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

A MERCHANT was there with a forked beard,
In motley,¹ 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,

275 Sounding always the increase of his winning.
He would the sea were kept for anything ²
Betwixt Middleburgh and Orëwell.
Well could he in Exchangan shields sell.³
This worthy man full well his wit beset —

280 There wistë 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.

1 271: "(dressed in) motley": probably not the loud mixed colors of the jester, but possibly tweed.

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

3 278: 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
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

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

There is a long and large difference
Betwixt Griselda's great 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

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 grantheth 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 courtely? 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
On women there as was his appetite.

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 unmaidely 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 quiteessentially English words like *womán, womén*, 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: *cétairn / 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 lorde's wit*.(1504). I have not felt it necessary to adopt the Chaucerian spelling (o)unsail as the word does not occur in rhyming position as it does in the Clerk’s Tale.

- *pity / pity:*
  - *But natheless yet had he great pitý*
  - *That thilk night offendên her must he* (1755, and also 1995)
  - *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*, paralleled with *well apaid*.

Lines that are difficult to scan even with Middle English spelling and pronunciation: 1630, 1780, 1784, 2109, 2248, 2273.
"Weeping and wailing, care and other sorrow
I know enough, on even and a-morrow!"

Quod the Merchant. "And so do others more
That wedded be! I trow that it be so,
For well I wot it fareth so with me!
I have a wife, the worstë that may be;
For though the fiend to her y-coupled were,

She would him overmatch, I dare well swear.
What should I you rehearse in special
Her high malice? She is a shrew at all!
There is a long and largë difference
Betwixt Griselda's greatë patience ¹

And of my wife the passing cruelty.
Were I unbounden, also may I thee,
I never would eft come into the snare.
We wedded men live in sorrow and care;
Assayë whoso will and he shall find

That I say sooth, by Saint Thomas of Inde,
As for the more part — I say not all;
God shieldë that it shouldë so befall!
Ah, good sir Host, I have y-wedded be
These monthës two, and morë not, pardee,

And yet, I trowë, he that all his life
Wifeless has been, though that men would him rive
Unto the heart, ne could in no mannër
Tellen so muchë sorrow as I now here
Could tellen of my wife's cursedness."

"Now," quod our Host, "Merchant, so God you bless,
Since you so muchë knownë of that art,
Full heartily I pray you tell us part."
"Gladly," quod he, "but of mine ownë sore
For sorry heart I tellë may no more."

¹ 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

Whilom there was dwelling in Lombardy
A worthy knight that born was of Pavie, In which he lived in great prosperity;
And sixty years a wifeless man was he, And followed aye his bodily delight
On women, there as was his appetite, As do these foolés that been secular.
And when that he was passèd sixty year — Were it for holiness or for dotáge
I can not say — but such a great couráge
Had this knight to be a wedded man, That day and night he does all that he can
T'espyen where he mighté wedded be, Praying our Lord to granten him that he
Might oncé know of thilké blissful life
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
That in this world it is a paradise."
Thus said this oldé knight that was so wise.

An extended passage in “praise” of marriage

And certainly, as sooth as God is king, To take a wife, it is a glorious thing, And namely when a man is old and hoar!
Then is a wife the fruit of his treasúre: Then should he take a young wife and a fair, On whom / beget
And lead his life in joy and in soláce, Whereas these bacheloré’s sing "Alas!"
When that they finden any adversity In love, which is but childish vanity.
And truly, it sits well to be so,  
That bachelors have often pain and woe;  
On brittle ground they build, and brittleness

They findè when they weenè sikerness.  
They live but as a bird or as a beast  
In liberty and under no arrest,  
Whereas a wedded man in his estate  
Liveth a life blissful and ordinate

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?  
Who is so true and eke so ententife  
To keep him, sick and whole, as is his make?

For weal or woe she will him not forsake.  
She is not weary him to love and serve,  
Though that he lie bedridden till he starve.

Ignore the misogamists

And yet some clerkès say it is not so,  
Of which he Theofrast is one of tho'.

What force though Theofrastus list to lie?¹  
"Ne take no wife," quod he, "for husbandry  
As for to spare in household thy dispense.²  
A truè servant does more diligence  
Thy goods to keepè than thine owne wife,

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  
Will keep thee better than she that waiteth aye  
After thy goods, and has done many a day.

And if thou take a wife unto thine hold,  
Full lightly mayest thou be a cuckèwold."  
This sentence and a hundred thingès worse  
Writeth this man. There God his bones curse!

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

² 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 —

1310  Defy Theofrast, and hearken me:
A wife is Gode's gifté verily.
All other manner giftés hardly,
As landés, rentés, pasture, or commune,
Or moebles, all been giftés of Fortune,¹

1315  That passen as a shadow upon a wall.
But dreadé not, if plainly speak I shall,
A wife will last and in thine house endure
Well longer than thee list, peráventure.

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 manné's help y-wrought:

1325  The highé God, when he had Adam makéd
And saw him all aloné, belly-naked,
God of his greaté goodness saidé 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 musté needés live in unity:

1335  One flesh they been, and one flesh, as I guess,
Has but one heart in weal and in distress.
A wife! Ah, Sainté Mary, ben'citee!
How might a man have any adversity
That has a wife? Certés, I cannot say.

1340  The blissé which that is betwixt them tway,
There may no tongué tell or hearté think.
If he be poor, she helpeth him to swink.
She keeps his goods and wasteth never a deal.

¹ 1313-4: *Pasture* is grazing land; *commune* is land or rights held in common with others; *moebles* is movable items like furniture.
1344: "Everything that her husband desires pleases her completely." The Chaucerian meaning of "lust," verb or noun, is not confined to sexual desire.

1 All that her husband lusters, her liketh well.\(^1\)

1345 She says not oncë "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 approved eke,

1350 That every man that holds him worth a leek
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.
He may not be deceivëd, as I guess,
So that he work after his wife's redde: 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 clerkës read, scholars
By good counsel of his mother Rebekke Genesis 27
Bound the kidde'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 Godë's people kept, Judith xi-xiii
And slew him Holofernes while he slept.
Lo Abigail, by good counsel how she I Kings (Samuel), 25
Saved her husband Nabal when that he

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 enhancëd for to be.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) 1344: "Everything that her husband desires pleases her completely." The Chaucerian meaning of "lust," verb or noun, is not confined to sexual desire.

\(^2\) 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,
As says Senek, above a humble wife.
Suffer thy wife’s tongue, as Cato bit.
She shall command and thou shalt suffer it,
And yet she will obey of courtesy.

1380 A wife is keeper of thine husbandry.
Well may the sické man bewail and weep
Where as there is no wife the house to keep.

I warné thee, if wisely thou wilt work,
Love well thy wife, as Christé 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.

Husband and wife, what so men jape or play,
They be so knit there may no harm betide —
And namely upon the wife’s side.

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 dayês old
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.

With facé sad this tale he has them told:
He saide, ”Friendês, I am hoar and old,
And almost, God wot, on my pitté’s brink.
Upon my soulé somewhat must I think.
I have my body folily dispended.
Blessèd be God that it shall be amended!

1395 For I will be, certáin, a wedded man,
And that anon, in all the haste I can,
Unto some maiden fair and tender of age.
I pray you shapeth for my marrïage
All suddenly, for I will not abide;
And I will fond t'espyen on my side
To whom I may be wedded hastily.
But for as much as you been more than I,
You shalle rather such a thing espy
Than I, and where me best were to ally.

1415 But one thing warn I you, my friendes dear:
I will no old wife have in no manner.
She shall not passen twenty years certain!
Old fish and young flesh would I have full fain.
Bet is," quod he, "a pike than a pickerel,
And better than old beef is tender veal.
I will no woman thirty years of age;
It is but bean-straw and great forage.
And eke these old widows, God it wot,
They can so muchel craft on Wade's boat,¹

1420 So muchel broken harm when that them lest,
That with them should I never live in rest.
For sundry schoolsen maken subtle clerkès;
Woman of many schoolsen half a clerk is.²

1425 But certainly, a young thing men may gie,
Right as men may warm wax with hand's ply.
Wherefore I say you plainly in a clause,
I will no old wife have right for this cause:
For if so were I had such mischance
That I in her ne could have no pleasance,
Then should I lead my life in avoutry,
And go straight to the devil when I die.
No children should I none upon her geten —
Yet were me lever houndès had me eaten
Than that my heritag should fall

1430 bean stalks & coarse fodder
also / God knows
guide, train
mould
in a phrase
sexual pleasure
adultery
beget
I had rather

1435 In strangè hands. And this I tell you all
(I dotè not) I wot the cause why
Men shoulde wed, and furthermore wot I
There speaketh many a man of marriage
That wot no more of it than wot my page.

¹ 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.

² 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 whiché causes should man take a wife?
If he ne may not livé chaste his life,  
Take him a wife with great devotion  
Because of lawful procreation  
Of children, to th'honour of God above,  
1450 And not only for paramour or love;  
And for they should lechery eschew,  
And yield their debté when that it is due;¹  
Or for that each of them should helpen other  
In mischief, as a sister shall the brother,  
1455 And live in chastity full holily,  
But sirs, by your leave, that am not I.²

He feels he is still quite virile

For God be thanked, I daré make avaunt,  
I feel my limbs stark and suffissaunt  
To do all that a man belongeth to.  
1460 I wot myselfe best what I may do.  
Though I be hoar, I fare as does a tree  
That blossoms ere the fruit y-waxen be,  
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

¹ 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.

² 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.
Divérsé men divérsely him told

Of marryagé many examples old.
Some blamed it, some praised it, certáin.
But at the lastè, shortly for to sayn,
As alday falleth altercation
Betwixté friends in disputatïon,
There fell a strife betwixt his brethren two,
Of which that one was clepéd Plácebo,
Justínus soothly called was that other.¹

Placebo tells January what he wants to hear

Placebo said: "O January, brother,
Full little need had you, my lord so dear,
Counsel to ask of any that is here,
But that you be so full of sapience
That you ne liketh, for your high prudénce,
To waiven from the word of Solomon.
This word said he unto us everyone:
`Work allè thing by counsel,' thus said he,
`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 soule bring at rest,²
I hold your owné counsel is the best.
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,
I have stonden in full great degree
Abouten lordês in full high estate,
Yet had I ne'er with none of them debate.
I never them contráried truly.
I wot well that my lord can more than I;
What that he says, I hold it firm and stable.
I say the same, or elsé thing sembláble.
A full great fool is any counsellor

¹ 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).
² 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 else thinken it
That his counsél should pass his lorde's wit.

Nay, lordes be no foolès, by my fay.
You have yourselfe showed here today
So high senténce so holily and well,
That I consent and confirme everydeall
Your wordes all and your opinion.

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.
And truly it is a high courage
Of any man that stapen is in age
To take a young wife. By my father's kin
Your heart hangeth on a jolly pin!
Do now in this matter right as you lest,
For, finally, I hold it for the best."

Justinus tells him some of the more unpleasant truths about marriage

Justinus that aye stillè sat and heard,

Right in this wise he Plácebo answered:
"Now, brother mine, be patient I pray,
Since you have said, and hearken what I say.

Seneca, among other wordè wise,
Says that a man ought him right well avise
To whom he gives his land or his chattél
And since I ought avisen me right well
To whom I give my goods away from me,
Well muchel more I ought avisè be
To whom I give my body for always.

I warn you well, it is no childè's play
To take a wife without avisement.
Men must enquire — this is mine assent —
Whe'r she be wise, or sober, or drunkelew,
Or proud, or else other ways a shrew,
A chidester, or waster of thy good,
Or rich, or poor, or else mannish wood.
Albeit so that no man findeñ shall
None in this world that trotteth whole in all,
Nor man nor beast such as men could devise,
But natheless, it ought enough suffice
With any wife, if so were that she had
More goodē thiwēs than her vices bad.

And all this asketh leisure for t’enquire.
For God it wot, I have wept many a tear
Full privily since that I had a wife:
Praise whoso will a wedded mannē's life,
Certain I find in it but cost and care,
And observánces of all blisses bare.
And yet, God wot, my neigbours about,
And namēly of women many a rout,
Say that I have the mostē 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.1

Aviseth you — you be a man of age —
How that you enter into marrïage,
And namely with a young wife and a fair.
By him that madē water, earth, and air,
The youngest man that is in all this rout
Is busy enough to bringen it about
To have his wife alonē. Trusteth me,
You shall not pleasen her fully yearēs three;
This is to say, to do her full pleasânce.
A wi médec asks full many an ābservance.
I pray you that you be not evil apaid.''

"Well," quod this January, "and hast thou said?
Straw for thy Seneca, and thy provérbns!
I countē not a panier full of herbs
Of schoolē-terms. Wiser men than thou,
As thou hast heard, assenteden right now
To my purpose. Placebo, what say ye?"
"I say it is a cursed man," said he,

1 1554: "You may do as you please, as far as I am concerned."
"That letteth matrimony, sikerly."
And with that word they risen suddenly,
And been assented fully that he should
Be wedded when him list and where he would.

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

High fantasy and curious busyness
From day to day gan in the soul impress
Of January about his marriage.

Many fair shapes and many a fair visage
There passeth through his hearté night by night;
As whoso took a mirror polished bright,
And set it in a common market place,
Then should he see full many a figure pace
By his miroúr; and in the samé wise
Gan January inwith his thought devise
Of maidens which that dwelten him beside.
He wist not where that he might abide.
For if that one has beauty in her face,
Another stands so in the people's grace
For her sadness and her benignity,
That of the people greatest voice had she;
And some were rich and had a baddé name.
But natheless, between earnest and game,
He at the last appointed him on one
And let all others from his hearté gone,
And chose her of his own authority,
For Love is blind alday, and may not see.
And when that he was in his bed y-brought,
He portrayed in his heart and in his thought
Her freshé beauty and her agé tender,
Her middle small, her armès long and slender,
Her wisé governance, her gentleness,
Her womanly bearing and her sadness.

And when that he on her was condescended,
Him thought his choice might not be amended.
For when that he himself concluded had,
Him thought each other manné's wit so bad
That impossible it were to reply
Against his choice. This was his fantasy.

*He announces his choice to his friends*

His friendës sent he to at his instance, request
And prayed them to do him that pleasânce
That hastily they would unto him come.
He would abridge their labour, all and some: one & all

1615 Needeth no more for them to go nor ride;
He was appointed where he would abide.¹ had decided
Placebo came and eke his friendës soon,
And alderfirst he bade them all a boon: first he asked a favor
That none of them no argumentës make

1620 Against the purpose which that he has take,
decision he had made
Which purpose was pleasânt to God, said he,
And very ground of his prosperity.
He said there was a maiden in the town
Which that of beauty hadd great renown.

1625 All were it so she were of small degree, Although / low rank
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 thankëd God that he might have her all,

1630 That no wight his blissë parten shall; nobody could share
And prayed them to labour in this need,
And shapen that he failë not to speed,
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 conscience,
The which I will rehearse in your presence: I'll mention
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. also

¹ 1616: "He had decided whom he would settle on."
1640  For though he keep him from the sinnès seven,
     And eke from every branch of thilké tree,¹
     Yet is there so perféct felicity  
     And so great ease and lust in marriage, 
     That ever I am aghast now in mine age 
That I shall leadè now so merry a life, 
So delicate, withouten woe and strife, 
That I shall have my heaven on earthè here.
For since that very heaven is bought so dear 
With tribulation and with great penánce, 
1645  That I shall leadè now so merry a life, 
How should I then, that live in such pleasánce 
As alle wedded men do with their wivès, 
Come to the bliss where Christ etern alive is? 
This is my dread. And you, my brethren tway, 
Assoileth me this question, I you pray." 
Justinus assures him that marriage will provide him with quite enough purgatory on earth 

1650  How should I then, that live in such pleasánce 
As alle wedded men do with their wivès, 
Come to the bliss where Christ etern alive is? 
This is my dread. And you, my brethren tway, 
Assoileth me this question, I you pray." 
Justinus assures him that marriage will provide him with quite enough purgatory on earth 

1655  Justinus, which that hated his folly, 
Answered anonright in his japery. 
And for he would his longé tale abridge, 
He wouldè no authority allege 
But saide: "Sir, so there be no obstacle 
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,² 
You may repent of wedded mannè's life 
In which you say there is no woe nor strife. 
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,² 
You may repent of wedded mannè's life 
In which you say there is no woe nor strife. 
And elsè God forbid but if he sent 
A wedded man him grace to repent 
Well often rather than a single man.³ 
And therefore, sir, the best rede that I can: 
Justinus assures him that marriage will provide him with quite enough purgatory on earth 

¹ 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.

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

³ 1667: "God forbid that a married man should not have the grace (reason?) to repent even oftener than a single man."
Despair you not, but have in your memory,
Paraunter she may be your purgatory;
She may be God's means and God's whip!
Then shall your soul up to heaven skip
Swifter than does an arrow out of a bow!
I hope to God hereafter shall you know

That there is not so great felicity
In marriage, ne never more shall be,
That shall you let of your salvation,
So that you use, as skill is and reason,
The lustes of your wife attemprely,\footnote{1678-9: "Provided that you satisfy your wife's lust in moderation (attemprely), as is right and proper." The sarcasm is obvious.}

And that you please her not too amorously,
And that you keep you eke from other sin.
My tale is done, for my wit is thin.
Be not aghast hereof, my brother dear,
But let us waden out of this matter.

The Wife of Bath, if you have understand,
Of mariage which we have on hand
Declared has full well in little space.\footnote{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.}

Fareth now well. God have you in His grace."

\begin{quote}
The marriage contract is drawn up, and the ceremony takes place
\end{quote}

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 needs be,
They wroghten so by sly and wise treaty
That she, this maiden, which that Mayus hight,\footnote{1695: Shall wedded be unto this January.
I trow it were too longe you to tarry\footnote{1696: "I think it would hold you up too long if ..."} to delay you
If I you told of every script and bond\footnote{1690: Have take their leave and each of them of other.
And when they saw that it must needs be,
They wroghten so by sly and wise treaty
That she, this maiden, which that Mayus hight,
As hastily as ever that she might,

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

2 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.

3 1696: "I think it would hold you up too long if ..."}
By which that she was feoffèd in his land;\(^1\)  
Or for to hearken of her rich array.

1700 But finally y-comen is that day  
That to the churchê bothè be they went  
For to receive the holy sacrament.  
Forth comes the priest with stole about his neck,  
And bade he be like Sarah and Rebekke

1705 In wisdom and in truth of marriage,  
And said his orisons as is uságe,  
And crouceth them, and bade God should them bless,  
And made all siker enough with holiness.  
Thus been they wedded with solemnity.

1710 And at the feastê sitteth he and she  
With other worthy folk upon the daïs.

The marriage feast: classical and biblical analogues

All full of joy and blissè is the palace,  
And full of instruments and of vitaille,  
The mostè dainteous of all Itaille.

1715 Before them stood instruments of such sound  
That Orpheus, ne of Thebês Amphion,  
Ne maden never such a melody.\(^2\)  
At every course then came loud minstrelcy,  
That never trumped Joab for to hear,  
David's trumpeter

1720 Ne he Theodamas yet half so clear  
At Thebês when the city was in doubt.  
Bacchus the wine them shenketh all about,  
And Venus laugheth upon every wight,  
For January was become her knight,  
her = Venus

1725 And wouldè both assayen his couráge  
In liberty and eke in marrïage,\(^3\)

---

\(^1\) 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.

\(^2\) 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.

\(^3\) 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.
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,
That writest us that ilkè wedding merry
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.¹

1740 Assayeth it yourself; then may you witen
If that I lie or no in this mattër.
    Mayus, that sits with so benign a cheer
Her to behold it seemèd faiërie.
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,
But thus much of her beauty tell I may,
That she was like the brightè morrow of May,
Fulfillèd of all beauty and pleasànce!

    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.

1755 But natheless yet had he great pity
That thilkè night offendèn her must he,
And thought: "Alas! O tender créature,

¹ 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 wouldst God you might well endure
All my courâge, it is so sharp and keen.

1760 I am aghast you shall it not sustain;
But God forbid that I did all my might!
Now wouldst God that it were waxen night,
And that the night would lasten evermo'.
I would that all this people were ago."

1765 And finally he does all his laboûr,
As he best might, saving his honoûr,
To haste them from the meat in subtle wise.
The timè came that reason was to rise,
And after that men dance and drinken fast,
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 highte Damian,
Which carved before the knight full many a day:
He was so ravished on his lady May

1775 That for the very pain he was nigh wood;
Almost he swelt and swooned there he stood,
So sore has Venus hurt him with her brand,
As that she bore it dancing in her hand.
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
Till freshâ May will rue upon his pain.
O perilous fire that in the bedstraw breedeth!
O familiar foe that his service biddeth!

1785 O servant traitor, falsè homely hew,
Like to the adder in bosom, sly, untrue!
God shield us allè from your acquaintance!
O January, drunken in pleasânce
In mariage, see how thy Damian,
Thine ownè squire and thy bornè man,
Intendeth for to do thee villainy!
God grantè thee thy homely foe t'espy,
For in this world is no worse pestilence
Than homely foe alday in thy présént!

January gets ready for the wedding night

1795  Performed has the sun his arc diurn;
No longer may the body of him sojourn
On th’orisont as in that latitude.
Night with his mantle that is dark and rude
Gan overspread the hemisphere about,

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 timè, go to rest.

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’encreasen his couráge,
And many a letuary had he full fine,

1810  Such as the cursed monk Daun Constantine
Has written in his book "De Coitu." ¹
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,

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,

1820  Out of the chamber has every wight him dressed.

¹ 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 àrmès take
His freshè May, his paradise, his make.
He lulleth her, he kisseth her full oft
With thické bristles of his beard unsoft

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

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.

It is no force how longè that we play.
In trué wedlock coupled be we tway,
And blessèd be the yoke that we be in!
For in our actès we may do no sin.

A man may do no sinnè with his wife,
Nor hurt himselfèn with his owne knife,
For we have leave to play us by the law." ¹

Thus labours he till that the day gan dawn;
And then he takes a sop in fine claree,
And upright in his bed then sitteth he,

And after that he sang full loud and clear,
And kissed his wife and made wanton cheer.

He was all coltish, full of ragery,
And full of jargon as a fleckèd pie:
The slacké skin about his neckè shaketh

While that he sang, so chanteth he and cracketh.
But God wot what that May thought in her heart
When she him saw up-sitting in his shirt,
In his night-cap and with his neckè lean;

¹ 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. And afterwards, when that he saw his time, Up riseth January. But freshê May

1860 Held her chamber unto the fourthê day, As usage is of wivês for the best. For every labourer some time must have rest, Or else longê may he not endure, This is to say, no live créature

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 freshê May Tellê thy woe? She will always say nay. Eke if thou speak, she will thy woe bewray. God be thy help, I can no better say."

1875 This sickê Damian in Venus' fire So burneth that he dieth for desire, For which he put his life in áventure. No longer might he in this wise endure, But privily a penner gan he borrow,

1880 And in a letter wrote he all his sorrow, In manner of a complaint or a lay¹ Unto his fairê freshê lady May. And in a purse of silk hung on his shirt He has it put and laid it at his heart.

¹ 1881: Kinds of love poems.
January notices his squire’s absence

1885 The mooné, that at noon was thilké day
That January has wedded freshé May
In two of Taur, was into Cancer gliden.¹
So long has May in her chamber abiden,
As custom is unto these nobles all.

1890 A bridé 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 fourthé day complete from noon to noon,
When that the highé massé was y-done,

1895 In hallé sit this January and May,
As fresh as is the brighté summer’s day.
And so befell how that this goodé man
Remembered him upon this Damian,
And said: "Saint Marie! how may it be
That Damian attendeth not to me?
Is he aye sick, or how may this betide?" ²
His squires which that stooden there beside
Excuséd him because of his sickness,
Which letted him to do his busyness —

1900 That Damian attendeth not to me?
No other causé mighté make him tarry.
"That me forthinketh," quod this January.
"He is a gentle squire, by my truth.
If that he diéd, it were harm and ruth.
He is as wise, discreet, and eke secree
& also trustworthy
As any man I wot of his degree,
And thereto manly and eke serviceable,
And for to be a thrifty man right able.
But after meat as soon as ever I may,
I will myselfé visit him, and eke May,

1910 To do him all the comfórt that I can."
And for that word him blesséd every man

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

² 1901: "Is he sick, or what is the matter?"
That of his bounty and his gentleness
He would so comfort in his sickness
His squire, for it was a gentle deed.

_January instructs his wife to go visit the sick man_

"Dame," quod this January, "take good heed,
At after-meat you with your women all,
When you have been in chamber out of this hall,
That all you go to see this Damian.
Do him desport — he is a gentle man;
And telleth him that I will him visit,
Have I no thing but rested me a lite;
And speed you faste, for I will abide
Till that you sleepe faste by my side,"
And, with that word, he gan to him to call
A squire that was marshall of his hall,
And told him certain thingés that he would.

_May obeys her husband. The unintended result._

This freshé May has straight her way y-hold
With all her women unto Damian.
Down by his beddé's sidé sits she then,
Comforting him as goodly as she may.
This Damian, when that his time he saw,
In secret wise his purse and eke his bill,
In which that he y-written had his will,
Has put into her hand withouten more,
Save that he sigheth wonder deep and sore,
And softely to her right thus said he:
"Mercy! and that you not discover me;
For I am dead if that this thing be kid."
This purse has she inwith her bosom hid
And went her way. You get no more of me.
But unto January y-come is she,
That on his beddé's sidé sits full soft,
And taketh her, and kisseth her full oft,
And laid him down to sleep and that anon.

1950 She feigned her as that she must gon
There as you wot that every wight must need,¹
And when she of this bill has taken heed,
She rent it all to cloutés at the last,
And in the privy softly she it cast.

1955 Who studieth now but fairé freshè May?
Adown by oldé 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 pleasânce;

1960 He said her clothès did him éncumbrânce;
And she obeyeth, be her lief or loth.
But lest that precious folk be with me wroth,
How that he wrought I dare not to you tell,
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.

May’s positive response revives Damian

Were it by destiny or áventúre,
Were it by influence or by natûre ²
Or constellation, that in such estate

1970 The heavens stooden that time fortunate
As for to put a bill of Venus’ works
(For allè thing hath time, as say these clerks)
To any woman for to get her love,
I cannot say. But greatè God above,

1975 That knoweth that no act is causeless,
He deem of all, for I will hold my peace.
But sooth is this: how that this freshè May
Has taken such impressïon that day

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

² 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 sické Damian

1980 That from her hearté she ne drivé can
The rémembrance for to do him ease!
"Certain," thought she, "whom that this thing displease
I recké not. For here I him assure
To love him best of any créature,

1985 Though he no moré haddé than his shirt."

Lo, pity runneth soon in gentle heart!
Here may you see how excellent franchise
In women is when they them narrow avise.
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
Well rather than have granted him her grace,
And her rejoicen in her cruel pride,
And reckéd not to be a homicide.¹

1995 This gentle May, fulfillèd of pitý,
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;

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.

2005 She takes him by the hand and hard him twists,
So secretly that no wight of it wist
And bade him be all whole, and forth she went
To January, when that he for her sent.

Up riseth Damian the nexté morrow;

¹ 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 passed was his sickness and his sorrow.
He combeth him, he preeneth him and piketh, & prims
And does all that his lady lusts and liketh.
And eke to January he goes as low
As ever did a dogge for the bow.
2015 He is so pleasant unto every man
(For craft is all, whoso that do it can) cleveryness / whatever
That every wight is fain to speak him good;
And fully in his lady's grace he stood.

January makes a walled pleasure-garden for private use

Thus let I Damian about his need, his business
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
2020 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
Amongst other of his honest things,
He made a garden wallèd all with stone.
2030 So faire 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,1 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.2

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1 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.

2 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
Prosépinka and all her faërie

Desporten them and maken melody
About that well, and danced, as men told.
   This noble knight, this January the old,
   Such dainty has in it to walk and play
That he will no wight suffer bear the key,
Save he himself: for of the small wicket
He bore always of silver a clicant,
   With which, when that him lest, he it unshut.
And when that he would pay his wife her debt
In summer season, thither would he go,

And May his wife, and no wight but they two.
And thingés which that were not done a-bed,
He in the garden performed them and sped.
And in this wíse many a merry day
Lived this January and freshe May.

Fortune is fickle

 But worldly joy may not always endure
To January, nor to no creature.
O sudden hap! O thou Fortúne unstable,
Like to the scorpion so deceivable,
That flatterest with thine head when thou wilt sting,
Thy tail is death through thine envenoming!
O brittle joy! O sweeté venom quaint!
O monster, that so subtly canst paint
Thy giftés under hue of steadfastness,
That thou deceivest bothé more and less!
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,
MERCHANT’S TALE

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,
So burned his hearte that he woulde 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 cloth black,
Sole as the turtle that has lost her mak.¹
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,
Save, out of doubtè, he may not forgon
That he n’as jealous evermore in one.²
Which jealousy it was so outrageous
That neither in hall nor in no other house,
Nor in no other placè neverthemo’
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
Or else she mustè have him as her lest.
She waiteth when her heartè wouldè burst.
Upon that other sidè Damian
Becomen is the sorrowfullest man
That ever was; for neither night nor day
Ne might he speak a word to freshè May,
As to his purpose of no such mattér,
But if that January must it hear,
¹ 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.
² 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 deceived be, ¹

2110 As be deceived when a man may see.
Lo Argus, which that had a hundred eyes, ²
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.³

This fresse May that I spoke of so yore, earlier
In warm wax hath 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 secretly
The clicket counterfeited privily.
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! ⁴ he = Love

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

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

³ 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."

⁴ 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
Pyramus and Thisbe in *Metamorphoses* 4.

1 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 freshē garden is ago,
And claptē to the wicket suddenly.

"Now wife," quod he, "here n'is but thou and I,
That art the créature that I best love.
For by that Lord that sits in heaven above,
Lever I had to dien on a knife
Than thee offend, trû dearrē wife.

For Godē's sakē, think how I thee chose,
Not for no covetisē, doubtēless,
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.

Three thingēs, certēs, shall you win thereby:
First, love of Christ; and to yourself honoûr;
And all my heritagē, town and tower,
I give it you — make charters as you lest.
This shall be done tomorrow ere sun rest,

So wisly God my soulē bring in bliss.
I pray you first in covenant you me kiss.
And though that I be jealous, wite me nought:
You be so deep imprinted in my thought,
That when that I consider your beauty,

And therewithal the unlikely eld of me,
I may not, certēs, though I shoulde die,
Forbear to be out of your company
For very love; this is without a doubt.
Now kiss me, wife, and let us roam about."

This freshē May, when she these wordēs heard,
Benignly to January answered,
But first and foremost she began to weep.
"I have," quod she, "a soulē for to keep
As well as you, and also mine honoûr;

And of my wifehood thilkē tender flower
Which that I have assurēd in your hand
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:

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
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!
oo trollop
Why speak you thus? But men be ever untrue,
are always unfaithful
And women have reproof of you aye new!
ever new
You have no other countenance, I 'lieve,¹
But speak to us of untrust and repreve!"
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 made she

That Damian should climb up on a tree
was loaded with
That chargèd was with fruit, and up he went;
For verily he knew all her intent
And every signè that she couldè make
Well bet than January, her owne make;
better / mate

For in a letter she had told him all
Of this mattère, how he worken shall.
should operate
And thus I let him sit upon the perry,
pear tree
And January and May roaming merry.
Bright was the day and blue the firmament.
sky

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.

¹ 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

And so befell that brighté morrow-tide
That in that garden, in the farther side,
Pluto, that is king of faërie, ¹
And many a lady in his company,
Following his wife, the queen Prosérpina,
Which that he ravished out of Etna
While that she gathered flowers in the mead
(In Claudian you may the story read
How in his grisly carté he her fet).

Pluto

This king of faerie then adown him set
Upon a bench of turvés fresh and green,
And right anon thus said he to his queen:
"My wife," quod he, "there may no wight say nay:
The experience so proveth every day
The treason which that woman does to man.

Ten hundred thousand tales tell I can
Notable of your untruth and brittleness.
O Solomon, wise and richest of richesse,
Fulfilled of sapience and wordly glory,
Full worthy been thy wordés to memóry
To every wight that wit and reason can.
Thus praiseth he yet the bounty of man:
`Amongst a thousand men yet found I one,
But of women alle found I none' —
Thus says the king that knows your wickedness.

And Jesu filius Syrak, as I guess,

¹ 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;^{1} with respect
A wildè fire and corrupt pestilence 
skin disease & rotting plague
So fall upon your bodies yet tonight!
Ne see you not this honorable knight?

2250 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 eyèsight,
When that his wife would do him villainy.
Then shall he knownen 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 sîrè's soul I swear 
by Saturn's soul
That I shall give her sufficiënt answèr!
And alle 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,
Yet shall we women visage it hardily, 
brazen it out
And weep, and swear, and chide 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.

^{1} 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:
With martyrdom they prov'd their constânce.
The Roman gestês eke make rémembrânce

2285 Of many a very truè wife also.
But sir, ne be not wroth, albeit so,
Though that he said he found no good woman;
I pray you, take the sentence of the man.
He meanteth thus: that in sovereign bounty

2290 N'is none but God, but neither he nor she.
Eh! For very God that is but one,
What makè you so much of Solomon?
What though he made a temple, Godè's house?
What though he werè rich and glorious?

2295 So made he eke a temple of falsè goddès!
How might he do a thing that more forbode is?
Pardee, as fair as you his name emplaster,
He was a lecher and an idoláster,
And in his eld he very God forsook.

2300 And if God ne had, as says the book,
Y-spared him for his father's sake, he should
Have lost his reignè rather than he would.
I set right nought, of all the villainy
That you of women write, a butterfly.

2305 I am a woman: needès must I speak,
Or elses swell until mine heartè break.
For since he said that we be jangleresses,
As ever wholè may I brook my tresses,¹
I shall not sparè for no courtesy

2310 To speak him harm that would us villainy."

Truce

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

¹ 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." \textit{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." \textit{Indeed / contradict}

\textit{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: \textit{parrot}
"You love I best, and shall, and other none."
So long about the alleys is he gone
2325 Till he was come against thilk perry, \textit{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, \textit{shining}
Gan for to sigh and said, "Alas, my side! \textit{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
To eaten of the smalle pearès green.
Help, for her love that is of heaven queen! \textit{love of her who}
2335 I tell you well, a woman in my plight
May have to fruit so great an appetite
That she may dien but she of it have."\textit{1}
"Alas!" quod he, "that I n'ad here a knave
That couldè climb! Alas, alas!" quod he,
2340 "For I am blind!" "Yea, sir, no force," quod she
"But would you vouchêsafè, for Godè's sake,
The perry inwith your armès for to take,
(For well I wot that you mistrustè me)
Then should I climbè well enough," quod she,

\textit{1 2335-7:} Her implication is that she is pregnant, and has an unusually strong craving for fruit.
"So I my foot might set upon your back."
"Certès," quod he, "thereon shall be no lack; Might I you helpen with mine hearté's blood." 1
He stoopeth down, and on his back she stood, And caught her by a twist, and up she goth.

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

Ladies, I pray you that you be not wroth; I cannot gloss, I am a rude man, And suddenly anon this Damian Gan pullen up the smock, and in he throng.

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

And when that Pluto saw this greaté wrong, 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; But on his wife his thought was evermo'.

Up to the tree he cast his eyen two, And saw that Damian his wife had dressed In such manner it may not be expressed, But if I would speak uncourteously; And up he gave a roaring and a cry

As does the mother when the child shall die: "Out! Help! Alas! Harrow!" he gan to cry, "O strongé lady store! What dost thou?"

**Proserpine in turn gives May a plausible response**

And she answèred, "Sir, what aileth you? Have patience and reason in your mind.

I have you helped in both your eyen blind.

---

1 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,
Thankèd be God, with both mine eyèn two;
And by my truth, me thought he did thee so."
      "You mezè, mezè, good 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,
      my love
God help me so as I am evil apaid.
But by my father's soul, I wend have seen
      I am sorry
How that this Damian had by thee lain

2395 And that thy smock had lain upon his breast."
      think as you like
      "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.
      fully awake
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,
There may full many a sighte you beguile.  
Beware, I pray you! For, by heaven’s king,  
Full many a man weeneth to see a thing  
And it is all another than it seemeth.  
He that misconceiveth, he misdeemeth.” ¹  

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,  
And on her womb he stroketh her full soft,  
And to his palace home he has her led.  

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

The Host comments on the tale  
"Eh, God’s mercy!” said our Host the  
"Now such a wife I pray God keep me fro.  
Lo, whiche sleightes and which subtleties  
In women been. For aye as busy as bees  
Be they, us silly men for to deceive,  
And from the sooth ever will they weive;²  
By this Merchant’s tale it proveth well.  
But doubtless, as true as any steel  
I have a wife, though that she poore be,  
But of her tongue a labbing shrew is she  
And yet she has a heap of vices mo’.  
Thereof no fors, let all such thinges go.  
But wit you what? In counsel be it said  
¹ 2410: “He who misunderstands makes bad judgements.”  
² 2424: “They will always veer from the truth.”
Me reweth sore I am unto her tied.  
For an I shoulde reckon every vice  
Which that she hath, y-wis I were too nice.

And causè why?  It shall reported be  
And told to her of some of this meinie --  
Of whom, it needeth not for to declare  
Since women cannèn outen such chaffare  
And eke my wit sufficeth not thereto  
To tellen all, wherefore my tale is do."

1 2438: “Women like to reveal that sort of thing.” Since *ouen 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.