Both the merchant who taught the Man of Law the tale and the merchants who tell the sultan about Custance are necessary if the events of the tale and the telling of it are to take place. Thus, while commodification of information introduces the potential for avarice in tale-telling, it also enacts one of the fundamental justifications for trade, shared even by *The Parson’s Tale* (X.777–78) and Gower’s *Mirour de*

¹³ Certainly many critics see the moral of this tale as transcending any limitations of its teller; see Morton W. Bloomfield, “*The Man of Law’s Tale*: A Tragedy of Victimization and a Christian Comedy,” *PMLA* 87 (1972): 384–90; Joseph E. Grennen, “Chaucer’s Man of Law and the Constancy of Justice,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 84 (1985): 498–514; Ann W. Astell, “Apostrophe, Prayer, and the Structure of Satire in *The Man of Law’s Tale*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 13 (1991): 81–97; and Anna Baldwin, “*The Man of Law’s Tale* as a Philosophical Narrative,” *Yearbook of English Studies* 22 (1992): 181–89.

¹⁴ David Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity: Absolutist Lineages and Associational Forms in England and Italy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 186.

l'Omme (ll. 25189–97), the need for commodities (including “tidynges”) to travel where they are needed. This mercantility of news contrasts strongly with Chaucer’s idealized description of written discourse in his *Retraction*, where “oure book seith, ‘Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,’ and that is myn entente” (X.1083). The *Retraction* presents *sentence* as the proper goal of narrative, but the commodification of narrative in *The Man of Law’s Tale* reveals the self-interest and presumed avarice of the merchant carrying it from place to place. This gap between this mercantile tale-telling and Chaucer’s didactic theory of narrative in the *Retraction* argues that a narrator focusing on himself lacks the didactic impulse to pass along the *sentence* with the *solaas*. While narrative self-interest was a reality in a world of cultural patronage, it was hardly the done thing to admit to it. The Man of Law’s “source” reflects historical merchants’ tastes in literature, which ran somewhat to sober didactic narrative, but the comparison to the unequivocally commodified “tidynges” of the Syrian merchants implies that the merchant-source might have as little devotional interest in it as those Muslim narrators did.¹⁵

We must also consider the effect of those “tidynges” within the tale: as they inflame the Sultan, he promises to convert to have Custance, but his motivations are in the form of “al his lust and al his bisy cure” (II.188). These tidings thus have a double effect, in that the Sultan’s promise to convert accomplishes a good unintended by the non-Christian merchants, but subsequent events prove quite unpleasant for Custance and the Sultan. Granted, her story requires substantial obstacles for her to overcome in order to prove her sanctity, and her piety has an overall positive effect on those around her, but the tale focuses almost salaciously on the chaotic adventure story of her voyages and her various mistreatments by mothers-in-law and suitors both potential and actual.¹⁶ Such entertaining trials and tribulations make sense if this nar-

¹⁵ See Janet Coleman, *Medieval Readers and Writers, 1350–1400* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 26, 41–44. Carol M. Meale considers merchants’ interest in romance manuscripts in the fifteenth century (“Patrons, Buyers, and Owners: Book Production and Social Status,” in *Book Production and Publishing in Britain, 1375–1475*, ed. Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 217).

¹⁶ On the subject of *The Man of Law’s Tale*’s adherence to hagiographical genre expectations, see, for example, Michael R. Paull, “The Influence of the Saint’s Legend Genre in *The Man of Law’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 5 (1971): 179–94; and Melissa M. Furrow, “The Man of Law’s St. Custance: Sex and the Saeculum,” *Chaucer Review* 24 (1990): 223–35. On the salaciousness of the tale’s treatment of Custance, note that the details of her hardships take far more narrative space than merchants’ description of her in II.162–68. Also instructive is Larry Scanlon’s description of the adventures of Thais in book 8 of Gower’s

rative is constructed for the material benefit of the teller rather than the spiritual benefit of the hearer. Though one might question the salvific value of a conversion made in a spirit of covetousness and lust, the news of Custance works inadvertently to the Sultan's spiritual benefit. In material terms, though, the merchants "lyven in wele" and get the Sultan's "grace" (II.175–76), while the Sultan is "al tohewe and stiked at the bord" (II.430). The merchants' "tidynges" have a moral effect not unlike that of *The Pardoner's Tale*: they might save souls by accident, so to speak, but saving Christian souls cannot be the goal of the unconverted merchants. Instead they gain from the telling, either in direct compensation of the Sultan's "grace" or in the maintenance of their reputation as a valuable source of news. This motivation applies to the Man of Law, too; Laurel L. Hendrix observes that "Custance serves the Man of Law well as the text, the coin, with which he pays his debt of story to the Host."¹⁷

The result of this challenge to the Man of Law's motives is that as the Man of Law presents the estate of merchants in terms that undermine common merchants' self-defenses, he also undermines their other primary function in his prologue—that of telling tales—and by implication, his own motives as a tale-teller. He tells a tale from a merchant, a fact revealing that a moral story need not have a moral teller and establishing merchants specifically as not being morally invested in their "tidynges." Certainly satire of lawyers was at least as common as that of merchants, and the two overlap in Gower's and Langland's satires, so it is logical for the Man of Law's criticism of merchants to rebound on him.¹⁸ Chaucer here makes a subtle point about the limitations of satire: the Man of Law's subtle attack on merchants' risk-taking becomes, in the context of a "mercantile" narrative, an attack on his own narrative self-interest. The Man of Law, by implicating himself in the same criticisms he makes of merchants, either reveals those criticisms' limitations or challenges his own right to criticize merchants, as he is every bit as

Confessio Amantis. Scanlon refers to "the guilty pleasure this narrative takes in imagining the possible violation of even this most virtuous of daughters" and goes on to compare Thais directly to Constance as "another good daughter, whose sufferings also restore and secure the transmission of dynastic rights" ("The Riddle of Incest: John Gower and the Problem of Medieval Sexuality," in *Re-Visioning Gower*, ed. R. F. Yeager [Asheville, NC: Pegasus Press, 1998], 121, 123).

¹⁷ Laurel L. Hendrix, "'Pennance profytable': The Currency of Custance in Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," *Exemplaria* 6 (1994): 165. See also Kevin Harty, "The Tale and its Teller: The Case of Chaucer's Man of Law," *American Benedictine Review* 34 (1983): 361–71.

¹⁸ *Mirour de l'Omme*, ll. 24181–816, 25177–500; William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge Ms. B.15.17*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, 2d ed. (Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle-Everyman, 1995), 3.161–62.

blameworthy. Such a reading accords with readings of *The Man of Law's Prologue* as a satire on the Man of Law. It is not possible to fully avoid the implications of Chaucer's satire here of both lawyers and merchants, but as this satire folds in upon itself, *The Man of Law's Tale* challenges the motivations of narrative itself as mercantile, so that Chaucer's approach to merchants focuses on discourse rather than financial practice.

Having established an association in *The Man of Law's Tale* between merchants' narrative self-interest and the surface reading encouraged by the Man of Law's ironic prologue, Chaucer follows it up with *The Merchant's Tale*, in which he portrays a merchant who is a superficial reader with a self-interested narrative. The notion of the Merchant's narrative "tyranny" is a familiar one, and Lee Patterson's model of the Merchant narrator's motives in this tale remains instructive. Patterson argues that London merchants were "a class in search of a legitimizing ideology," and credits the well-established narrative and stylistic discontinuities of *The Merchant's Tale* to the Merchant's attempts to borrow from clerical and aristocratic discourses in order to construct such an ideology.¹⁹ Given that *The Merchant's Tale* does not seem to represent the sort of story we would expect a historical merchant to have told, unlike the pseudo-Chaucerian *Tale of Beryn* or *The Man of Law's Tale*, the structural and stylistic confusion of *The Merchant's Tale* makes the most sense as a way for Chaucer to represent the lack of a coherent, unchallenged ideology around which to build a merchant subjectivity. As the Merchant's ideological needs and deficiencies appear through his narrative persona, the tale emphasizes the Merchant's lack of understanding through his attempt to link his tale to *The Clerk's Tale*, which more successfully mixes clerical and aristocratic discourse. The narrative discontinuities of *The Merchant's Tale*, constructed as they are from the kinds of discursive conflicts outlined by Patterson, proceed from the Merchant's misreading of the Clerk's envoy. In his narrative self-interest and desire to borrow from successful discourses, the Merchant reveals himself to be a flawed reader of those texts, and his inability to transmit the *sentence* of the Clerk's envoy thus fits into the pattern of discursive failure established by *The Man of Law's Tale*. Where the Clerk has advised Wife-of-Bath-like "archewyves" (IV.1195) to "lat hym [the husband] care, and wepe, and wrynge, and waille" (IV.1212), the Merchant

¹⁹ Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 330 ff.; see also Karla Taylor, "Chaucer's Reticent Merchant," in *The Idea of Medieval Literature: New Essays on Chaucer and Medieval Culture in Honor of Donald R. Howard*, ed. James M. Dean and Christian K. Zacher (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992), 195.

reports that “Wepying and waylyng, care and oother sorwe / I knowe ynogh, on even and a-morwe” (IV.1213–14). The merchant’s focus on the shrewishness of the envoy instead of the exemplum of Grisilde reveals his misreading of the envoy’s relationship to the tale. Following the union of the three estates in a clerical description of the marriage of an aristocrat to a peasant, the Merchant’s borrowing highlights his own exclusion from the three-estate paradigm along with his misunderstanding of the tone of the envoy. The Merchant seems unaware that the Clerk’s epilogue and envoy shift radically from the atmosphere of most of *The Clerk’s Tale*.²⁰

In one of the last stanzas before the envoy, *The Clerk’s Tale* states that “It were ful hard to fynde now-a-dayes / In al a toun Grisildis thre or two” (IV.1164–65) and then invokes the Wife of Bath (IV.1170). With this ending and the subsequent overt antifeminism of the envoy, *The Clerk’s Tale* contrasts its idealized if troubling marriage with non-idealized marriage “now-a-dayes.” The mention of towns tantalizingly suggests the urban Merchant’s apparent recognition of himself, if not satire, in the envoy, a recognition shared by the Host in his immediate acceptance of the Merchant’s antifeminism as expertise on marriage (IV.1240–41).²¹ The Merchant misreads the Clerk’s satire on modern marriage as sympathy for his own misogynist misery. The hint in *The Merchant’s Prologue* that the Merchant’s marriage to a “shrew” matches the Clerk’s satire on the rarity of real-life Grisildes thus represents an ironically wrong-headed move by the Merchant to link himself with what he sees as the Clerk’s successful mix of clerical and aristocratic discourse, as does the Merchant’s own later invocation of the Wife of Bath (IV.1685). He successfully echoes the Clerk’s language, but not his meaning, and his narrative of his own marriage places him into the very subject-position satirized as the opposite of idealized marriage between estates. The Merchant’s self-interested attempt to fit himself into clerkly discourse thus links anti-mercantile satire of social climbing to inept reading.

Since *The Merchant’s Tale* engages with the estate of merchants only through its narrative persona, its engagement with the estates satire

²⁰ David Wallace reads *The Merchant’s Tale* as a response to *The Clerk’s Tale*, with a relationship between the two similar to that commonly found between *The Knight’s Tale* and *The Miller’s Tale* (*Chaucerian Polity*, 294–95).

²¹ Mark Allen effectively characterizes the Host as urban and “bourgeois,” in contrast with the functionally similar Deduit/Mirthe from the *Roman de la Rose* (“Mirth and Bourgeois Masculinity in Chaucer’s Host,” in *Masculinities in Chaucer: Approaches to Maleness in “The Canterbury Tales” and “Troilus and Criseyde,”* ed. Peter G. Beidler [Rochester, NY: D. S. Brewer, 1998], 9–21).

conception of merchants is only peripheral; similarly, since the merchants in *The Man of Law's Tale* are limited to their role as bearers of "tidynges," only the prologue of that tale has any engagement with the estates satire tradition. As a result, although the merchants in *The Man of Law's Tale* and *The Merchant's Tale* trade only in talk, it is not immediately obvious that these two tales avoid estates satire tropes so that they can link merchants instead to the problem of discourse. With the third tale to feature a merchant, however, trade itself plays a much stronger role, and as a consequence Chaucer's use of imperfect narrative as characteristic of merchants becomes much more subtle and must compete with the same satiric stereotypes active in *The General Prologue*. Given the overt defense of merchandise in the mouth of the apparently nameless merchant in *The Shipman's Tale*, this tale alone speaks directly to the merchant estate. Between them, the merchant, the wife, and Daun John succinctly present the positions on trade available to a reader of *The Shipman's Tale*. The main critical tradition of this tale, which generally assimilates medieval anti-mercantilism, allows us a window into the potential thought processes of a medieval reader critical of the estate of merchants. At the same time, less popular pro-mercantile readings continue to provide a much-needed corrective and suggest the possibilities for a pro-mercantile reader.²² More importantly for my overall argument, *The Shipman's Tale* merchant fits directly into *The Canterbury Tales'* pattern of portraying merchants as somewhat dim when faced with discourse. This merchant demonstrates the consequences of his lack of discernment, both in his ignorance of his wife's infidelity and in his failure or refusal to understand (and his participation in) his wife's puns at the conclusion of the tale. Despite its spirited defenses of trade, *The Shipman's Tale* does ultimately challenge the commodification of marriage

²² For anti-mercantile readings of *The Shipman's Tale*, see Albert H. Silverman, "Sex and Money in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," *Philological Quarterly* 32 (1953): 329–36; Janette Richardson, "The Façade of Bawdry: Image Patterns in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," *English Literary History* 32 (1965): 303–13; Bernard S. Levy, "The Quaint World of *The Shipman's Tale*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 4 (1967): 112–18; George R. Keiser, "Language and Meaning in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 12 (1978): 147–61; John P. Hermann, "Dis-memberment, Dissemination, Discourse: Sign and Symbol in *The Shipman's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 19 (1985): 302–37; and Thomas Hahn, "Money, Sexuality, Wordplay, and Context in *The Shipman's Tale*," in *Chaucer in the Eighties*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman and Robert J. Blanch (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 235–49. For pro-mercantile readings, see Cahn, "Chaucer's Merchants and the Foreign Exchange"; V. J. Scattergood, "The Originality of *The Shipman's Tale*," *Chaucer Review* 11 (1977): 210–31; and John McGalliard, "Characterization in Chaucer's *Shipman's Tale*," *Philological Quarterly* 54 (1975): 1–18. Most recent work on the tale has thankfully moved away from the question of the merchant's culpability.

inherent in the business transaction between the wife and the monk (sex for money) and that between the merchant and his wife (sex canceling monetary debt). It is within this context that we must read the merchant's discursive problems, which generally have taken a critical back seat to interpretations of the relationships in the tale.

Before proceeding to the concluding moment of mercantile "reading," however, it is worth a brief look at how this tale attaches narrative self-interest, mercantile avarice, and misreading to different characters. The wife demonstrates self-interest most clearly in her speech to Daun John:

Myn housbonde is to me the worste man
That evere was sith that the world bigan. . . .
As helpe me God, he is noght worth at al
In no degree the value of a flye.
But me greveth moost his nygardye.
And wel ye woot that wommen naturelly
Desiren thynges sixe as wel as I:
They wolde that hir housbondes sholde be
Hardy and wise, and riche, and therto free,
And buxom unto his wyf and fressh abedde.

(VII.161-77)

This is as clear an example of self-interested discourse as one might find anywhere, although some critics have taken it at face value. The wife implies that her husband is none of these six things, but in the same speech she has also suggested that she is feeling suicidally depressed (VII.122), sworn faith to the monk "verrailly for love and affiance" (VII.140), and implied that she is in physical danger from her husband if caught without the hundred francs (VII.181). Given the embrace and kisses of the merchant's return (VII.377-78), the mildness of his reaction when she reveals the absence of the money to the merchant (VII.427 ff.), and his phlegmatic acceptance of her revelation that she spent the hundred francs on "array" (VII.418), none of her claims to the monk quite matches the subsequent action of the tale. While her discursive energy and the extent to which her interaction with the monk fits into a fabliau ethos encourage us to identify with her and thus to oppose her husband the merchant, this gap between her narrative and that of the tale in general reveals the consequences of her pure self-interest. She seems to be lying outright, far more so than either *The Man of Law's Tale* merchants or the Merchant himself in his prologue. With its merchant-class setting, *The Shipman's Tale* separates the various failures of discourse which have earlier characterized merchants, and this mis-

reading and narrative self-interest are thus developed further in conjunction with merchants than they had been in the other two tales.

Since the bulk of the tale's anti-trade material attaches to Daun John, who arguably out-trades the merchant within the realm of the merchant's marriage, the tale radically shifts the traditional scorn for trade by combining an estates-satire focus on greed with equally traditional anticlericalism.²³ Indeed, traditional anti-trade material in the tale is most successful when applied to Daun John's financial transactions, since such business is more unequivocally transgressive for a monk. With traditional anti-mercantile tropes thus distanced from the tale's merchant character, Chaucer's main quibble with merchants remains their use of discourse. The conjunction of merchandise and marital infidelity suggests an implicit comparison between the merchant and January in their modes of responding to infidelity, since both fabliau husbands remain blind to their wives' actions, but the merchant in *The Shipman's Tale* seems not to make the conscious choice to be duped that ultimately makes January so complicit in May and Damian's fornication. *The Shipman's Tale* (as distinct from the wife) also never presents the merchant as deserving cuckoldry in the same way that January does. Where January chooses to believe May's story over his own restored chance for vision, the *Shipman's Tale* merchant's acceptance remains bound up in his inability to read the puns at the end of the tale, so that our choices of interpreting the merchant's character require him to be a poor reader not unlike the Merchant in his own prologue. We see this merchant's discursive ineptitude in the wife's final exchange with him:

"For I wol paye yow wel and redily
 Fro day to day, and if so be I faille,
 I am your wyf; score it upon my taille,
 And I shall paye as soone as ever I may. . . .
 Ye shal my joly body have to wedde;
 By God, I wol nat paye you but abedde. . . ."
 This marchant saugh ther was no remedie . . .
 "Now wyf," he seyde, "and I foryeve it thee;
 But, by thy lyf, ne be namoore so large.
 Keep bet thy good, this yeve I thee in charge."
 Thus endeth my tale, and God us sende
 Taillynge ynough unto our lyves ende. Amen.
 (VII.414-34)

²³ See Richardson, "Façade of Bawdry," 306-7; Levy, "Quaint World," and Hahn, "Money, Sexuality, Wordplay, and Context," 235.

These puns themselves, on “taille,” “wedde,” and “good,” are problematic, as puns in general are difficult to discuss with precision. Robert Adams sees them as encoding the subtle moral of the tale, so that the puns recall “exactly what is missing in the tale: a sense of sin and the need for penance.”²⁴ If, as Adams suggests, a reader naturally associates debt language with penance, penance might well be a silent third referent between the debt and sexuality embedded in the tail/tally, wedding/wed (collateral), and good/goods surrounding the wife’s verbal exchange with the merchant at the conclusion of the tale.

If so, the merchant’s response to these puns represents his greatest moment of spiritual as well as discursive failure: his superficial reading here cuts him off from the reminder of penance as well as a recognition of having been wronged. While more extreme readings of *The Shipman’s Tale* overstate the immorality of any mention of money or monetary exchange, the wife’s infidelity and her punning escape from the consequences of her actions do reveal this merchant, and with him any readers who place too much weight on his sober exterior, to be easily fooled. As an example of a reading and interpreting subject, this merchant earlier in the tale responds to the criticism of gambling in *The Man of Law’s Prologue* through his sober behavior and refusal to dance on his business trip. On the other hand, he misses out on the verbal play of his wife in exactly the way that the Merchant missed the satire of the Clerk’s envoy. Where one critic has compared the play of money in *The Shipman’s Tale* to the Derridean play of language, this merchant only understands the money.²⁵ For the most part moving away from traditional anti-mercantile satire in all three of these tales, Chaucer focuses his satire on a mercantile trait far more dangerous in the eyes of a poet with any moral ambitions: a group characterized by its narrative self-interest and its inability to understand such complex linguistic forms as satire and punning would have a hard time learning anything from *The Canterbury Tales*.

The result of this collapse of merchants’ superficial reading into the obtuseness of the merchant in *The Shipman’s Tale*, a discursive failure on the part of the best merchant in *The Canterbury Tales*, is that Chaucer moves beyond the satire tradition’s superficial criticisms of trade practice (themselves out of touch with late thirteenth- and fourteenth-

²⁴ Robert Adams, “The Concept of Debt in *The Shipman’s Tale*,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 6 (1984): 93.

²⁵ Gerhard Joseph, “Chaucer’s Coinage: Foreign Exchange and the Puns of *The Shipman’s Tale*,” *Chaucer Review* 17 (1983): 341–57.

century cutting-edge theories of financial exchange) to a critique of merchants' superficiality leading up to the *Shipman's Tale* merchant's obliviousness.²⁶ Chaucer replicates potential merchant responses to satire in the *Shipman's Tale* merchant's defenses of trade (VII.224–38) and then pulls the rug out from under them by victimizing the merchant through his inability to understand puns. Such a criticism of the estate of merchants is significantly less savage than traditional anti-mercantilism, and in particular does not imply that all merchants are damned, but it is still a devastating charge in a work that regularly addresses the function and viability of didactic poetry, as in (for example) *The Pardoner's Tale*, *The Prioress's Tale*, *The Tale of Melibee*, *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, and *The Parson's Tale* and *Chaucer's Retraction*. Although Chaucer's idealized merchant in *The Shipman's Tale* is as sympathetic a merchant as one can expect to find anywhere in medieval literature, that merchant's interpretive failure attributes specifically to merchants the familiar fault of reading too much on the surface, just as the merchant's wife's speeches to Daun John reveal that the link between money, sex, and narrative self-interest inhibits the transmission of truth.

With the cumulative effect of Chaucer's constructions of merchants as unable to perceive or transmit *sentence*, despite their historical taste for didactic literature, he draws them into a central issue of *The Canterbury Tales*: the purpose of poetry itself. The Nun's Priest presents the most cogent advice on reading in *The Canterbury Tales*, in his well-known line "Taketh the fruyt, and lat the chaf be stille" (VII.3443), and Chaucer shows that merchants in *The Canterbury Tales* are *not* such idealized Chaucerian readers. As a result of this pattern within his portrayal of merchants, Chaucer's portrayal of merchants' discursive failure implicitly raises a question fundamental to estates satire: if the sins of merchants and other estates have been known to and pointed out by satirists for all these years, why are merchants still so sinful? The two answers to this question both appear in *The Canterbury Tales*' portrayals of merchants, and they explain why Chaucer is not nearly as dependent on estates-satire images of merchants as his contemporaries Gower and Langland. On one hand, critics now realize what Chaucer must have known, that the estates tradition was mistaken about many of the details of medieval trade, as might be expected from a conservative tradition generated in opposition to economic and social change. On the other hand, what Chaucer presents as a pattern of merchants' involvement with texts effectively isolates hypothetical merchant readers from the *sentence* of corrective and satirical literature. If a mercantile reader

of *The Canterbury Tales* shared the perceptive inabilities of the *Merchant's Tale* narrator or the *Shipman's Tale* merchant, such a reader could not gain much in the way of correction from traditional satire because of the very sort of misreading modeled here. Similarly, the narrative self-interest associated with the *Man of Law's Tale* merchants or *The Shipman's Tale's* merchant-class wife would prevent such readers from passing on any *sentence* they did receive. Such a mercantile failure to locate or acknowledge the *fruyt* of traditional satire necessitates Chaucer's movement away from the terms of that traditional satire and sounds a death knell for its treatment of merchants. With the merchants of *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer establishes just why traditional satire is not the way to go about reforming that particular estate. The relative rarity of estates-satiric portrayals of merchants in later English literature may suggest that Chaucer's subtle point here was well-taken.

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²⁶ On economic theory, see Kaye, *Economy and Nature*, passim. Peter John Olivi in particular had a sophisticated and surprisingly modern approach to trade (ibid., 118).