



Notes

CHAUCER'S MERCHANT'S TALE, E 2412-16

This Januarie, who is glad but he?
 He kisseth hire, and clippeth hire ful ofte,
 And on hire wombe he stroketh hire ful softe,
 And to his palays hoom he hath hire lad.
 Now, goode men, I pray yow to be glad.¹

When January has retreated so far into his blindness that he can accept May's claim of having done no more than "struggle with a man upon a tree" (E 2374), the narrator of Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale* comments, "This Januarie, who is glad but he?" (E 2412). Then, after describing January's joyous fondling of his unfaithful wife, the narrator comments, "Now, goode men, I pray yow to be glad" (E 2416). Without wishing to put too much emphasis on a small point, I should like to suggest that the repetition of the word "glad" in the latter line makes it rich with meaning and helps to make clear the implicit moral of the tale. The narrator is suggesting that those men who wish can indeed find happiness in marriage, but they can do so only by following the example of January; that is, they must ignore reality and find happiness by dedicating themselves to self-indulgence so completely that they can avoid the otherwise inevitable awareness of the cunning and cruelty of women.

This is the statement of an egotist in a desperate attempt to find solace in his misery by suggesting that this misery reveals his own clearheadedness and high ideals for happiness and that it is a condition shared by all men who are not so blind as January. Such a sentiment accords well with the assertion the Merchant makes in the prologue to his tale:

We wedded men lyven in sorwe and care,
 Assaye whoso wole, and he shal fynde
 That I seye sooth, by Seint Thomas of Ynde,
 As for the moore part, I sey nat alle
 (E 1228-31).

The narrowness of vision in the sentiment is readily apparent. The Merchant refuses to accept any responsibility for creating his miserable condition; the responsibility, he insists, rests entirely with his wife who, "thogh the feend to hire ycoupled were,/She wolde hym overmacche" (E 1219-20).

1. All quotations are taken from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton, 1957).

That the Merchant should be reduced to satisfying his pretensions by making such petty claims is the final and devastating irony in Chaucer's portrait of a man accustomed to "sownynge alwey th'encrees of his wynnyng" (A 275).

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"UNDO IT, CUT IT, QUICK": THE GORDIAN KNOT IN *BENITO CERENO*

At the height of Captain Delano's uncertainty and confusion aboard the *San Dominick*, an old sailor throws a marvelously intricate knot of ropes at the Captain and challenges him to "undo it, cut it, quick."¹ Melville pays careful attention to the development of this episode, whose symbolic center is the knot. Its "intricacy" Delano "had never seen in an American ship, nor indeed any other" (p. 29). The knot seems to radiate different meanings. It reflects the tangle of Delano's mind, and it represents in a cryptic way the complexity of the situation aboard the ship, as R. H. Fogle has noted.² What appears to be true is in reality false. The slaves control the ship; the racial conflict seethes below the surface. All of these facts, wound in ambiguity, are aptly symbolized in the knot, which is a device of considerable complexity and worthy of explication.

It is described as "Gordian," woven by an aged sailor, whose "seated cross-legged" position and wrinkled "countenance grave and composed" (p. 29) suggest the role of seer or prophet. "The old man looked like an Egyptian priest, making Gordian knots for the temple of Ammon" (p. 29). He serves the role of seer, like Elijah or Dansker.

The myth of the Gordian knot illuminates the central theme in the story and the prophetic role of the knot-maker; it also anticipates the violent resolution to the mutiny aboard the *San Dominick*. The myth tells of a time of internal disturbances in Phrygia, during which an oracle informed the people that a leader would put an end to their strife. He appeared as Gordius, who with a knot of bark fastened his chariot to a pole. An oracle then asserted that the man who should untie the knot would rule Asia. Alexander the Great, failing in his attempts to untie it, cut the knot with his sword and reigned.³

Melville's allusion to the myth suggests that the conflicts and oppositions on the ship, and by implication in the larger world of civilization of bond and free, can be resolved only by violence and not by careful unravel-

1. Herman Melville, "Benito Cereno," in *A Benito Cereno Handbook*, ed. Seymour L. Gross (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1965), p. 29. Subsequent page references to the novel are from this text and will be placed in parentheses after quoted passages.

2. "The Monk and the Bachelor: Melville's *Benito Cereno*," *Tulane Studies in English*, 3 (1952), 173-174; rpt. in *A Benito Cereno Handbook*, pp. 161-162.

3. Sir James George Fraser, *The Golden Bough* (New York: MacMillan, 1935), III, 316-317.