

# **The Canterbury Tales**

**The Merchant, his Prologue and his Tale**

The **Merchant** is apparently a prosperous exporter who likes to TALK of his prosperity; he is concerned about pirates and profits, he is skillful in managing exchange rates, but tightlipped about business details.

### The portrait of the Merchant from the General Prologue

275	<p>A MERCHANT was there with a forked beard,          In motley,<sup>1</sup> and high on horse he sat,          Upon his head a Flandrish beaver hat,          His boots clasped fair and fetisly.          His reasons he spoke full solémpnely,          Sounding always the increase of his winning.          He would the sea were kept for anything<sup>2</sup>          Betwixt Middleburgh and Oréwell.          Well could he in Exchangé shieldés sell.<sup>3</sup>          This worthy man full well his wit beset —          There wisté no wight that he was in debt,          So stately was he of his governance          With his bargains and with his chevissance.          Forsooth he was a worthy man withal,          But sooth to say, I n'ot how men him call.</p>	<p><i>from Flanders</i>  <i>neatly</i>  <i>solemnly</i>  <i>profits</i>  <i>He wished</i>    <i>sell currency</i>  <i>used his brains</i>  <i>no person knew</i>  <i>astute in management</i>  <i>money dealings</i>  <i>Truly / indeed</i>  <i>truth / I don't know</i></p>
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<sup>1</sup> 271: "(dressed in) motley": probably not the loud mixed colors of the jester, but possibly tweed.

<sup>2</sup> 276-7: "He wished above all that the stretch of sea between Middleburgh (in Flanders) and Orwell (in England) were guarded (*kept*) against pirates."

<sup>3</sup> 278: He knew the intricacies of foreign exchange. Scholars have charged the Merchant with gold smuggling or even coin clipping; but, although "shields" were units of money, they were neither gold nor coins.

## THE MERCHANT'S TALE

### Introduction

The opening words of *The Merchant's Tale* deliberately repeat some prominent words at the end of the Clerk's tale, to which it is clearly a sharp response:

Clerk:

*Be aye of cheer as light as leaf on lind* (tree)  
*And let him care and weep and wring and wail.*

Merchant:

*Weeping and wailing, care and other sorrow*  
*I know enough on even and a-morrow* (morning & evening)

Moreover, he makes a direct reference to the Clerk's story:

*There is a long and large difference*  
*Betwixt Griselda's greates patience*  
*And of my wife the passing cruelty*

So the *Merchant's Tale* is very much a member of the "Marriage Group." It is a response, not only to that of the Clerk, but also to that of the Wife of Bath, and it contrasts with the tale of the Franklin which comes after it. Its Prologue shares some of the confessional quality of the Wife's tale, and critics have disputed how closely the Merchant's tale itself should be associated with the confessional narrator of its Prologue; he is quite unlike the tightlipped Merchant of the General Prologue (see the pen Portrait). Is January (the deluded husband of the tale) is he the creature of the embittered mind of the confessional Merchant, a scathing version of himself? Or is he simply another *senex amans* in a Chaucerian fabliau, a foolish old man of comedy who marries a very young woman to his cost, like John the Carpenter of *The Miller's Tale* only several notches less funny? Since Chaucer did give this confessional prologue to the Merchant, it is fair to think that there is meant to be some connection between the prologue and the tale that follows it.

The tale has produced some of the strongest critical responses from readers over the years, who often use language as vigorous and pungent as that of the tale itself. January is a "repulsive dotard" whose "old man's folly" shows "disgusting imbecility." One or more of the characters is "degraded" or

"crass." The tale is "a sordid adulterous intrigue" with a "dirtily obscene atmosphere," a tale of "harsh cynicism," "mordant irony," "savage satire," in which the Merchant indulges in "self-lacerating rage," one of the "most savagely obscene, angrily embittered, pessimistic and unsmiling tales in our language."

Not many works of art have called down such an acid rain of language from critics, certainly no other work by the "genial" Chaucer. To be sure, a few have thought that the tale was "fundamentally comic," with a tone of "rich and mellow irony," a broad "comedy of humors." But these voices have been pretty well drowned out by the more strident ones just mentioned.

The tale is, to be sure, one in which it is hard to like any of the characters portrayed. It is strikingly unlike the Miller's yarn at the same time that it has a striking likeness to it. There is grotesque farce in it, as there is in the Miller's, but the tone is quite different, and one's response is different also. There are few hearty laughs in the Merchant's tale. But it is not, perhaps, as destructively negative as many critics contend.

One reason that January calls forth so much stronger distaste than John the Carpenter of the Miller's tale is the difference between Show and Tell. We are told simply and briefly that John has married a very young girl and keeps her cooped up at home for fear of being cuckolded. In the present tale, however, January is *shown* making his foolish, self-absorbed plans to marry a young woman, and we are given his deluded thinking at some considerable length. In addition we are shown his aged love-making in such fashion as to make it seem grotesque and repulsive. Moreover, the fact of his inevitable jealousy is not merely stated but portrayed in all its grasping unpleasantness.

All of this may make the reader sympathize with May, the young wife, but Chaucer also undermines any easy romanticism. When May surreptitiously reads a love-letter written to her by her husband's squire, Damian, she does not kiss it and replace it in her bosom next to her heart; more shrewdly but much less romantically, she tears it up

*And in the privy softly she it cast*

*(toilet)*

We are not even allowed to hear Damian's romantic phrases, and are free to speculate that they were no more romantic than May's written response, which we also get in paraphrase, brief and to the point, with a nice play on the double meaning of "lust" (any pleasure / sexual desire):

*Right of her hand a letter maked she  
In which she granteth him her very grace.  
There lacketh nought but only day and place  
Where that she might unto his lust suffice.*

Here is not the long wooing of courtly love; one letter from the pining male, and May promptly capitulates, offers her body, and makes arrangements for consummation.

At the assignation, while she is making protestations of fidelity to January, she is making signs to Damian to get up the pear tree. This *could* be comic — in a Mozart opera, say. Here it is unpleasant or worse. There follows the consummation of the grand passion: a sexual coupling in a pear tree, about as charming as that in January's bed. "Romantic" young love, it appears, is not necessarily much more lovely to look upon than old lust. And when January finally realizes what is going on in the tree, May has an answer ready. She can write a quick letter, turn a fast trick, return a smart answer. Love courtly? Love curtly.

May's partner, Damian, a young man to whom his master January has been rather kind, is hardly characterized. He is simply The Lover without the love, perhaps a reincarnation of January as he was forty years before, who

*followed aye his bodily delight* (always)  
*On women there as was his appetite.* (desire)

Forty years later he may still be January, with just about as much character. Some of the other personae are more allegorical than real, like the advisors Placebo the Yesman and Justinus the Just man. In fact, the tale is an odd mixture: the two lovemaking scenes are about as frankly "realistic" as one could well want, but even January and May have allegorical names, and Pluto and Proserpina are out of Roman mythology, though they *sound* like the Wife of Bath and one of her husbands exchanging insults and "authorities" — sacred scripture, no less. Somehow the mixture works, and potently.

In the long climactic scene in January's garden, May's expression of longing for the pears is sexually obvious, and her talk of honor is about as sincere as that of ladies of quality in any Restoration play. The inherent contradiction implied in a January garden with May in it, is, I think, Chaucer's serious wordplay, not mine.

This May who hints at the fruit of her womb, is unrelated to her namesake, the virgin queen of heaven, whom she invokes. May is pregnant (*if* she is) not by the Holy Ghost but by someone a good deal more earthly. It was inevitable that some scholars would see a possible ironic reference to the medieval "Cherry Tree Carol" which recounts the story of how the cherry tree bent down to give the fruit for which the pregnant Virgin Mary craved, and which her old husband had refused to get because he thought her unfaithful.

The narrator also specifically draws attention to the relationship between January's garden and that romantic epitome of all romantic gardens for the medieval world — the Garden in *The Romance of the Rose*, (from which, however, two of the items specifically excluded were old age and ugliness!). The romantic delicacies of Guillaume de Lorris, who wrote the beginning of that poem, become frankly priapic in the section by Jean de Meung who wrote the greater part of it, relating the efforts of the Lover to achieve the Rose in spite of all obstacles. Eventually, at the end of a very long poem, the Lover does achieve his aim: he plucks the virginal rose, as Damian gets the fruit of the peartree.

The Garden of Eden, with its primordial Fall and serpent in the fruit tree, is not far off from the literary memory either. There are also strong echoes of the enclosed garden, the "hortus conclusus," that evocatively romantic image of the lover in the biblical *Song of Songs*, phrases from which are put in the mouth of January himself. The enclosed garden had been used by bible commentators as an image for the Virgin Mary, the heavenly Queen whose name May impiously invokes as she asks help in her unmaidenly business. May's prayer *is* answered, but from another quarter, first by January who gives her a hoist into the Tree of Knowledge, carnal knowledge; then by Prosperina, the Queen of Hell, who gives her the gift of the forked, beguiling tongue of the serpent.

This complex mixing of images and allusions has had a potent effect on the critics, some of whom seem offended by its result — an unsentimental picture in dark, powerful colors, of the workings of the basic human desire that subtends romantic love, and which sometimes subverts good sense and marital fidelity. (As we see it undermine brotherhood and fellowship in, say, the tales of the Knight and the Shipman). Lust, that indispensable part of our human loving, is here shown without its saving consort, love, and barely covered by the tattered rags of romantic convention. Priapus, god of gardens and rutting, is worshipped in the garden which is both January's *and* May's. But then, it is implied, he was worshipped in the Garden of *The Romance of the Rose* too. And, if some biblical commentators were right, in the Garden of Eden, where they thought *that* was the Original Sin. January and May, after contact with the King of the Underworld, like (and unlike) our first parents in *Paradise Lost*

*hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow  
Through Eden took their solitary way*

Some notes on the language of

The Merchant's Tale

**Stress and Rhythm:**

Many of the remarks about word stress in the Clerk's Tale apply here also. Chaucer clearly felt free to vary the stress on many words from one syllable to another, for poetic reasons. This is especially true of words of French origin like *pity*, *miracle*, *counsel* but is not confined to them. Word stress and line rhythm are, of course, intimately connected.

Sometimes I have marked words stressed in ways that are unusual for us but sometimes not. *Purpose* (1571) and *mercury* (1735), for example, seem to have the stress on the second syllable, but marking them thus seems somehow excessive. Similarly for *obstacle* / *miracle* which were probably stressed as *obstácle* / *mirácle* 1659/60. But even quitesentially English words like *womán*, *womé*n, it would seem, could sometimes be stressed thus on the second syllable ( 2279).

Among words that have alternating stress and that I have marked are: *certain* / *certáin* ; *Plácebo* and *Placébo*. *Jánuary* has 3 syllables at 2023 and sometimes elsewhere; otherwise it has four as in 1695 where it rhymes with *tarry*.; *Cóunsel* 1480-85-90 , but *That his counsél should pass his lordè's wit.*(1504). I have not felt it necessary to adopt the Chaucerian spelling *c(o)unsail* as the word does not occur in rhyming position as it does in the Clerk's Tale.

*pity* / *pitý*::            *But natheless yet had he great pitý*  
                                   *That thilkè night offenden her must he* (1755, and also 1995)

but

*Lo, pity runneth soon in gentle heart.* (1986)

Similarly:            *On Ashuer, so meek a look has she.*  
                                   *I may you not devise all her beautý,* (1745/6)

*SLURRING*: Here as elsewhere in Chaucer *evil apaid* is almost certainly pronounced *ill apaid*, paralled with *well apaid* .

Lines that are difficult to scan even with Middle English spelling and pronunciation: 1630, 1780, 1784, 2109, 2248, 2273.

*THE PROLOGUE to the MERCHANT'S TALE*

*The Merchant, picking up on some words at the end of the Clerk's tale, vents his bitter personal disappointment in marriage*

- "Weeping and wailing, care and other sorrow  
I know enough, on even and a-morrow!" *p.m. & a.m.*
- 1215 Quod the Merchant. "And so do others more *many others*  
That wedded be! I trow that it be so, *I guess*  
For well I wot it fareth so with me! *I know it goes*  
I have a wife, the worstè that may be;  
For though the fiend to her y-coupled were, *the devil*
- 1220 She would him overmatch, I dare well swear.  
What should I you rehearse in special *tell in detail*  
Her high malice? She is a shrew at all! *in every way*  
There is a long and largè difference  
Betwixt Griselda's greatè patience <sup>1</sup>
- 1225 And of my wife the passing cruelty.  
Were I unbounden, also may I thee, *single / I promise you*  
I never would eft come into the snare. *never again*  
We wedded men live in sorrow and care;  
Assayè whoso will and he shall find *Let anyone try*
- 1230 That I say sooth, by Saint Thomas of Inde, *truth / India*  
As for the more part — I say not all; *majority*  
God shieldè that it shouldè so befall! *God forbid*  
Ah, good sir Host, I have y-wedded be *been married*  
These monthès two, and morè not, pardee, *by God*
- 1235 And yet, I trowè, he that all his life *I think*  
Wifeless has been, though that men would him rive *stab*  
Unto the heart, ne could in no mannér  
Tellen so muchè sorrow as I now here  
Could tellen of my wife's cursedness."
- 1240 "Now," quod our Host, "Merchant, so God you bless,  
Since you so muchè knowen of that art,  
Full heartily I pray you tell us part."  
"Gladly," quod he, "but of mine ownè sore *pain*  
For sorry heart I tellè may no more."

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<sup>1</sup> 1224: Griselda is the heroine of the immediately preceding tale told by the Clerk. She endures with incredible patience the trials inflicted by her husband.

**THE MERCHANT'S TALE***An old lecher finally decides to get married*

- 1245 Whilom there was dwelling in Lombardy *Once upon a time*  
 A worthy knight that born was of Pavie, *born in Pavia*  
 In which he lived in great prosperity;  
 And sixty years a wifeless man was he,  
 And followed aye his bodily delight *always indulged*  
 1250 On women, there as was his appetite, *wherever he liked*  
 As do these foolès that been secular. *worldly*  
 And when that he was passèd sixty year —  
 Were it for holiness or for dotáge *senility*  
 I can not say — but such a great couráge *desire*  
 1255 Had this knight to be a wedded man,  
 That day and night he does all that he can  
 T'espyen where he mightè wedded be, *To see*  
 Praying our Lord to granten him that he  
 Might oncè know of thilkè blissful life *of that*  
 1260 That is betwixt a husband and his wife,  
 And for to live under that holy bond  
 With which that first God man and woman bound:  
 "No other life," said he, "is worth a bean!  
 For wedlock is so easy and so clean  
 1265 That in this world it is a paradise."  
 Thus said this oldè knight that was so wise.

*An extended passage in "praise" of marriage*

- And certainly, as sooth as God is king, *As sure as*  
 To take a wife, it is a glorious thing,  
 And namely when a man is old and hoar! *white-haired*  
 1270 Then is a wife the fruit of his treasúre:  
 Then should he take a young wife and a fair,  
 On which he might engender him an heir, *On whom / beget*  
 And lead his life in joy and in soláce,  
 Whereas these bachelore's sing "Alas!"  
 1275 When that they finden any adversity  
 In love, which is but childish vanity. *is only*

	And truly, it sits well to be so,	<i>it's appropriate</i>
	That bachelors have often pain and woe;	
	On brittle ground they build, and brittleness	
1280	They findè when they weenè sikerness.	<i>imagine certainty</i>
	They live but as a bird or as a beast	
	In liberty and under no arrest,	<i>no constraint</i>
	Whereas a wedded man in his estate	<i>condition in life</i>
	Liveth a life blissful and ordinate	<i>ordered</i>
1285	Under this yoke of marriage y-bound;	
	Well may his heart in joy and bliss abound.	
	For who can be so buxom as a wife?	<i>so obliging</i>
	Who is so true and eke so ententife	<i>also so attentive</i>
	To keep him, sick and whole, as is his make?	<i>&amp; healthy / mate</i>
1290	For weal or woe she will him not forsake.	<i>For good or ill</i>
	She is not weary him to love and serve,	
	Though that he lie bedridden till he starve.	<i>till he die</i>

*Ignore the misogynists*

	And yet some clerkès say it is not so,	<i>clerics, scholars</i>
	Of which he Theofrast is one of tho'.	<i>T: an anti-feminist</i>
1295	What force though Theofrastus list to lie? <sup>1</sup>	<i>What matter / chooses</i>
	"Ne take no wife," quod he, "for husbandry	<i>economy</i>
	As for to spare in household thy dispense. <sup>2</sup>	
	A truè servant does more diligence	<i>works harder</i>
	Thy goods to keepè than thine ownè wife,	
1300	For she will claim half part all her life.	
	And if that thou be sick, so God me save,	
	Thy very friendès or a truè knave	<i>good f. / servant</i>
	Will keep thee better than she that waiteth aye	<i>always</i>
	After thy goods, and has done many a day.	<i>After = For</i>
1305	And if thou take a wife unto thine hold,	<i>keeping</i>
	Full lightly mayest thou be a cuckèwold."	<i>v. easily / deceived husband</i>
	This sentence and a hundred thingès worse	<i>opinion</i>
	Writeth this man. There God his bonès curse!	<i>May God</i>

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<sup>1</sup> 1295: "What does it matter if Theophrastus chooses to lie." Theophrastus's anti-feminist tract figures earlier, in the Wife of Bath's Tale. Her fifth husband liked reading it.

<sup>2</sup> 1296-7: "Do not marry for the sake of economy, to save on household expenses" (such as servants). Presumably a pun is intended on *husbandry* = "economy" and also "marriage."

	But take no keep of all such vanity —	<i>take no notice / nonsense</i>
1310	Defy Theofrast, and hearken me: A wife is Godè's giftè verily. All other manner giftès hardily, As landès, rentès, pasture, or commune, Or moebles, all been giftès of Fortune, <sup>1</sup>	<i>listen to truly certainly common land chattels</i>
1315	That passen as a shadow upon a wall. But dreadè not, if plainly speak I shall, A wife will last and in thine house endure Well longer than thee list, peráventure.	<i>than you want, maybe</i>
	Marriage is a full great sacrament.	
1320	He which that has no wife I hold him shent. He liveth helpless and all desolate — I speak of folk in secular estate. And hearken why I say not this for nought That woman is for mannè's help y-wrought:	<i>wretched i.e. not priests created</i>
1325	The highè God, when he had Adam makèd And saw him all alonè, belly-naked, God of his greatè goodness saidè then: "Let us now make a help unto this man Like to himself." And then he made him Eve.	
1330	Here may you see, and hereby may you prove That wife is man's help and his comfort, His paradise terrestre and his desport. So buxom and so virtuous is she They mustè needès live in unity:	<i>p. on earth &amp; his joy So obedient</i>
1335	One flesh they been, and one flesh, as I guess, Has but one heart in weal and in distress. A wife! Ah, Saintè Mary, ben'citee! How might a man have any adversity That has a wife? Certès, I cannot say.	<i>good times bless us! certainly</i>
1340	The blissè which that is betwixt them tway, There may no tonguè tell or heartè think. If he be poor, she helpeth him to swink. She keeps his goods and wasteth never a deal.	<i>two to work she looks after / a bit</i>

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<sup>1</sup> 1313-4: *Pasture* is grazing land; *commune* is land or rights held in common with others; *moebles* is movable items like furniture.

- All that her husband lusts, her liketh well.<sup>1</sup>  
 1345 She says not oncè "Nay" when he says "Yea."  
 "Do this," says he. "All ready, sir," says she.
- O blissful order of wedlock precious,  
 Thou art so merry and eke so virtuous, *& also*  
 And so commended and approvèd eke,  
 1350 That every man that holds him worth a leek *thinks himself*  
 Upon his bare knees ought all his life  
 Thanken his God that him has sent a wife,  
 Or else pray to God him for to send  
 A wife to last unto his life's end,  
 1355 For then his life is set in sikerness. *security*  
 He may not be deceivèd, as I guess,  
 So that he work after his wife's rede: *Provided that / advice*  
 Then may he boldly keepen up his head.  
 They be so true and therewithal so wise,  
 1360 For which, if thou wilt worken as the wise,  
 Do always so as women will thee rede. *advise*

*Biblical wives and classical authorities*

- Lo how that Jacob, as these clerkès read, *scholars*  
 By good counsel of his mother Rebekke *Genesis 27*  
 Bound the kiddè's skin about his neck,  
 1365 For which his father's benison he won. *blessing*  
 Lo Judith, as the story eke tell can,  
 By good counsel she Godè's people kept, *Judith xi-xiii*  
 And slew him Holofernes while he slept.  
 Lo Abigail, by good counsel how she *I Kings (Samuel), 25*  
 1370 Saved her husband Nabal when that he  
 Should have been slain. And look Esther also *Esther 7*  
 By good counsel delivered out of woe  
 The people of God, and made him Mardochee  
 Of Ashuer enhancèd for to be.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1344: "Everything that her husband desires pleases her completely." The Chaucerian meaning of "lust," verb or noun, is not confined to sexual desire.

<sup>2</sup> 1374 and preceding: All of these "commendable" actions by women involved deceit or trickery of some kind.

- 1375 There is no thing in gree superlative, *degree*  
 As says Senek, above a humble wife.  
 Suffer thy wife's tongue, as Cato bit. *Endure / bids*  
 She shall command and thou shalt suffer it,  
 And yet she will obey of courtesy.
- 1380 A wife is keeper of thine husbandry. *household economy*  
 Well may the sickè man bewail and weep  
 Where as there is no wife the house to keep.
- I warnè thee, if wisely thou wilt work,  
 Love well thy wife, as Christè loved his church.
- 1385 If thou lovest thyself thou lovest thy wife.  
 No man hates his flesh, but in his life  
 He fosters it; and therefore bid I thee,  
 Cherish thy wife or thou shalt never thee. *thee (vb) = succeed*  
 Husband and wife, what so men jape or play, *joking aside*
- 1390 Of worldly folk holden the siker way. *non-clerical / surer*  
 They be so knit there may no harm betide — *occur*  
 And namèly upon the wife's side. *especially*

*Back to the tale of January, who asks his friends to help him find a wife — a young one*

- For which this January of whom I told  
 Considered has inwith his dayès old *in his old age*
- 1395 The lusty life, the virtuous quiet  
 That is in marriage honey sweet;  
 And for his friendès on a day he sent  
 To tellen them th'effect of his intent. *the gist*  
 With facè sad this tale he has them told: *serious face*
- 1400 He saidè, "Friendès, I am hoar and old, *white-haired*  
 And almost, God wot, on my pittè's brink. *God knows / grave's*  
 Upon my soule somewhat must I think.  
 I have my body folily dispended. *wantonly used*  
 Blessèd be God that it shall be amended!
- 1405 For I will be, certáin, a wedded man,  
 And that anon, in all the haste I can, *promptly*  
 Unto some maiden fair and tender of age.  
 I pray you shapeth for my marriage *make arrangements*  
 All suddenly, for I will not abide; *wait*
- 1410 And I will fond t'espyen on my side *try to see*

- To whom I may be wedded hastily.  
 But for as much as you been more than I,  
 You shallè rather such a thing espy  
 Than I, and where me best were to ally. *best for me to marry*
- 1415 But one thing warn I you, my friendès dear:  
 I will no old wife have in no mannér.  
 She shall not passen twenty years certáin!  
 Old fish and young flesh would I have full fain. *very gladly*  
 Bet is," quod he, "a pike than a pickerel, *Better / young pike*
- 1420 And better than old beef is tender veal.  
 I will no woman thirty years of age;  
 It is but beanè-straw and great foráge. *bean stalks & coarse fodder*  
 And eke these oldè widows, God it wot, *also / God knows*  
 They can so muchel craft on Wade's boat,<sup>1</sup>
- 1425 So muchel broken harm when that them lest, *breach of peace?*  
 That with them should I never live in rest.  
 For sundry schoolès maken subtle clerkès;  
 Woman of many schoolès half a clerk is.<sup>2</sup>
- 1430 But certainly, a young thing men may gie, *guide, train*  
 Right as men may warm wax with handès ply. *mould*  
 Wherefore I say you plainly in a clause, *in a phrase*  
 I will no old wife have right for this cause:  
 For if so were I haddè such mischance
- 1435 That I in her ne could have no pleasánce, *sexual pleasure*  
 Then should I lead my life in avoutry, *adultery*  
 And go straight to the devil when I die.  
 No children should I none upon her geten — *beget*  
 Yet were me lever houndès had me eaten *I had rather*  
 Than that my heritagè shouldè fall
- 1440 In strangè hands. And this I tell you all  
 (I dotè not) I wot the causè why *(I'm not senile) I know*  
 Men shouldè wed, and furthermore wot I *I know*  
 There speaketh many a man of marriage  
 That wot no more of it than wot my page. *knows*

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<sup>1</sup> 1424: "They know (*can*) so much about Wade's boat ..." Nobody seems to know quite what this refers to. The reader must guess from the context. Much the same is true of *muchel broken harm*.

<sup>2</sup> 1427-8: "Attendance at different schools makes sharper scholars; a woman who has studied many husbands is half a scholar."

*He knows all the orthodox reasons for marriage*

- 1445 For whichè causes should man take a wife?  
 If he ne may not livè chaste his life, *celibate*  
 Take him a wife with great devotion *Let him take*  
 Because of lawful procreation  
 Of children, to th'honour of God above,
- 1450 And not only for paramour or love; *sexual pleasure*  
 And for they shouldè lechery eschew, *And because / avoid*  
 And yield their debtè when that it is due;<sup>1</sup>  
 Or for that each of them should helpen other  
 In mischief, as a sister shall the brother, *In trouble*
- 1455 And live in chastity full holily,  
 But sirs, by your leave, that am not I.<sup>2</sup>

*He feels he is still quite virile*

- For God be thanked, I darè make avaunt, *boast*  
 I feel my limbs stark and suffissaunt *strong & able*  
 To do all that a man belongeth to. *belongs to a man*
- 1460 I wot myselfè best what I may do. *I know*  
 Though I be hoar, I fare as does a tree *white haired*  
 That blossoms ere the fruit y-waxen be, *is grown*  
 And blossomy tree is neither dry nor dead:  
 I feel me nowhere hoar but on my head.
- 1465 My heart and all my limbès be as green  
 As laurel through the year is for to seen.  
 And since that you have heard all my intent,  
 I pray you to my counsel you'll assent."

*Different responses from different people*


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<sup>1</sup> 1452: Each partner of the marriage owes sexual relief to the other when he or she demands it; this is the "debt" that is due from one to the other, so that married people should be more readily able to "eschew lechery", i.e. avoid adultery.

<sup>2</sup> 1445-56: For what causes should people marry? These lines list the accepted answers, the last of which seems to include the odd case, sometimes encountered in saints' lives, where the married partners agree to abstain from sex completely and live together like sister and brother. The speaker says he is definitely not one of those.

- Diverse men diversely him told *Different(ly)*  
 1470 Of marriage many examples old.  
 Some blamed it, some praised it, certain.  
 But at the last, shortly for to sayn,  
 As alday falleth altercation *daily / quarrels*  
 Betwixt friends in disputation,  
 1475 There fell a strife betwixt his brethren two,  
 Of which that one was cleped Plácebo, *was called*  
 Justínus soothly called was that other.<sup>1</sup> *truly*

*Placebo tells January what he wants to hear*

- Placébo said: "O January, brother,  
 Full little need had you, my lord so dear,  
 1480 Counsel to ask of any that is here,  
 But that you be so full of sapience *wisdom*  
 That you ne liketh, for your high prudéce, *are not likely*  
 To waiven from the word of Solomon. *to depart*  
 This word said he unto us everyone:  
 1485 `Work allé thing by counsel,' thus said he, *by advice*  
 `And then shalt thou not repenten thee.'  
 But though that Solomon spoke such a word,  
 My owné dearé brother and my lord,  
 So wisly God my soulé bring at rest,<sup>2</sup> *As surely as*  
 1490 I hold your owné counsel is the best. *for a fact*  
 For brother mine, of me take this motive:  
 I have now been a court-man all my life,  
 And God it wot, though I unworthy be, *God knows*  
 I have stonden in full great degree *high position*  
 1495 Abouten lordés in full high estate, *of great rank*  
 Yet had I ne'er with none of them debate.  
 I never them contráried truly. *contradicted*  
 I wot well that my lord can more than I; *knows more*  
 What that he says, I hold it firm and stable. *That which*  
 1500 I say the same, or elsé thing sembláble. *similar*  
 A full great fool is any counsellor

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<sup>1</sup> 1476-7: The two "brothers" (two aspects of his mind?) have appropriately allegorical names: "Placebo" ("I will please," the Yesman) and Justinus (the Just man).

<sup>2</sup> 1489: "As surely as (I hope) God will bring my soul to His peace."

- That serveth any lord of high honour  
 That dare presume or elsé thinken it  
 That his counsél should pass his lordé's wit. *wisdom*
- 1505 Nay, lordés be no foolés, by my fay. *by my faith*  
 You have yourselfè showéd here today  
 So high senténcé so holily and well, *such good sense*  
 That I consent and cónfirm everydeal *completely*  
 Your wordés all and your opinion.
- 1510 By God, there is no man in all this town  
 Nor in Itaille could better have y-said.  
 Christ holds him of this counsel well apaid. *will be pleased*  
 And truly it is a high couráge *spirit*  
 Of any man that stapen is in age *advanced*
- 1515 To take a young wife. By my father's kin  
 Your hearté hangeth on a jolly pin! *is well tuned*  
 Do now in this mattér right as you lest, *as you please*  
 For, finally, I hold it for the best."

*Justinus tells him some of the more unpleasant truths about marriage*

- Justínus that aye stillè sat and heard, *all the time*
- 1520 Right in this wise he Plácebo answéred:  
 "Now, brother mine, be patient I pray,  
 Since you have said, and hearken what I say.  
 Seneca, among other wordés wise, *(Roman philosopher)*  
 Says that a man ought him right well advise *consider carefully*
- 1525 To whom he gives his land or his chattél *property*  
 And since I ought avisen me right well  
 To whom I give my goods away from me,  
 Well muchel more I ought aviséd be  
 To whom I give my body for always.
- 1530 I warn you well, it is no childé's play  
 To take a wife without avisément. *consideration*  
 Men must enquirè — this is mine assent —  
 Whe'r she be wise, or sober, or drunkelew, *Whether / alcoholic*  
 Or proud, or elsé other ways a shrew,
- 1535 A chidester, or waster of thy good, *A nag*  
 Or rich, or poor, or elsé mannish wood. *crazy for men*  
 Albeit so that no man finden shall *Although*  
 None in this world that trotteth whole in all, *is perfect*

	Nor man nor beast such as men could devise,	<i>imagine</i>
1540	But natheless, it ought enough suffice With any wife, if so were that she had More goodè thewès than her vices bad.	<i>good points</i>
	And all this asketh leisure for t'enquire. For God it wot, I have wept many a tear	<i>God knows</i>
1545	Full privily since that I had a wife: Praise whoso will a wedded manne's life, Certain I find in it but cost and care, And observánces of all blisses bare.	<i>privately</i> <i>expense &amp; trouble</i> <i>thankless tasks</i>
	And yet, God wot, my neighebour's about, 1550 And namely of women many a rout, Say that I have the mostè steadfast wife, And eke the meekest one that beareth life, But I wot best where wringeth me my shoe. You may, for me, right as you liketh do. <sup>1</sup>	<i>in large numbers</i> <i>And also</i> <i>I know</i>
1555	Aviseth you — you be a man of age — How that you enter into marriage, And namely with a young wife and a fair.	<i>Beware</i> <i>and pretty one</i>
	By him that madè water, earth, and air, The youngest man that is in all this rout	<i>in this group</i>
1560	Is busy enough to bringen it about To have his wife alonè. Trusteth me, You shall not pleasen her fully yearès three; This is to say, to do her full pleasáncè.	<i>to himself</i> <i>total satisfaction</i>
	A wifè asks full many an óbservance.	<i>much attention</i>
1565	I pray you that you be not evil apaid."	<i>angry</i>

*Placebo confirms January in what he wants to hear*

	"Well," quod this January, "and hast thou said?"	<i>finished</i>
	Straw for thy Seneca, and thy provérbs! I countè not a panier full of herbs	<i>basket of weeds</i>
	Of schoolè-terms. Wiser men than thou,	<i>scholars' talk</i>
1570	As thou hast heard, assenteden right now To my purpose. Placebo, what say ye?" "I say it is a cursed man," said he,	<i>have agreed</i>

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<sup>1</sup> 1554: "You may do as you please, as far as I am concerned."

"That letteth matrimony, sikerly."  
 And with that word they risen suddenly,  
 1575 And been assented fully that he should  
 Be wedded when him list and where he would. *he pleased & wanted*

*January fantasizes about brides beautiful, young, and wise. He makes his choice.*

High fantasy and curious busyness *Beautiful & fanciful thoughts*  
 From day to day gan in the soul impress *ran in the mind*  
 Of January about his marriage.  
 1580 Many fair shapes and many a fair visage *a beautiful face*  
 There passeth through his heartè night by night;  
 As whoso took a mirror polished bright, *whoever*  
 And set it in a common market place,  
 Then should he see full many a figure pace  
 1585 By his mirrouúr; and in the samè wise  
 Gan January inwith his thought devise *within / think*  
 Of maidens which that dwelten him beside. *lived near*  
 He wisté not where that he might abide. *knew / settle on*  
 For if that one has beauty in her face,  
 1590 Another stands so in the people's grace  
 For her sadness and her benignity, *seriousness & goodness*  
 That of the people greatest voice had she;  
 And some were rich and had a baddè name.  
 But natheless, between earnest and game,  
 1595 He at the last appointed him on one *to tell the truth*  
 And let all others from his heartè gone, *decided on*  
 And chose her of his own authority, *initiative*  
 For Love is blind alday, and may not see. *always*  
 And when that he was in his bed y-brought,  
 1600 He portrayed in his heart and in his thought  
 Her freshè beauty and her agè tender,  
 Her middle small, her armès long and slender,  
 Her wisè governance, her gentleness,  
 Her womanly bearing and her sadness. *maturity*  
 1605 And when that he on her was condescended, *settled*  
 Him thought his choicè might not be amended. *improved*  
 For when that he himself concluded had, *had decided*  
 Him thought each other mannè's wit so bad *every o. m's advice*

That impossible it were to reply  
 1610 Against his choice. This was his fantasy.

*He announces his choice to his friends*

	His friendès sent he to at his instánce,	<i>request</i>
	And prayèd them to do him that pleasáncè	
	That hastily they would unto him come.	
	He would abridge their labour, all and some:	<i>one &amp; all</i>
1615	Needeth no more for them to go nor ride;	
	He was appointed where he would abide. <sup>1</sup>	<i>had decided</i>
	Placebo came and eke his friendès soon,	
	And alderfirst he bade them all a boon:	<i>first he asked a favor</i>
	That none of them no argumentès make	
1620	Against the purpose which that he has take,	<i>decision he had made</i>
	Which purpose was pleasánt to God, said he,	
	And very ground of his prosperity.	<i>basis</i>
	He said there was a maiden in the town	
	Which that of beauty haddè great renown.	
1625	All were it so she were of small degree,	<i>Although / low rank</i>
	Sufficeth him her youth and her beauty.	
	Which maid he said he would have to his wife,	
	To lead in ease and holiness his life,	
	And thankèd God that he might have her all,	
1630	That no wight his blissè parten shall;	<i>nobody could share</i>
	And prayèd them to labour in this need,	
	And shapen that he failè not to speed,	<i>arrange / to succeed</i>
	For then, he said, his spirit was at ease.	

*One problem: since marriage is such a paradise on earth, how will he ever get to heaven?*

	"Then is," quod he, "nothing may me displease.	
1635	Save one thing pricketh in my consciéncè,	
	The which I will rehearse in your préséncè:	<i>I'll mention</i>
	I have," quod he, "heard said full yore ago	
	There may no man have perfect blisses two,	
	This is to say, on earth and eke in heaven.	<i>also</i>

---

<sup>1</sup> 1616: "He had decided whom he would settle on."

- 1640 For though he keep him from the sinnés seven,  
 And eke from every branch of thilké tree,<sup>1</sup> *also / of that*  
 Yet is there so perféct felicity *happiness*  
 And so great ease and lust in marriage, *& pleasure*  
 That ever I am aghast now in mine age *afraid*
- 1645 That I shall leadé now so merry a life,  
 So delicate, withouten woe and strife, *So delicious*  
 That I shall have my heaven on earthé here.  
 For since that very heaven is bought so dear *heaven itself*  
 With tribulation and with great penánce,
- 1650 How should I then, that live in such pleasánce  
 As allé wedded men do with their wivés,  
 Come to the bliss where Christ etern alive is?  
 This is my dread. And you, my brethren tway, *two*  
 Assoileth me this question, I you pray." *Answer*

*Justinus assures him that marriage will provide him with quite enough purgatory on earth*

- 1655 Justinus, which that hated his folly, *which that = who*  
 Answered anonright in his japery. *promptly / sarcasm*  
 And for he would his longé tale abridge, *shorten*  
 He wouldé no authority allege *quote no authors*  
 But saidé: "Sir, so there be no obstacle *if there's no*
- 1660 Other than this, God of his high miracle  
 And of his mercy may so for you work  
 That ere you have your rites of holy church,<sup>2</sup> *last rites*  
 You may repent of wedded manné's life  
 In which you say there is no woe nor strife.
- 1665 And elsé God forbid but if he sent  
 A wedded man him gracé to repent  
 Well often rather than a single man.<sup>3</sup>  
 And therefore, sir, the best rede that I can: *advice I know*

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<sup>1</sup> 1640-41: The 7 Deadly Sins were: Pride, Covetousness, Lust, Anger, Gluttony, Envy, and Sloth. From these all other sins grew, and they were often portrayed as branches and leaves on the tree of vice.

<sup>2</sup> 1662: "Before you have the last rites of the church," (i.e. before you die).

<sup>3</sup> 1667: "God forbid that a married man should not have the grace (reason?) to repent even oftener than a single man."

- 1670 Despair you not, but have in your memory,  
 Paraunter she may be your purgatory; *Perhaps*  
 She may be Godè's means and Godè's whip!  
 Then shall your soule up to heaven skip  
 Swifter than does an arrow out of a bow!  
 I hope to God hereafter shall you know  
 1675 That there is not so great felicity  
 In marriage, ne never more shall be,  
 That shall you let of your salvation, *prevent your*  
 So that you use, as skill is and reason, *Provided / right*  
 The lustès of your wife attemprely,<sup>1</sup> *moderately*  
 1680 And that you please her not too amorously,  
 And that you keep you eke from other sin. *keep yourself also*  
 My tale is donè, for my wit is thin. *my wisdom*  
 Be not aghast hereof, my brother dear, *amazed*  
 But let us waden out of this mattèr. *get out of*  
 1685 The Wife of Bath, if you have understand,  
 Of marriage which we have on hand  
 Declarèd has full well in little space.<sup>2</sup>  
 Fareth now well. God have you in His grace."

*The marriage contract is drawn up, and the ceremony takes place*

- 1690 And with that word this Justin and his brother  
 Have take their leave and each of them of other.  
 And when they saw that it must needès be,  
 They wroughten so by sly and wise treaty *arranged / agreement*  
 That she, this maiden, which that Mayus hight, *was called May*  
 As hastily as ever that she might,  
 1695 Shall wedded be unto this January.  
 I trow it were too longè you to tarry<sup>3</sup> *to delay you*  
 If I you told of every script and bond *title deed*

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<sup>1</sup> 1678-9: "Provided that you satisfy your wife's lust in moderation (*attremprely*), as is right and proper." The sarcasm is obvious.

<sup>2</sup> 1685-7: The literary impropriety of having one pilgrim (the Wife of Bath) mentioned by a character (Justinus) in one of the tales told by another pilgrim has often been remarked. It would be different if the Merchant had mentioned her, as he refers to a character within the Clerk's Tale. If lines 1685-87 could be regarded as a parenthesis by the Merchant, some of the awkwardness might be avoided. Or, of course, it might be Chaucer's little literary joke.

<sup>3</sup> 1696: "I think it would hold you up too long if ..."

- By which that she was feoffed in his land;<sup>1</sup> *endowed with*  
 Or for to hearken of her rich array. *clothes ?*
- 1700 But finally y-comen is that day  
 That to the churchè bothè be they went  
 For to receive the holy sacrament. *s. (of matrimony)*  
 Forth comes the priest with stole about his neck,  
 And bade her be like Sarah and Rebekke *prayed her to*
- 1705 In wisdom and in truth of marriage,  
 And said his orisons as is uságe, *prayers / customary*  
 And croucheth them, and bade God should them bless, *makes sign of cross*  
 And made all siker enough with holiness. *secure*  
 Thus been they wedded with solemnity.
- 1710 And at the feastè sitteth he and she  
 With other worthy folk upon the daís.

*The marriage feast: classical and biblical analogues*

- All full of joy and blissè is the palace,  
 And full of instruments and of vitaille, *victuals, food*  
 The mostè dainteous of all Itaille. *Italy*
- 1715 Before them stood instruments of such sound  
 That Orpheus, ne of Thebès Amphion,  
 Ne maden never such a melody.<sup>2</sup>  
 At every course then came loud minstrelcy,  
 That never trumpéd Joab for to hear, *David's trumpeter*
- 1720 Ne he Theodamas yet half so clear  
 At Thebès when the city was in doubt.  
 Bacchus the wine them shenketh all about, *pours for them*  
 And Venus laugheth upon every wight,  
 For January was become her knight, *her = Venus*
- 1725 And wouldè both assayen his couráge *prove his sexual power*  
 In liberty and eke in marriage,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1692-98: His friends conduct the negotiations for the marriage and draw up a formal marriage treaty by which, among other things, May is "enfeoffed," i.e. entitled to some or all of January's property.

<sup>2</sup> 1716-21: Orpheus, the harpist of classical story, almost rescued his wife Eurydice from the underworld by the beauty of his music. Amphion built the walls of Thebes by moving the very stones into place by the music of his lyre. Joab was the trumpeter of David in the Old Testament. Theodamas was a trumpeter augur of Thebes.

<sup>3</sup> 1725-6: "And wished to demonstrate his sexual prowess both as a bachelor (in the past) and

- And with her firebrand in her hand about  
 Danceth before the bride and all the rout. *company*  
 And certainly, I dare right well say this:
- 1730 Hymeneus, that god of wedding is,  
 Saw never his life so merry a wedded man!  
 Hold thou thy peace, thou poet Martian, *Martianus Capella*  
 That writest us that ilkè wedding merry *that the*  
 Of her Philology and him Mercury,
- 1735 And of the songè that the Muses sung:  
 Too small is both thy pen and eke thy tongue  
 For to describen of this marriage  
 When tender youth has wedded stooping age:  
 There is such mirth that it may not be written.<sup>1</sup>
- 1740 Assayeth it yourself; then may you witen *try it / may know*  
 If that I lie or no in this mattér.  
 Mayus, that sits with so benign a cheer *pleasant an expression*  
 Her to behold it seemèd faiërie. *enchanting*  
 Queen Esther lookèd never with such an eye
- 1745 On Ashuer, so meek a look has she.  
 I may you not devise all her beauty, *describe*  
 But thus much of her beauty tell I may,  
 That she was like the brightè morrow of May, *morning*  
 Fulfillèd of all beauty and pleasánce!

*More fantasy*

- 1750 This January is ravished in a trance  
 At every time he lookèd on her face!  
 But in his heart he gan her to menace  
 That he that night in armès would her strain  
 Harder than ever Paris did Elaine. *Helen of Troy*
- 1755 But natheless yet had he great pity  
 That thilkè night offenden her must he,  
 And thought: "Alas! O tender creäture, *That this*

---

as a married man now."

<sup>1</sup> 1723-39: The mirth of the company and the laughter of Venus are presumably not just the usual wedding merriment but partly the laughter of derision at this particular marriage.

- Now wouldè God you mightè well endure  
 All my couráge, it is so sharp and keen. *sexual power*  
 1760 I am aghast you shall it not sustain; *I'm afraid*  
 But God forbid that I did all my might!  
 Now wouldè God that it were waxen night, *that it was night*  
 And that the night would lasten evermo'.  
 I would that all this people were ago." *wish / were gone*  
 1765 And finally he does all his labouúr,  
 As he best might, saving his honouúr,  
 To haste them from the meat in subtle wise. *meal*  
 The timè came that reason was to rise,  
 And after that men dance and drinken fast,  
 1770 And spices all about the house they cast.

*An unexpected if predictable reality intrudes*

- And full of joy and bliss is every man --  
 All but a squire that hightè Damian, *was called*  
 Which carved before the knight full many a day: *Which = Who*  
 He was so ravished on his lady May  
 1775 That for the very pain he was nigh wood; *nearly mad*  
 Almost he swelt and swoonèd there he stood, *Almost fainted*  
 So sore has Venus hurt him with her brand, *torch*  
 As that she bore it dancing in her hand. *When*  
 And to his bed he went him hastily.  
 1780 No more of him at this time speak I,  
 But there I let him weep enough and 'plain *complain*  
 Till freshè May will rue upon his pain. *take pity on*  
 O perilous fire that in the bedstraw breedeth!  
 O familiar foe that his service biddeth! *offers*  
 1785 O servant traitor, falsè homely hew, *disloyal domestic servant*  
 Like to the adder in bosom, sly, untrue!  
 God shield us allè from your áquaintance!  
 O January, drunken in pleasánce  
 In marríage, see how thy Damian,  
 1790 Thine ownè squire and thy bornè man,  
 Intendeth for to do thee villainy!  
 God grantè thee thy homely foe t'espy, *domestic enemy*

For in this world is no worse pestilence  
Than homely foe alday in thy preséncé! *every day*

*January gets ready for the wedding night*

1795	Performéd has the sun his arc diurn; No longer may the body of him sojourn On th'orizont as in that latitude. Night with his mantle that is dark and rude Gan overspread the hemisphere about,	<i>his daily round</i> <i>stay</i> <i>Above horizon</i> <i>rough</i>
1800	For which departed is this lusty rout, From January with thanks on every side. Home to their houses lustily they ride, Where as they do their thingès as them lest, And when they saw their timé, go to rest.	<i>lively group</i>   <i>as they please</i>
1805	Soon after that this hasty January Will go to bed; he will no longer tarry. He drinketh ipocras, claret, and vernáge, Of spices hot t'increasen his couráge, And many a letuary had he full fine,	<i>Wishes to go</i> <i>(aphrodisiacs)</i> <i>potency</i> <i>drug</i>
1810	Such as the cursed monk Daun Constantine Has written in his book "De Coitu." <sup>1</sup> To eat them all he was no thing eschew. And to his privy friendès thus said he: "For Godè's love, as soon as it may be,	   <i>not reluctant</i> <i>close</i>
1815	Let voiden all this house in courteous wise." And they have done right as he will devise. Men drinken, and the traverse draw anon; The bride was brought a-bed as still as stone; And when the bed was with the priest y-blessed,	<i>Clear the house</i> <i>as he wished</i> <i>curtain</i>
1820	Out of the chamber has every wight him dressed.	<i>everyone went</i>

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<sup>1</sup> 1810-11: Constantine says that big wine drinkers will have plenty of desire and semen. His recipes for aphrodisiacs generally call for many different kinds of seed, including rape seed. Another requires the brains of thirty male sparrows and the grease surrounding the kidneys of a freshly-killed he-goat. For Paul Delany's translation of "De Coitu" ("On Copulation") by Constantinus Africanus see *Chaucer Review* IV, (1970), 55-66.

*The wedding night*

And January has fast in armès take  
 His freshè May, his paradise, his make. *mate*  
 He lulleth her, he kisseth her full oft  
 With thicke bristles of his beard unsoft  
 1825 Like to the skin of houndfish, sharp as briar  
 For he was shaved all new (in his mannér).  
 He rubbeth her about her tender face,  
 And saidè thus: "Alas, I must trespass  
 To you, my spouse, and you greatly offend  
 1830 Ere timè come that I will down descend.  
 But natheless, consider this," quod he,  
 "There is no workman, whatsoe'er he be,  
 That may both workè well and hastily.  
 This will be done at leisure perfectly.  
 1835 It is no force how longè that we play. *It doesn't matter*  
 In truè wedlock coupled be we tway, *two*  
 And blessèd be the yoke that we be in! *bond*  
 For in our actès we may do no sin.  
 A man may do no sinnè with his wife,  
 1840 Nor hurt himselfen with his ownè knife,  
 For we have leave to play us by the law." <sup>1</sup>

Thus labours he till that the day gan dawn;  
 And then he takes a sop in fine claree, *piece of bread in f. wine*  
 And upright in his bed then sitteth he,  
 1845 And after that he sang full loud and clear,  
 And kissed his wife and madè wanton cheer. *merry talk*  
 He was all coltish, full of ragery, *"gallantry"*  
 And full of jargon as a fleckèd pie: *old talk / magpie*  
 The slackè skin about his neckè shaketh  
 1850 While that he sang, so chanteth he and cracketh. *croaks*  
 But God wot what that May thought in her heart *God knows*  
 When she him saw up-sitting in his shirt,  
 In his night-cap and with his neckè lean;

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<sup>1</sup> 1841: "We have the right to enjoy ourselves legally."

She praiseth not his playing worth a bean.  
 1855 Then said he thus: "My restè will I take.  
 Now day is come. I may no longer wake."

And down he laid his head and slept till prime. *about 9 a.m.*  
 And afterwards, when that he saw his time,  
 Up riseth January. But freshè May  
 1860 Held her chamber unto the fourthè day,  
 As usage is of wivès for the best.  
 For every labourer some time must have rest,  
 Or else longè may he not endure,  
 This is to say, no live creäture  
 1865 Be it of fish or bird or beast or man.

*Laid low by lovesickness, squire Damian laments his love-lorn state in poetry*

Now will I speak of woeful Damian  
 That languisheth for love, as you shall hear.  
 Therefore I speak to him in this mannér:  
 I say: "O silly Damian, alas,  
 1870 Answer to my demand as in this case:  
 How shalt thou to thy lady freshè May  
 Tellè thy woe? She will always say nay.  
 Eke if thou speak, she will thy woe bewray. *expose*  
 God be thy help, I can no better say."  
 1875 This sickè Damian in Venus' fire  
 So burneth that he dieth for desire,  
 For which he put his life in áventure. *danger*  
 No longer might he in this wise endure,  
 But privily a penner gan he borrow, *writing case*  
 1880 And in a letter wrote he all his sorrow,  
 In manner of a complaint or a lay<sup>1</sup> *poems*  
 Unto his fairè freshè lady May.  
 And in a purse of silk hung on his shirt  
 He has it put and laid it at his heart.

---

<sup>1</sup> 1881: Kinds of love poems.

*January notices his squire's absence*

- 1885 The moonè, that at noon was thilkè day *that day*  
 That January has wedded freshè May  
 In two of Taur, was into Cancer gliden.<sup>1</sup> *Taurus*  
 So long has May in her chamber abiden,  
 As custom is unto these nobles all.
- 1890 A bridè shall not eaten in the hall  
 Till dayès four, or three days at the least  
 Y-passed been. Than let her go to feast.  
 The fourthè day complete from noon to noon,  
 When that the highè massè was y-done,
- 1895 In hallè sit this January and May,  
 As fresh as is the brightè summer's day.  
 And so befell how that this goodè man  
 Remembered him upon this Damian,  
 And saidè: "Saint Marie! how may it be  
 1900 That Damian attendeth not to me?  
 Is he aye sick, or how may this betide?"<sup>2</sup>  
 His squires which that stoden there beside  
 Excusèd him because of his sickness,  
 Which letted him to do his busyness — *prevented from*
- 1905 No other causè mightè make him tarry.  
 "That me forthinketh," quod this January. *grieves me*  
 "He is a gentle squire, by my truth.  
 If that he dièd, it were harm and ruth. *pity*  
 He is as wise, discreet, and eke secree *& also trustworthy*
- 1910 As any man I wot of his degree, *I know of his rank*  
 And thereto manly and eke serviceable,  
 And for to be a thrifty man right able. *successful*  
 But after meat as soon as ever I may, *meal*  
 I will myselfè visit him, and eke May,  
 1915 To do him all the comfórt that I can."  
 And for that word him blessèd every man

---

<sup>1</sup> 1886-7: A roundabout astronomical way, dear to Chaucer, of saying apparently, that three or four days had passed.

<sup>2</sup> 1901: "Is he sick, or what is the matter?"

That of his bounty and his gentleness  
 He wouldè so comfort in his sickness  
 His squire, for it was a gentle deed.

*January instructs his wife to go visit the sick man*

- |      |   |  |
|------|---|--|
| 1920 | "Dame," quod this January, "take good heed,<br>At after-meat you with your women all,<br>When you have been in chamber out of this hall,<br>That all you go to see this Damian.<br>Do him desport — he is a gentle man; | <i>Madame<br/>after dinner</i>                                 |
| 1925 | And telleth him that I will him visit,<br>Have I no thing but rested me a lite;<br>And speed you fastè, for I will abide<br>Till that you sleepè fastè by my side,"<br>And, with that word, he gan to him to call       | <i>Cheer him up<br/>After I have / little<br/>Hurry / wait</i> |
| 1930 | A squire that was marshall of his hall,<br>And told him certain thingès that he would.  | <i>he wanted</i>   |

*May obeys her husband. The unintended result.*

- |      |   |  |
|------|---|--|
| 1935 | This freshè May has straight her way y-hold<br>With all her women unto Damian.<br>Down by his beddè's sidè sits she then,<br>Comforting him as goodly as she may.<br>This Damian, when that his time he saw,<br>In secret wise his purse and eke his bill,<br>In which that he y-written had his will,<br>Has put into her hand withouten more, | <i>fashion / letter<br/>his wishes<br/>without delay</i> |
| 1940 | Save that he sigheth wonder deep and sore,<br>And softely to her right thus said he:<br>"Mercy! and that you not discover me;<br>For I am dead if that this thing be kid."<br>This purse has she inwith her bosom hid   | <i>Please do not betray<br/>known</i>                    |
| 1945 | And went her way. You get no more of me.<br>But unto January y-come is she,<br>That on his beddè's sidè sits full soft,<br>And taketh her, and kisseth her full oft,  |  |

- And laid him down to sleep and that anon.  
 1950 She feignèd her as that she mustè gon *pretended she had to go*  
 There as you wot that every wight must need,<sup>1</sup> *you know / has to*  
 And when she of this bill has taken heed, *read this letter*  
 She rent it all to cloutès at the last, *tore in bits*  
 And in the privy softly she it cast.  
 1955 Who studieth now but fairè freshè May?  
 Adown by oldè January she lay,  
 That slept till that the cough has him awakèd  
 Anon he prayed her strippen her all naked.  
 He would of her, he said, have some pleasáncè;  
 1960 He said her clothès did him éncumbráncè;  
 And she obeyeth, be her lief or loth. *like it or not*  
 But lest that precious folk be with me wroth, *sensitive / angry*  
 How that he wrought I dare not to you tell, *performed*  
 Or whether she thought it paradise or hell.  
 1965 But here I let them worken in their wise  
 Till evensongè rang, and they must rise. *vespers*

*May's positive response revives Damian*

- Were it by destiny or áventúre, *or chance*  
 Were it by influence or by natúre <sup>2</sup> *Influence of planets?*  
 Or constellation, that in such estate *in the stars*  
 1970 The heavens stooden that time fortunate  
 As for to put a bill of Venus' works *love-letter*  
 (For allè thing hath time, as say these clerks) *scholars*  
 To any woman for to get her love,  
 I cannot say. But greatè God above,  
 1975 That knoweth that no act is causèless,  
 He deem of all, for I will hold my peace. *Let Him judge*  
 But sooth is this: how that this freshè May  
 Has taken such impressiõn that day

---

<sup>1</sup> 1950-51: "She pretended she had to go where, as you know, everyone has to" (i.e. the toilet).

<sup>2</sup> 1967-74: "Whether it was destiny or pure chance (*aventure*) or the position of the stars and planets that made it a good time to write a letter to gain a woman's love ... I do not know."

- Of pity on this sickè Damian  
 1980 That from her heartè she ne drivè can  
 The rémembrancè for to do him ease! *intention*  
 "Certain," thought she, "whom that this thing displeasè  
 I reckè not. For here I him assure *I don't care*  
 To love him best of any créature,  
 1985 Though he no morè haddè than his shirt."
- Lo, pity runneth soon in gentle heart!  
 Here may you see how excellent franchise *generosity*  
 In women is when they them narrow avise. *think deeply*  
 Some tyrant is, as there be many a one  
 1990 That has a heart as hard as any stone,  
 Which would have let him starven in the place *let him die*  
 Well rather than have granted him her grace, *favor*  
 And her rejoicen in her cruel pride,  
 And reckèd not to be a homicide.<sup>1</sup>
- 1995 This gentle May, fulfillèd of pity,  
 Right of her hand a letter makèd she, *filled with*  
 In which she granteth him her very grace. *with her hand*  
 There lacketh nought, but only day and place  
 Where that she might unto his lust suffice; *satisfy his wish*  
 2000 For it shall be right as he will devise.  
 And when she saw her time upon a day,  
 To visiten this Damian goes May,  
 And subtly this letter down she thrust  
 Under his pillow. Read it if him lest. *if he wishes*  
 2005 She takes him by the hand and hard him twists,  
 So secretly that no wight of it wist *nobody knew*  
 And bade him be all whole, and forth she went *to get well*  
 To January, when that he for her sent.

Up riseth Damian the nextè morrow;

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<sup>1</sup> 1989-1994: The meaning of this ironic speech, is that many a woman would have played the tyrant and not granted him her favor, taking pleasure in her cruelty, and would not care if this killed him.

- 2010 All passèd was his sickness and his sorrow.  
 He combeth him, he preeneth him and piketh, & *primps*  
 And does all that his lady lusts and liketh. *desires and*  
 And eke to January he goes as low *also*  
 As ever did a doggè for the bow.
- 2015 He is so pleasant unto every man  
 (For craft is all, whoso that do it can) *cleverness / whoever*  
 That every wight is fain to speak him good; *everyone is glad to*  
 And fully in his lady's grace he stood. *favor*

*January makes a walled pleasure-garden for private use*

- Thus let I Damian about his need, *his business*  
 2020 And in my talè forth I will proceed.  
 Some clerkès holden that felicity *scholars / happiness*  
 Stands in delight, and therefore certain, he, *consists in*  
 This noble January, with all his might  
 In honest wise as 'longeth to a knight, *as becomes*  
 2025 Shope him to liven full deliciously: *Arranged*  
 His housing, his array, as honestly *clothes, as appropriate*  
 To his degree was makèd as a king's. *To his rank*  
 Amongèst other of his honest things,  
 He made a garden walled all with stone.
- 2030 So fair a garden wot I nowhere none. *know I*  
 For out of doubt I verily suppose  
 That he that wrote "The Romance of the Rose"  
 Ne could of it the beauty well devise;<sup>1</sup> *describe*  
 Nor Priapus ne mightè not suffice,
- 2035 Though he be god of gardens, for to tell  
 The beauty of the garden, and the well  
 That stood under a laurel always green.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 2032-3: *The Romance of the Rose* was a thirteenth-century French poem by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun which influenced Chaucer profoundly; he may even have done the English version of it that often appears in complete editions of his work. For the ironic relationship of the garden and the characters of *The Romance* to old January, lusty Damian and May see introduction to this tale.

<sup>2</sup> 2034ff: Priapus was god of gardens but also of male sexual desire. He figures in one legend as being embarrassed when he is caught just about to rape a sleeping nymph.

Full often time he Pluto and his Queen *Pluto himself*  
 Prosérpina and all her faërie *fairy band*  
 2040 Desporten them and maken melody *amuse themselves*  
 About that well, and dancèd, as men told.  
 This noble knight, this January the old,  
 Such dainty has in it to walk and play *delight*  
 That he will no wight suffer bear the key, *allow nobody*  
 2045 Save he himself: for of the small wicket *gate*  
 He bore always of silver a clicket, *key*  
 With which, when that him lest, he it unshut. *when he pleased*  
 And when that he would pay his wife her debt  
 In summer season, thither would he go, *there*  
 2050 And May his wife, and no wight but they two. *nobody*  
 And thingès which that were not done a-bed,  
 He in the garden performed them and sped. *with success*  
 And in this wisè many a merry day  
 Lived this January and freshè May.

*Fortune is fickle*

2055 But worldly joy may not always endure  
 To January, nor to no creàture.  
 O sudden hap! O thou Fortúne unstable, *Chance*  
 Like to the scorpion so deceivable,  
 That flatterest with thine head when thou wilt sting,  
 2060 Thy tail is death through thine envenoming! *poisoning*  
 O brittle joy! O sweetè venom quaint! *seductive poison*  
 O monster, that so subtly canst paint  
 Thy giftès under hue of steadfastness, *under color*  
 That thou deceivest bothè more and less! *rich & poor*  
 2065 Why hast thou January thus deceived,  
 That haddest him for thy full friend received?  
 And now, thou hast bereft him both his eyes,  
 For sorrow of which desireth he to die.

*Physical affliction makes January even more jealously possessive*

Alas! this noble January free, *carefree*

2070	Amid his lust and his prosperity, Is waxen blind, and that all suddenly. He weepeth and he waileth piteously. And therewithal the fire of jealousy, Lest that his wife should fall in some folly,	<i>Has become</i>
2075	So burned his heartè that he wouldè fain That some man bothè her and him had slain. For neither after his death nor in his life, Ne would he that she were love nor wife, But ever live as widow in clothès black,	<i>he really wished</i>  <i>lover</i>
2080	Sole as the turtle that has lost her mak. <sup>1</sup> But at the last, after a month or tway, His sorrow gan assuagè, sooth to say: For when he wist it may no other be, He patiently took his adversity,	<i>Alone / mate</i> <i>two</i> <i>slacken, truth to</i> <i>he realized</i>
2085	Save, out of doubtè, he may not forgon That he n'as jealous evermore in one. <sup>2</sup> Which jealousy it was so outrageous That neither in hall nor in no other house, Nor in no other placè neverthemò'	<i>Except / can't help</i>    <i>either</i>
2090	He would not suffer her to ride or go, But if that he had hand on her alway. For which full oftè weepeth freshè May That loveth Damian so benignly That she must either dien suddenly	<i>allow her to go anywhere</i> <i>Unless</i>
2095	Or else she mustè have him as her lest. She waiteth when her heartè wouldè burst. Upon that other sidè Damian Becomen is the sorrowfullestè man That ever was; for neither night nor day	<i>as she wishes</i> <i>She thought her ...</i>
2095	Ne might he speak a word to freshè May, As to his purpose of no such mattèr, But if that January must it hear,	<i>without J. hearing</i>

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<sup>1</sup> 2077-80: "He did not want her to have a lover while he lived nor become a wife after his death but live as a widow dressed in black, alone, like a turtledove who has lost her mate." The turtledove was a symbol of marital fidelity.

<sup>2</sup> 2085-6: "Except that he cannot stop being jealous constantly " (*evermore in one*).

That had a hand upon her evermo'.

*Love finds a way to outwit Jealousy*

- But natheless, by writing to and fro,  
 2100 And privy signès, wist he what she meant; *secret / he knew*  
 And she knew eke the fine of his intent. *the point*  
 O January! what might it thee avail  
 Though thou mightst see as far as shippès sail?  
 For as good is blind deceivèd be, <sup>1</sup>  
 2110 As be deceivèd when a man may see.  
 Lo Argus, which that had a hundred eyes, <sup>2</sup>  
 For all that ever he could pore or pry  
 Yet was he blent, and God wot so been mo' *hoodwinked, & God knows*  
 That weenen wisly that it be not so. *Who think indeed*  
 2115 Pass over is an ease; I say no more.<sup>3</sup>
- This freshè May that I spoke of so yore, *earlier*  
 In warm wax has imprinted the clicket *key*  
 That January bore of the small wicket, *gate*  
 By which into his garden oft he went.  
 2120 And Damian that knew all her intent  
 The clicket counterfeited privily. *secretly*  
 There is no more to say, but hastily  
 Some wonder by this clicket shall betide,  
 Which you shall hearen if you will abide.  
 2125 O noble Ovid! sooth sayst thou, God wot, *truth / God knows*  
 What sleight is it, though it be long and hot, *strategy*  
 That he n'ill find it out in some manner! <sup>4</sup> *he = Love*

---

<sup>1</sup> 2109-10: "One might as well be blind and deceived as seeing and deceived."

<sup>2</sup> 2111-13: Argus of the hundred eyes was put to sleep by Hermes with music and storytelling, then killed.

<sup>3</sup> 2115: *Pass over is an ease* = "To pass this over is a comfort" or "It is easy to overlook things," or "There is comfort in not seeing some things."

<sup>4</sup> 2125 ff: "What you say is true, God knows. There is no strategy, however long and hard (may be the effort), that Love will not eventually work out." Ovid wrote the story of the lovers

- By Pyramus and Thisbe may men lere: *learn*  
 Though they were kept full long strict overall, *in every way*  
 2130 They been accorded rouning through a wall, *communicated by whispering*  
 Where no wight could have found out such a sleight. *nobody / trick*
- But now to purpose: ere that dayès eight *To get on with story: before ...*  
 Were passèd, of the month of June, befell *...June 8*  
 That January hath caught so great a will,  
 2135 Through egging of his wife, him for to play *urging / enjoy himself*  
 In his garden, and no wight but they tway, *nobody but they two*  
 That in a morrow unto his May says he: *one morning*  
 "Rise up, my wife, my love, my lady free.  
 The turtle's voice is heard, my dovè sweet!  
 2140 The winter is gone with all his rains wet.<sup>1</sup> *turtle dove's*  
 Come forth now with thine eyen columbine. *its rains*  
 How fairer be thy breastès than is wine. *dovelike eyes*  
 The garden is enclosed all about.  
 Come forth, my whitè spousè, out of doubt, *undoubtedly*  
 2145 Thou hast me wounded in mine heart! O wife,  
 No spot of thee ne knew I all my life!  
 Come forth and let us taken our desport; *pleasure*  
 I chose thee for my wife and my comfort."  
 Such oldè lewèd wordès usèd he.  
 2150 On Damian a signè madè she  
 That he should go beforè with his cliket. *key*  
 This Damian has opened then the wicket,  
 And in he starts, and that in such mannér  
 That no wight might it see, neither y-hear. *nobody / nor hear*  
 2155 And still he sits under a bush anon.

*January and May walk in his garden, and talk about love and fidelity*

This January, as blind as is a stone,

---

Pyramus and Thisbe in *Metamorphoses* 4.

<sup>1</sup> 2138 ff: This passage is full of phrases from the great biblical love poem "The Song of Songs." Referring to them as "old, lewd words" in line 2149 is therefore, meant to be especially ironic. "Lewd" here probably has the double meanings "stupid" and "lewd" in the modern sense.

- With Mayus in his hand and no wight more  
 Into his freshè garden is ago,  
 And claptè to the wicket suddenly. *no one else*  
 2160 "Now wife," quod he, "here n'is but thou and I,  
 That art the creäture that I best love. *closed*  
 For by that Lord that sits in heaven above,  
 Lever I had to dien on a knife *I had rather*  
 Than thee offend, truè dearè wife.  
 2165 For Godè's sakè, think how I thee chose,  
 Not for no covetisè, doubtèless,  
 But only for the love I had to thee.  
 And though that I be old and may not see,  
 Be to me true, and I will tell you why.  
 2170 Three thingès, certès, shall you win thereby:  
 First, love of Christ; and to yourself honoúr;  
 And all my heritagè, town and tower,  
 I give it you — make charters as you lest. *deeds as you wish*  
 This shall be done tomorrow ere sun rest,  
 2175 So wisly God my soulè bring in bliss. *As surely as*  
 I pray you first in covenant you me kiss. *in token*  
 And though that I be jealous, wite me nought: *blame*  
 You be so deep imprinted in my thought,  
 That when that I consider your beauty,  
 2180 And therewithal the unlikely eld of me, *age*  
 I may not, certès, though I shouldè die,  
 Forbear to be out of your company *Cannot bear*  
 For very love; this is without a doubt.  
 Now kiss me, wife, and let us roam about."  
 2185 This freshè May, when she these wordès heard,  
 Benignly to January answered,  
 But first and foremost she began to weep.  
 "I have," quod she, "a soulè for to keep  
 As well as you, and also mine honoúr;  
 2190 And of my wifhood thilkè tender flower *that*  
 Which that I have assurèd in your hand *sworn*  
 When that the priest to you my body bound.  
 Wherefore I will answer in this mannér,

By the leave of you, my lord so dear:  
 2195 I pray to God that never dawn the day  
 That I ne starve as foul as woman may *die*  
 If ever I do unto my kin that shame, *my family*  
 Or elsè I impairè so my name *soil*  
 That I be false. And if I do that lack, *unfaithful / sin*  
 2200 Do strip me, and put me in a sack, *Have me stripped*  
 And in the nextè river do me drench. *have me drowned*  
 I am a gentlewoman, and no wench! *no trollop*  
 Why speak you thus? But men be ever untrue, *are always unfaithful*  
 And women have reproof of you aye new! *ever new*  
 2205 You have no other countenance, I 'lieve,<sup>1</sup>  
 But speak to us of untrust and reprove!" *reproof*

*Damian, hiding in the garden, climbs up a pear tree at May's signal*

And with that word she saw where Damian  
 Sat in the bush, and coughen she began,  
 And with her finger signès madè she  
 2210 That Damian should climb up on a tree  
 That chargèd was with fruit, and up he went; *was loaded with*  
 For verily he knew all her intent  
 And every signè that she couldè make  
 Well bet than January, her ownè make; *better / mate*  
 2215 For in a letter she had told him all  
 Of this mattèrè, how he worken shall. *should operate*  
 And thus I let him sit upon the perry,  
 And January and May roaming merry. *pear tree*  
 Bright was the day and blue the firmament. *sky*  
 2220 Phoebus hath of gold his streams down sent *P = The sun*  
 To gladden every flower with his warmness.  
 He was that time in Gemini, as I guess,  
 But little from his declination  
 Of Cancer, Jovè's exaltation.

---

<sup>1</sup> 2205-6: "You have no other way, I believe, to put a face on that but to accuse us of untrustworthiness."

*The underworld deities Pluto and Proserpina, also living in the garden, engage in a vigorous verbal battle of the sexes, and take sides for and against January and May*

- 2225 And so befell that brightè morrow-tide *morning time*  
 That in that garden, in the farther side,  
 Pluto, that is king of faërie,<sup>1</sup>  
 And many a lady in his company,  
 Following his wife, the queen Proserpina,  
 2230 Which that he ravished out of Etna *snatched*  
 While that she gathered flowers in the mead *meadow*  
 (In Claudian you may the story read  
 How in his grisly cartè he her fet). *fetched*

*Pluto*

- This king of faerie then adown him set  
 2235 Upon a bench of turvès fresh and green, *bank of turf*  
 And right anon thus said he to his queen:  
 "My wife," quod he, "there may no wightè say nay: *nobody can deny*  
 The experieñce so proveth every day  
 The treason which that woman does to man.  
 2240 Ten hundred thousand talès tell I can  
 Notable of your untruth and brittleness.  
 O Solomon, wise and richest of riches,  
 Fulfilled of sapience and wordly glory, *full of wisdom*  
 Full worthy been thy wordès to memóry  
 2245 To every wight that wit and reason can. *everyone / wisdom / knows*  
 Thus praiseth he yet the bounty of man:  
 `Amongst a thousand men yet found I one,  
 But of women allè found I none' —  
 Thus says the king that knows your wickedness.  
 2250 And Jesu filius Syrak, as I guess, *Ecclesiasticus*

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<sup>1</sup> 2227 ff: Pluto is not the king of fairyland but of the underworld. (One of his other names is Hades). He had snatched away the young and beautiful Proserpina (Persephone) while she had been gathering flowers in a meadow, to be his wife in the underworld from which she returned every year for spring and summer. The parallel between them and January/May is obvious.

Ne speaks of you but seldom reverence;<sup>1</sup>  
 A wildè fire and corrupt pestilence  
 So fall upon your bodies yet tonight!  
 Ne see you not this honorable knight?  
 2255 Because, alas, that he is blind and old,  
 His ownè man shall make him a cuckold!  
 Lo where he sits, the lecher in the tree!  
 Now will I granten of my majesty  
 Unto this oldè, blindè, worthy knight  
 2260 That he shall have again his eyesight,  
 When that his wife would do him villainy. *wrong*  
 Then shall he knowen all her harlotry,  
 Both in reproof of her and others mo'. "

*Proserpine*

"You shall?" quod Proserpínè. "Will you so?  
 2265 Now by my mother's sirè's soul I swear *by Saturn's soul*  
 That I shall give her sufficient answér!  
 And allè women after for her sake,  
 That though they be in any guilt y-take, *taken (caught)*  
 With faces bold they shall themselves excuse,  
 2270 And bear them down that woulden them accuse. *face down those*  
 For lack of answer none of them shall die!  
 All had man seen a thing with both his eyes, *Even if*  
 Yet shall we women visage it hardily, *brazen it out*  
 And weep, and swear, and chidè subtly,  
 2275 So that you men shall be as lewd as geese. *stupid*  
 What recketh me of your authorities?  
 I wot well that this Jew, this Solomon, *I know*  
 Found of us women foolès many a one,  
 But though that he ne found no good woman,  
 2280 Yet has there founden many another man  
 Women full true, full good and virtuous.

---

<sup>1</sup> 2242-51: Note the deliberate absurdity of a pagan god quoting the Bible, and later (2290-2300) Proserpina speaking of the "true god" and denouncing Solomon for having built a temple for false gods. 2250: Jesus, the supposed author of *Ecclesiasticus* (not Jesus Christ).

	Witness on them that dwell in Christ's house:	<i>heaven ?</i>
	With martyrdom they provèd their constánce.	<i>constancy</i>
	The Roman gestès eke make rémembránce	<i>stories</i>
2285	Of many a very true wife also.	
	But sir, ne be not wroth, albeit so,	<i>even if it is so</i>
	Though that he said he found no good woman;	
	I pray you, take the sentence of the man.	<i>general meaning</i>
	He meantè thus: that in sovereign bounty	<i>total goodness</i>
2290	N'is none but God, but neither he nor she.	<i>man nor woman</i>
	Eh! For very God that is but one,	<i>only true God</i>
	What makè you so much of Solomon?	
	What though he made a temple, Godè's house?	<i>So what if ...</i>
	What though he werè rich and glorious?	
2295	So made he eke a temple of falsè goddès!	<i>He also made</i>
	How might he do a thing that more forbode is?	<i>forbidden</i>
	Pardee, as fair as you his name emplaster,	<i>By God / paint</i>
	He was a lecher and an idoláster,	<i>idolator</i>
	And in his eld he very God forsook.	<i>old age / true God</i>
2300	And if God ne had, as says the book,	
	Y-spared him for his father's sake, he should	<i>I Kings 11: 11-13</i>
	Have lost his reignè rather than he would.	<i>sooner / wished</i>
	I set right nought, of all the villainy	<i>I care no more ...</i>
	That you of women write, a butterfly.	<i>...than a b.</i>
2305	I am a woman: needès must I speak,	
	Or elsè swell until mine heartè break.	
	For since he said that we be jangleresses,	<i>gossips</i>
	As ever wholè may I brook my tresses, <sup>1</sup>	
	I shall not sparè for no courtesy	<i>not cease</i>
2310	To speak him harm that would us villainy."	<i>wishes us ill</i>

*Truce*

"Dame," quod this Pluto, "be no longer wroth. *Madame, / angry*  
 I give it up. But since I swore mine oath  
 That I would granten him his sight again,

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<sup>1</sup> 2308: "As sure as I am proud of my (long woman's) hair uncut" (?), i.e. as long as I am proud to be a woman.

- My word shall stand, I warnè you certain.  
 2315 I am a king; it sits me not to lie." *It's not becoming*  
 "And I," quod she, "a queen of faërie.  
 Her answer shall she have, I undertake.  
 Let us no morè wordès hereof make.  
 Forsooth, I will no longer you contráry." *Indeed / contradict*

*Back to the main narrative: May professes a craving for fruit, and asks for  
 January's help.*

- 2320 Now let us turn again to January  
 That in the garden with his fairè May  
 Singeth full merrier than the popinjay: *parrot*  
 "You love I best, and shall, and other none."  
 So long about the alleys is he gone  
 2325 Till he was come against thilkè perry, *that very peartree*  
 Where as this Damian sits full merry  
 On high among the freshè leavès green.  
 This freshè May, that is so bright and sheen, *shining*  
 Gan for to sigh and said, "Alas, my side!" *Began to*  
 2330 Now sir," quod she, "for aught that may betide,  
 I must have of the pearès that I see,  
 Or I must die — so sorè longeth me *I long to*  
 To eaten of the smallè pearès green.  
 Help, for her love that is of heaven queen! *love of her who*  
 2335 I tell you well, a woman in my plight *condition*  
 May have to fruit so great an appetite  
 That she may dien but she of it have."<sup>1</sup> *unless*  
 "Alas!" quod he, "that I n'ad here a knave *I don't have a boy*  
 That couldè climb! Alas, alas!" quod he,  
 2340 "For I am blind!" "Yea, sir, no force," quod she *no matter*  
 "But would you vouchèsafe, for Godè's sake, *would you agree*  
 The perry inwith your armès for to take, *peartree / within*  
 (For well I wot that you mistrustè me) *I know*  
 Then should I climbè well enough," quod she,

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<sup>1</sup> 2335-7: Her implication is that she is pregnant, and has an unusually strong craving for fruit.

2345 "So I my foot might set upon your back." *If I could*  
 "Certès," quod he, "thereon shall be no lack;  
 Might I you helpen with mine heartè's blood." <sup>1</sup>  
 He stoopeth down, and on his back she stood,  
 And caught her by a twist, and up she goth. *And seized a branch*

*Damian and May get to know each other in the tree*

2350 Ladies, I pray you that you be not wroth;  
 I cannot gloss, I am a rudè man, *can't be delicate / uncultivated*  
 And suddenly anon this Damian  
 Gan pullen up the smock, and in he throng. *Pulled up the skirt / thrust*

*Seeing what is going on, Pluto gives January a dubious gift*

And when that Pluto saw this greatè wrong,  
 2355 To January he gave again his sight,  
 And made him see as well as ever he might.  
 And when that he had caught his sight again,  
 Ne was there never man of thing so fain; *so glad*  
 But on his wife his thought was evermo'.  
 2360 Up to the tree he cast his eyen two,  
 And saw that Damian his wife had dressed *had treated*  
 In such mannér it may not be expressed,  
 But if I wouldè speak uncourteously; *Unless I were to*  
 And up he gave a roaring and a cry  
 2365 As does the mother when the child shall die:  
 "Out! Help! Alas! Harrow!" he gan to cry,  
 "O strongè lady store! What dost thou?" *impudently brazen*

*Proserpine in turn gives May a plausible response*

And she answerèd, "Sir, what aileth you?  
 Have patience and reason in your mind.  
 2370 I have you helped in both your eyen blind. *eyes*

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<sup>1</sup> 2346-7: "Certainly you shall not lack for that, even if I had to help you with my heart's blood."

- On peril of my soul, I shall not lie,  
 As me was taught, to healè with your eye  
 Was nothing better for to make you see  
 Than struggle with a man upon a tree.  
 2375 God wot I did it in full good intent."  
 "Struggle!" quod he. "Yea! algate in it went!  
 God give you both on shame's death to die!  
 He swivèd thee! I saw it with mine eye,  
 And elsè be I hangèd by the hals."  
 2380 "Then is," quod she, "my medicine all false!  
 For certainly, if that you mightè see,  
 You would not say these wordès unto me.  
 You have some glimpsing, and no perfect sight."  
 "I see," quod he, "as well as ever I might,  
 2385 Thankèd be God, with both mine eyen two;  
 And by my truth, me thought he did thee so."  
 "You mazè, mazè, goodè sir," quod she.  
 "This thanks have I for I have made you see!  
 Alas!" quod she, "that ever I was so kind!"

*Another truce*

- 2390 "Now dame," quod he, "let all pass out of mind.  
 Come down, my lief; and if I have mis-said,  
 God help me so as I am evil apaid.  
 But by my father's soul, I wend have seen  
 How that this Damian had by thee lain  
 2395 And that thy smock had lain upon his breast."  
 "Yea, sir ," quod she, "you may ween as you lest!  
 But sir, a man that wakes out of his sleep  
 He may not suddenly well take keep  
 Upon a thing, nor see it perfectly  
 2400 Till that he be adawèd verily.  
 Right so a man that long hath blind y-be  
 Ne may not suddenly so well y-see  
 First when his sight is newè come again,  
 As he that hath a day or two y-seen.  
 2405 Till that your sight y-settled be awhile,

*As I was told**(There) was**God knows**All the way**shameful death**He penetrated**by the neck**You're dazed**my love**I am sorry**I thought I'd seen**think as you like**notice**fully awake**been*

There may full many a sightè you beguile. *deceive you*  
 Beware, I pray you! For, by heaven's king,  
 Full many a man weeneth to see a thing *thinks*  
 And it is all another than it seemeth.  
 2410 He that misconceiveth, he misdeemeth." <sup>1</sup>

*January chooses to stay comfortably sightless*

And with that word she leaped down from the tree.  
 This January, who is glad but he?  
 He kisseth her and clippeth her full oft, *embraces*  
 And on her womb he stroketh her full soft,  
 2415 And to his palace home he has her led.

Now, goodè men, I pray you to be glad.  
 Thus endeth here my tale of January.  
 God bless us and his mother, Saintè Mary.

*The Host comments on the tale*

"Eh, Godès mercy!" said our Hostè tho *then*  
 2420 "Now such a wife I pray God keep me fro. *from*  
 Lo, whichè sleightès and which subtleties *See, what tricks*  
 In women been. For aye as busy as bees *For, always*  
 Be they, us silly men for to deceive,  
 And from the soothè ever will they weive;<sup>2</sup> *truth / veer*  
 2425 By this Merchantè's tale it proveth well.  
 But doubtèless, as true as any steel  
 I have a wife, though that she poorè be,  
 But of her tongue a labbing shrew is she  
 And yet she has a heap of vices mo'.  
 2430 Thereof no fors, let all such thingès go. *Never mind*  
 But wit you what? In counsel be it said *Do you know ? / In confidence*

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<sup>1</sup> 2410: "He who misunderstands makes bad judgements."

<sup>2</sup> 2424: "They will always veer from the truth."

	Me reweth sore I am unto her tied.	<i>I am v. sorry</i>
	For an I shoulde reckon every vice	<i>if I should count</i>
	Which that she hath, y-wis I were too nice.	<i>too foolish</i>
2435	And causè why? It shall reported be	
	And told to her of some of this meinie --	<i>this group</i>
	Of whom, it needeth not for to declare	
	Since women kannen outen such chaffare <sup>1</sup>	
	And eke my wit sufficeth not thereto	
	To tellen all, wherefore my tale is do."	<i>finished</i>

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<sup>1</sup> 2438: "Women like to reveal that sort of thing." Since *outen such chaffare* is a phrase of the Wife of Bath's, and since she openly admitted that women cannot keep secrets for long, it is likely that he is referring to her.