

The Merchant's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer



The Prologue of the Merchant's Tale

"About weeping and wailing¹, care and sorrow, I know plenty," said the Merchant, "both day and night, and so do others who are wedded, I believe. Well I know it is so with me. I have a wife, the worst one possible; for even if the Fiend were coupled to her, I dare well swear she would outmatch him. Why should I rehearse to you all the points of her great malice? She is an evil creature in every way. There is a long and large difference between Griselda's² meekness and the surpassing cruelty of my wife. 1225

"If I were unbound, never again would I come into the snare³, by my head! We wedded men live in worry and sorrow. Try it, those who wish to, and they shall find, by Saint Thomas of India⁴, that I tell the truth, at least for the greater part--I speak not of all. May God save us, if it should be so! 1232

"Ah, good sir Host! I have been wedded these two months, and not more, by God! And yet I believe that he who has been wifeless all his life could in no way, even if men would tear him to the heart, tell so much sorrow as I now could tell here of my wife's cursedness!" 1239

Our Host said, "Now, Merchant, may God save your soul, since you know so much about that business, I pray you heartily, tell us a part of it gladly." 1242

He replied, "Only from my own pain will I, for my sorry heart I can tell no more." 1244

Here begins the Merchant's Tale.

¹ Weeping and wailing. The epilogue of the *Clerk's Tale*, the tale preceding this one, has just ended with a note that women should work to get the upper hand in marriage and let their husbands worry, weep, wring their hands, and wail over the trouble that their wives give them. The epilogue to the *Clerk's Tale* is spoken in an ironic tone, since the tale itself presents the point of view that women should be subservient to their husbands

² Griselda. The clerk has told the tale of patient Griselda, a woman who endured the many hardships and cruelties set forth for her by her own husband, who was testing her loyalty.

³ The snare. I.e., of marriage.

⁴ St. Thomas of India. St. Thomas the Apostle, who, according to legend, traveled to India to convert thousands to Christianity.

Some time ago there dwelt in Lombardy⁵ a worthy knight, born in Pavia, in which town he lived in great prosperity; and for sixty years he was wifeless and always pursued his carnal pleasure on women where his appetite was set, just as these fools do who are laymen⁶. And when he was past sixty years, this knight had such a mind to be a wedded man--whether it was from holiness or dotage, I cannot say--that he did all he could, day and night, to determine how he might become wedded. Praying our Lord to grant him once to know that very blissful existence that is between husband and wife, and to live under that holy bond with which God first bound man and woman. 1262

"No other way of life," he said, "is worth a bean. For wedlock is so simple and pure that it is paradise on earth." Thus spoke this old knight, who was so wise. 1266

"And certainly, as true as God is King, it is glorious to take a wife, especially when a man is old and white-haired; then a wife is the fruit of his treasure. Then he ought to take a young and beautiful wife, on whom to beget himself an heir; and lead his life in joy and bliss, while these bachelors sing 'alas,' when they find any adversity in their affairs of love, which are but childish vanity. 1276

"And in truth it is fitting that bachelors often have pain and woe; they build on brittle ground, and find brittleness when they look for certainty. They live just as a bird or a beast, in freedom, under no restraint, while a wedded man in his degree lives a life blessed and ordered, secured under the yoke of marriage. 1285

"Well may his heart abound in all gladness and bliss. For who can be as obedient as a wife? Who is as faithful as his mate, and as attentive to care for him, sick and well? For well or for woe, she will not forsake him. She is not weary to love and serve him, though he may lie bedridden until he may die. And yet some scholars deny it, of whom Theophrastus⁷ is one. But what does it matter if Theophrastus wishes to lie? He says, "Take no wife, for the sake of your thrift, to spare expense in your household a faithful servant is more diligent than your own wife to keep your goods. For all her days she will claim a half. And if you are sick, God is my witness, your true friends or a faithful lad will care for you better than she that ever waits, and has waited many days, for your goods." This man writes this evil saying, and a hundred more--may God curse

⁵ Lombardy. The central northern region of Italy.

⁶ Laymen. Some take this as evidence that this tale should have been told by a religious person on the pilgrimage such as the monk. Others see it as a touch of self-deprecating irony. (See also 1322.)

⁷ Theophrastus. Author of the lost book *Liber de Nuptiis* (*The Book of Marriage*), an anti-feminist tract that is mentioned in the Wife of Bath's Prologue (see note on this below) and that is used by St. Jerome in *Jerome adversus Jovinianum* (*Jerome Against Jovinian*), another famous anti-feminist tract.

his bones! But heed no such vain opinions; reject Theophrastus and listen to me. 1310

“Truly, a wife is God’s gift. All other forms of gifts, such as lands, rents, pasture, common or personal property, all are gifts of Fortune, I declare boldly, which pass away as a shadow upon the wall. But without doubt, and, to speak plainly, a wife will last and abide in your house (longer than you would wish, perhaps). Marriage is a great sacrament; he who has no wife, I believe him to be a lost man, who lives helpless and desolate--I am speaking of lay people. 1322

“And hear why--I don’t say this lightly--it is because woman was created to be man’s help. When he had made Adam, and saw him all alone, and stark naked, the great God, from his great goodness said, “Let us now make a helper for this man, like him.” And then he made Eve for him. Here you may see and prove by this that a wife is man’s help and comfort, his terrestrial paradise and his amusement. So obedient and excellent she is that they cannot do other than live in unity. They are one flesh; and one flesh, I would say, has but one heart in well and woe. 1336

“A wife! Ah, Holy Mary! God bless! How could a man who has a wife feel any adversity? Surely, I cannot say. The bliss that is between the two of them no tongue can tell or heart can think. If he is poor, she helps him labor; she keeps his goods and never wastes a bit. All that her husband desires, well pleases her! She never says ‘no’ when he says ‘yes.’ He says, ‘do this’; she answers, ‘all ready, sir.’ O, blessed order, precious wedlock, you are so pleasant and virtuous and so highly commended and approved, that every man who maintains himself to be worth a leek ought to thank his God that has sent him a wife, or else pray God to send him a wife to last until he dies. For then is his life set in security. 1355

“He cannot be deceived, I believe, so he works according to his wife’s counsel; wives are so faithful and discreet that he may hold his head up boldly. Therefore, if you wish to be like the wise, always do as women counsel you. 1361

“Lo, how Jacob⁸ by the good counsel of Rebecca, his mother, as these scholars tell, bound the kid’s skin about his neck, and thus won his father’s blessing. Lo, Judith⁹, as the history tells; she by wise counsel guarded God’s people and slew

⁸ Jacob. Old Testament figure whose mother Rebecca advised him to wear a kid’s skin in order to deceive his father Isaac into passing the family blessing, i.e., inheritance, to him instead of his twin brother Esau, the older son. Jacob’s twelve sons then become the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob’s name means “deceiver.”

⁹ Judith. Old Testament figure who slays the Assyrian general Holofernes before he is able to rape her. Her act of courage leads the Israelites to victory. (In some Protestant Bibles the Book of Judith is included in The Apocrypha.)

Holofernes while he slept. Lo, Abigail¹⁰, how she by good counsel saved her husband, Nabal, when he was to have been slain. And look also how Esther¹¹ by good counsel delivered the people of God from woe, and made Mordecai to be advanced by Assuere. 1374

“There is nothing superlative in degree, as Seneca¹² says, ‘above a humble wife.’ ‘Endure your wife’s tongue,’ as Cato¹³ bids. ‘She shall command, and you shall permit it, and yet of her courtesy sometimes she will obey.’ A wife is the keeper of your household. Well may the sick man wail and weep who has no wife to keep his house. I warn you, if you will act wisely love your wife well, as Christ loves His church. If you love yourself, you will love your wife. No man hates his own flesh, but he fosters it all the days of his life; and therefore I bid you to cherish your wife, or you shall never prosper. However men may mock and jest, of all mortal people husband and wife hold the safest road. They are so closely knit that no harm can happen--and especially from the wife’s side.” 1392

Thus in the days of his age, this January, of whom I speak, meditated on the lusty life, the virtuous quiet, in honey-sweet marriage. And one day he sent for his friends, to tell them all his intention. 1398

With grave countenance he told his tale, and said, “Friends, I am white-haired and old, and, God knows, almost on the brink of the grave; now must I consider my soul a bit. I have wasted my body on folly, but--blessed be God!--that shall be amended for I will be a wedded man, and that will soon be so, surely, in all possible haste. I pray you, help me to plan for my speedy marriage to some fair maiden of tender years, for I will not delay; and on my side, I will try to seek out to whom I may be quickly wedded. But inasmuch as you are more numerous than I, you rather than I should be able to seek out such a thing, and where it would be best for me to mate. 1414

“But of one thing, my dear friends, I warn you: in no manner will I have any old wife. In truth, she shall not be over twenty years of age; I gladly would have old fish and young flesh. Better is a pike than a pickerel, and better the tender veal than old beef,” he said. “I will have no woman thirty years of age;

¹⁰ Abigail. Old Testament woman who persuaded David, who desired her, not to take vengeance on her husband, but married David when Nabal died. See 1 Samuel 25.1-35.

¹¹ Esther. Beautiful Jewish woman, who is chosen as queen by the Persian King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I or II) after he has rejected his previous wife, Vashti. The duplicitous Haman plotted the massacre of the Jews, but Esther and her cousin Mordecai stopped him. Haman was hanged, and Mordecai became the king’s chief minister. See Esther 7.1-10.

¹² Seneca. Actually, the quote is from Fulgentius in the *The Mythographies* 1.22.

¹³ Cato. Author of the *Distiches of Cato*, a work of proverbs that was popular in the Middle Ages.

such creatures are but dried beanstalks and coarse fodder. And these old widows--God knows--they know so much of Wade's boat¹⁴, do so much harm when they wish that I should never live in peace with a widow. For a change of diverse schools makes subtle scholars; and woman is half a scholar of many schools. But certainly men can guide a young thing, just as men can mold warm wax with the hands. Therefore I tell you plainly and in short, I will have no old wife, for this very reason. 1432

"For if it turned out so ill that I could have no joy in her, then should I lead a life of adultery and go straight to the Devil when I die. And I would beget no children by her; yet I tell you all, I'd rather hounds would eat me than that my heritage should fall into strange hands. I dote not, I know the reason why men should wed, and furthermore I know that many men speak of wedlock who knows no more than my page for what reasons man should take a wife. If he cannot live chaste all his days, let him take a wife in piety, for the sake of procreating children, to the honor of God in heaven and not only for love and passion; and because they should shun lechery and yield their debt when it is due; or that each of them should help the other in misfortune, as a brother shall a sister, and live holily in continence. 1455

"But, sirs, by your leave, I am not such for, God be thanked, I feel my limbs strong and sufficient to play all a man's part. I know best what I can do. Though I may be white on my head, I fare like a tree that blossoms before it yields fruit; a blossoming tree is not dry or dead. I feel myself white only on my hair; my heart and limbs are as green as the laurel is throughout the year. And since you have heard my whole mind, I pray you agree to my will." 1468

Diverse men told him diversely many old examples about marriage. In truth, some blamed it, some praised it; but in the end, to speak briefly, as altercation every day occurs between friends in dispute, there arose strife between his two kinsmen, of whom the first was called Placebo¹⁵, the second Justinus. 1477

Placebo said, "Brother January, you had very little need, my lord so dear, to ask counsel of anyone present, save that you are so wise that by your great prudence you wish not turn aside from the word of Solomon. This advice he said to us, 'Do all things by counsel and then you shall not repent.' But though Solomon spoke such words, my own dear lord and brother, I hold your own counsel the best, so may God save my soul! For, my brother, take this from me: I have been a courtier all my life now, and God knows, though I am unworthy, I have stood in high position with lords of great

estate; yet I never had strife with any of them. Truly, I never withstood them. 1497

"I know well my lord knows more than I; what he says I hold to be sound, and say the same, or things similar. Any counselor who serves a lord of high degree is a complete fool, if he dare take upon himself, or even think, that his counsel should surpass his lord's wisdom. No, by my faith, lords are no fools; you yourself have showed here today so well and in such holy fashion your lofty wisdom, so devoutly and well, that I approve and confirm all your words and your opinion every bit. By the Lord, there is no man in this entire town nor in all Italy who could have spoken better; Christ is well pleased with this counsel. And in truth it shows a high spirit in any man who is advanced in age, to take a young wife; by my father's soul, your heart hangs on a jolly nail! Do in this just as you wish, for in conclusion I think it best." 1518

Justinus, who sat quiet throughout and listened, answered Placebo in this fashion. "Now, my brother, be patient, I ask you; since you have spoken, listen to me. Seneca, among his other wise words, says that a man ought very well to consider to whom he gives his land or his goods. And since I ought to consider well to whom I give my goods away, much more ought I to consider to whom I give my body; for well I warn you it is no child's play to take a wife without due thought. A man must inquire, I believe, whether she wise, sober, drunken, proud (or otherwise a shrew), a scolder, a waster of your goods, rich, poor, or even man-crazy¹⁶. 1536

"Albeit no man shall find or imagine any in this world that trots perfectly in all things, neither man nor beast, nevertheless, it should suffice that any wife will have more good traits than ill vices. And all this demands leisure to inquire into. For, God knows, I have wept many private tears since I have had a wife. Let whoever will praise the life of a wedded man, in truth, I find in it only cost and care, and duties bare of all bliss. 1548

"And yet, God knows, my neighbors around me, and especially many troops of women, say I have the most steadfast and meekest wife living. But I know best where my shoe wrings me. But for all of me, you may do just as you will; you are a man of years, consider how you enter upon marriage, and especially with a young and fair wife. 1557

"By Him that made water, air, earth, and fire, the youngest man in all this company has enough to do to keep his wife to himself, trust me. Not for three years can you wholly content her; a wife demands many duties. But I ask you, do not be ill-pleased with me." 1565

"Well, have you done your speech?" said January. A straw for your Seneca and your proverbs; I care not two blades of grass

¹⁴ Wade's boat. Many editors have tried to explain this missing bit of Germanic mythology. The point may be that these women know so much about something that there is nothing to know about.

¹⁵ Placebo. In Latin the word means "I please."

¹⁶ Man-crazy. Lascivious.

for your school-terms. Wiser men than you have agreed to my plan, as you have heard just now. Placebo, what do you say?" 1571

"I say," he said, "that it is truly a cursed man who hinders matrimony." And at these words they immediately arose and fully agreed that he should wed when he wishes and whomever he desired. 1576

High-flown fancies and anxious thoughts about his marriage began to occupy January's soul from day to day, and night by night many fair shapes and many fair faces passed through his heart. Whoever would take a well-polished mirror and set it in the general market-place, would see many forms pass across his mirror; and in the same fashion January began to consider in his thoughts the maidens who dwelt near him. 1587

He knew not where his thoughts should settle. For if one had beauty of countenance, another stood so highly in the people's grace for her steadiness and kindness that she most had the general approval. And some were rich and had a bad reputation. 1593

But nevertheless, between earnest and game, at last he decided on one, and let all the others pass out of his heart, and by his own authority chose her; for love is always blind. And when he was laid in his bed, in his heart and mind he portrayed her fresh beauty and tender age, her small middle, her long and slim arms, her wise demeanor, her steadiness, her good breeding and her womanly bearing. And when his choice was fixed upon her, it seemed to him that it could not have been bettered; for when he was resolved, he thought every other man's wit so poor that none could speak against his choice; so he imagined. 1610

He sent to his friends with urgent request and asked them to do him that pleasure to come to him speedily. He would relieve them, one and all, of their labor, and there was no more need for him to go on searching; he had made up his mind where he would place his affections. 1616

Placebo came immediately, and all his friends as well. And first of all January begged of them the grace that none of them should offer argument against the purpose which he had taken; which course was pleasing to God, and a sure foundation for his well-being. He said there was in the town a maiden who had a great name for beauty, though she was of low degree; but beauty sufficed him. This maiden, he said, he would have, to lead all his life with her in ease and holiness; and he thanked God that he might have her entirely, that no creature should share his bliss, and asked them to do their duty that he failed not of success; if they would do this, his spirit would be at rest. 1633

"Then," he said, "there is nothing to mar my bliss, save that one thing pricks in my conscience, which I will rehearse to

you here. Long I have heard it said," he said, "that no man can have two perfect joys, that is, on earth and in paradise. For even if he may avoid the seven sins and every branch of that tree, yet there is such perfect felicity and ease and joy in marriage, that now in my old age I am ever aghast that I shall now lead so merry a life, so delicious, without woe and contention, that I shall have my heaven now on earth. For since the true heaven is bought so dearly with tribulation and great penance, how should I, then, who shall live in such happiness as all wedded men have, come to the bliss where Christ lives eternally? This is my fear, and please, my two brethren, resolve this question for me, I pray." 1654

Justinus, who despised January's folly, answered without delay in his mockery; and to abridge his long tale he would cite no authority, but said, "Sir, so that there may be none obstacle other than this, God may in His mercy work such a great miracle for you that, before you receive the last sacrament of the Holy Church, you may have reason to repent the married life, in which you say there is no woe or contention. And may God forbid otherwise, that he would send a wedded man grace to repent more often than a single man! And therefore the best counsel I know is, despair not, sir, but have in your memory that perhaps she may be your purgatory. She may be God's instrument and God's scourge; then shall your soul skip up to heaven swifter than an arrow out of a bow. I hope to God that hereafter you shall learn that there is no such felicity in marriage, and never shall be, that will hinder your salvation, as long as you solace yourself with your wife temperately, as is just and reasonable, and please her not too amorously, and keep yourself from other sin as well. My tale is done, for my wit is thin, but be not aghast at this, my brother. But let us wade out of this matter. The Wife of Bath¹⁷ has declared full well in little space, if you have understood, upon marriage, which you have in hand. And now fare you well, and God have you in His grace!" 1688

And after these words Justinus and Placebo each took leave of him and each other. And when they saw it must be so, by discreet and wise negotiation they planned so that this maiden, who was named May, should be wedded to this January as soon as she could. I believe it would delay you too long if I told you of every bond and document by which she was put into legal possession of his land, or of all her rich preparation. But finally the day had come when they both made their way to the church to receive the holy sacrament. The priest came forth with stole over his shoulders, and bade her be like Rebecca and Sara¹⁸ in faithfulness to marriage vows and in

¹⁷ Wife of Bath. Another pilgrim; she has told her own life story at length, of her five marriages and the troubles in them, especially how as a young woman she tortured and deceived her three much older husbands; she has also told the tale of a knight who discovers what women want most, which is sovereignty over men.

¹⁸ Rebecca and Sara. Two faithful wives of the Old Testament. Rebecca was the wife of Isaac and mother, in her advanced age, to

discretion; and said his prayers as is the custom, and signed them with the cross and prayed to God to bless them, and made all very secure with holy rites. 1709

Thus were they wedded with all ceremony, and at the feast he and she sat upon the dais with other honorable people. All full of joy and happiness was the palace, and full of instruments of music and the most dainty cuisine in all Italy. Before them stood instruments of such sound that neither Orpheus nor Amphion¹⁹ of Thebes had ever made such melody. With every course came such bursts of minstrelsy that Joab²⁰ never trumpeted half so clear to men's hearing, nor Theodamas at Thebes²¹, when the city was in dread. Bacchus²² poured out the wine for them on every side, and Venus²³ laughed upon every one of them, for January was now her knight and would make trial of his spirit as well in marriage as in freedom; and with her torch in her hand she danced about before the bride and all the company. I dare well say, in truth, that Hymen, who is the god of marriage, never saw in his life so merry a wedded man. You, Martian²⁴, the poet who describes to us that merry wedding of Philology and Mercury, and the songs that the Muses sang, hold your peace; too small are both your pen and your tongue to describe this wedding. When tender youth weds stooping age, there is such mirth that it cannot be written; try it yourselves, and then shall you know whether or not I am lying in this. 1741

May, who sat with so benign a countenance, to look upon her seemed enchantment; so meek was her look, Queen Esther never looked with such eyes upon Ahasuerus²⁵. I cannot describe to you all her beauty, but thus much I may tell, that she was like the bright morn of May filled with all beauty and

Jacob and Esau. Sara was the wife of Abraham and the mother, also in her advanced age, to Isaac.

¹⁹ Orpheus nor Amphion. Two mythological musicians. Orpheus was the long-suffering husband of Eurydice and traveled to the underworld to retrieve her, but ultimately in vain. Amphion was the leader of Thebes who was given a lyre by Mercury. With his music he later moved the rock that would become the city walls by the power of his music.

²⁰ Joab. Son of David's sister Zeruah and commander of his uncle's armies. A trusted and skillful administrator, he was often vindictive and cruel, as in his killing of Abner, Absalom, and Amasa. David's dying curse on Joab is remarkable. For his support of Adonijah, Solomon had him put to death. (IP) See 2 Samuel 2.28, 18.16, and d 20.22.

²¹ Theodamas at Thebes. Augur for the Argive besiegers of Thebes after Amphiarauus's death; his first prayer as augur was followed at once by the trumpets of the attacking Thebans, and more trumpets followed a raid on the Thebans that he later inspired. (RC)

²² Bacchus. The god of wine.

²³ Venus. Goddess of love, especially physical love.

²⁴ Martian. Martianus Capella, fifth-century poet, author of *The Marriage of Philology and Mercury*, a sort of compendium of the Seven Liberal Arts.

²⁵ Queen Esther never looked with such eyes upon Ahasuerus. See note on Esther above.

January was ravished into a trance every time he beheld her face. "Now would to God it would become night," he thought, "and that the night would last forever! Would that all these people were gone!" 1764

And finally he did all he could, saving his honor, to hasten them in crafty fashion from the feast. And the time came when there was reason to rise. And after that, people danced and drank deep, and cast spices all about the house, and every man was full of joy and happiness--all but a squire, called Damian, who many days had carved²⁶ before the knight. He was so ravished with his lady May that for the very pain he was nearly mad; he almost fainted and swooned where he stood, so sorely had Venus wounded him with her brand as she bore it in her dancing. And quickly he got himself to bed. I speak no more of him as at this time, but there let him weep and lament his fill, until fresh May will have pity on his pain. 1782

O perilous fire, that breeds in the bedstraw! O household foe that proffers his service! O traitor servant, false appearance of domestic faithfulness, like the sly faithless serpent in the bosom, may God shield us all from knowing you! O, January, drunken in joy of marriage, see how your Damian, your own squire and your man born, has in mind to do you dishonor. God grant you to spy out your household foe, for there is no worse pestilence in this world than a household foe ever before you. 1794

The sun had run his diurnal arc; his body could no longer sojourn on the horizon in that latitude; night with his dark rough mantle began to overspread the hemisphere. Wherefore all this lusty throng parted from January, with thanks on every side. Home to their houses they rode full of energy, where they did their things just as it pleased them, and went to rest when they saw their time. Soon after, this impatient January would go to bed, would tarry no longer. He drank punches, cordials and sweet wine of Italy with stinging spices, and many choice medicinal syrups, such as the cursed monk Constantine has written of in his book *De Coitu*²⁷; he was not a bit backward to partake of all of them. And to his close friend he said, "For God's love, in courteous fashion let the house be emptied as soon as may be." And they did just as he desired. Men drank, and then drew the curtain. 1817

The bride was brought to bed as still as a stone; and when the bed had been blessed by the priest, every person left the chamber, and January held tight in his arms his fresh May, his paradise, his mate. He sings to her, and he kisses her repeatedly. With the thick bristles of his rough beard, like the skin of a dogfish, sharp as briars--for he was freshly shaved in his manner--he rubs her all about her tender face, and said, "Alas, I must trespass on you, my spouse, and greatly offend you before the time comes that I will descend. But

²⁶ Carved. I.e., carved the meat and served January's household.

²⁷ Constantine. *De Coitu: On sex*.

nonetheless, consider this," he said, "there is no workman, whoever he may be, that may work both well and hastily; this will be done perfectly at leisure. It doesn't matter how long we play; in true wedlock the two of us are coupled, and blessed be the yoke that we are in, for in our actions we can not sin. A man may commit no sin with his wife, nor hurt himself with his own knife, for we have permission of the law to play." 1841

Thus he labored until the day began to dawn, and then he took a sop of bread in fine cleared wine and sat upright in his bed and sang loud and high, and kissed his wife and made lecherous sport. He was all coltish, and as full of wantonness and chatter as a flecked magpie. The slack skin about his neck shook while he sang, so he chants and croaks. But God knows what May thought in her heart, when she saw him sitting up in his shirt and nightcap, with his lean neck; she did not think his playing was worth a bean. 1854

Then he said, "I will take my rest; now the day has come, I can keep my eyes open no longer." And down he laid his head and slept until prime²⁸. And afterwards in due season up rose January, but fresh May, as the good custom is for wives, remained in her chamber up to the fourth morning. For all must have rest sometime, or else they cannot long endure; no living creature can, be it fish or bird, or man or beast. 1865

Now will I speak of the wretched Damian, who, as you shall hear, is languishing for love. And therefore I speak to him in this manner: I say, "O hapless Damian, alas! Answer my demand now, how shall you tell your woe to your lady, the fresh May? She will say "no," and if you speak, she will reveal your sorrow. May God be your help! I can say no better! 1874

This sick Damian so burned in the flames of Venus that he was dying of desire. He could endure no longer in this state, but put his life in jeopardy, and secretly he borrowed a pen-case, and wrote all his pain in a letter, in the style of a complaint or a lay²⁹, to his fair fresh lady. And he put it into a purse of silk which hung over his shirt, and laid it next to his breast. 1884

The moon, which on that noon when January wedded fresh May was in the second degree of Taurus, had now glided into Cancer. May had remained in her chamber this long, as is the custom among these nobles; a bride shall not eat in the hall until four days, or three at the least, have passed; then she was to go to the banquet. The fourth day being completed from noon to noon, when the high mass was ended, this January sat in the hall, with May as fresh as a bright summer's morning. And so it happened, this good man considered his squire and

said, "Blessed Mary! How is it that Damian attends not upon me? Is he still sick, or what is the matter? 1901

His squires, who stood beside him, made excuses for him because of his sickness, which hindered him from the performance of his duties; no other cause could keep him away. 1905

"That worries me; he is a gentle squire, by my faith!" said January. "If he were to die, it would be a trouble and a pity; he is as wise, discreet, and secret as any man of his degree that I know, and he is manly and willing to serve, and most deserving to prosper. After this meal, as soon as I can, I myself and May also will visit him, to give him all the comfort I know how." 1915

And for these words every man blessed him, since through his noble kindness he would thus comfort his squire in sickness; for it was a gentle deed. 1919

"Lady," said this January, "after this meal when you have gone from this hall to your chamber with your women, mind that you all go see this Damian. He is a man of gentle blood. Make him some entertainment, and tell him that I will visit him when I have rested a little. And hurry along, for I will wait until you have come to me again." And after these words he called to him a squire, who was the marshal of his hall, and told him certain things that he wished. 1931

This fresh May with all her women held her way straight to Damian. Down by his bed-side she sat, comforting him in as kind a way as she could. This Damian, when he saw his opportunity, put into her hand secretly his purse and his letter in which he had written his desires, without more ado than that he sighed deeply, and softly said to her, "Mercy, and I pray that you will not expose me. I am dead if this thing be known." 1943

This purse she hid in her bosom and went her way; you get no more from me on this meeting. And now she came to January, and sat softly upon his bed-side. He took her and kissed her often, and laid himself down to sleep. She made excuse to leave the room, and when she had read through this love letter, at last she tore it all to bits and cast them away in the privy. 1954

Who ponders carefully now but fair fresh May? She came back to the side of old January, who slept until the cough awakened him. Then he asked her to strip herself naked; he wished of her, he said, to have some pleasure. He said her clothes got in the way. And she obeyed, whether she wanted to or not. 1961

But lest prudish people be upset with me, I dare not let you know whether it seemed to her paradise or hell; and here I leave them until evensong rang and they had to arise. 1966

²⁸ Prime. 9:00 A.M.

²⁹ Complaint. A lament in poetic form. Lay. A song, usually one in which there is a setting for the lover's complaint.

Whether it was by destiny or chance, by some mystic influence or by nature or through the constellations, that the heavens stood in such a configuration that the time was fortunate (for as these scholars say, everything has its time) to give a letter in the service of Venus to any woman, to get her Jove--as to all this I cannot say. But great God in heaven, who knows no act is without cause, let Him judge all, for I will hold my peace. 1976

But the truth is that this fresh May received that day such an impression of pity for this sick Damian that she could not drive from her heart the thought of bringing him ease. "In truth," she thought, "I care not whom this thing may annoy, for here I assure him to love him best of any creature, even if he has no more than his shirt." 1985

Lo, pity runs swiftly into a gentle heart! Here you may see how excellent a generosity there is in women, when they take counsel well. There may be some tyrant, indeed there be many, with hearts as hard as stone, who would have let him die in the place rather than have granted him their grace; and would rejoice in their cruel pride, and care not though they committed homicide. 1994

This gentle May, full of pity, made a letter with her own hand, and in it she granted him her full grace; there was nothing lacking except a day and place where she might meet him, for it should be just as he would have it. And one day, when she saw her time, May went to visit this Damian, and craftily thrust this letter down under his pillow; let him read it if he wished. She took him by the hand and wrung it hard, but so secretly that there was not a creature that knew of it, and bid him to be entirely well soon, and went forth to January, when he sent after her. 2008

Up rose Damian the next morning; all his sickness and sorrow were gone. He combed his hair, he preened and adorned himself, he did all that delights and pleases his lady; and toward January he performed as dutifully as ever did any bow-hunting dog. He was so pleasant to every one (for cunning is all, whoever knows how to use it), that every creature was glad to speak well of him; and fully he stood in his lady's favor. And thus I leave Damian going about his business, and I will proceed with my tale. 2020

Some scholars maintain that felicity consists of pleasure, and if this be so, in truth, this noble January shaped his course by all his power to live in the highest happiness in honorable fashion as is fitting for a knight. His house and all his manner of life were made as honorable and befitting his degree as a king's. Among others of his noble possessions, he made a garden, walled entirely with stone; so fair a garden I know of nowhere. 2030

For, beyond a doubt, I believe truly, he who wrote the *Romance of the Rose*³⁰ could not well describe the beauty of it; nor would Priapus³¹, though he may be god of gardens, be sufficient to tell the beauty of the garden and of the well-spring under an ever-green laurel. Often Pluto and his spouse Proserpina³², and all elfdom, amused themselves and made melody about that spring, and danced, as men have told. This aged knight, noble January, took such pleasure in walking and entertaining himself there that he would allow no person except himself to bear the key; for he always carried a little silver key to the small gate, with which, when he wished, he opened it. 2047

And in the summer season, when he wished to pay his wife her marital debt, he would go there with May his wife and none but the two of them. And in this fashion January and his blooming spouse lived many merry days. But earthly joy does not last forever, for January or any creature. 2056

O sudden chance, O you Fickle Fortune, so deceitful like the scorpion, that with your head flatter when you are about to sting; your tail with its venom is death. O brittle joy! O sweet, strange venom! O monster that can paint your gifts so craftily under the color of steadfastness, so that you deceive both great and small! Why have you thus deceived January, who had taken him as your full friend? And now you have robbed him of both his eyes, for sorrow of which he would gladly die. 2068

Alas! This noble, lordly January, amidst all his prosperity and lustiness, has grown blind, and so suddenly. He wept and wailed sorely, and with this, lest his wife should fall into some folly, the fire of jealousy so burned his heart that he would gladly some man had killed both him and her. For he desired not that either in the days of his life or after his death she should be loved or wedded, but ever live as a widow in black clothes, solitary as the turtle-dove that has lost her mate. 2080

But at the last, to tell the truth, his sorrow began to assuage after a month or two; for when he knew that it could not be otherwise, he took his adversity in patience, except that he could not help but to be more jealous all the time. This jealousy was so inordinate that neither in the hall nor in any other house, nor in any other place, would he allow her to walk or ride, unless he had at all times his hand on her. 2091

Therefore this fresh May wept often, who loved Damian so warmly that either she must soon die or else she must have

³⁰ *Romance of the Rose*. Lengthy thirteenth-century French poem by Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun (and translated by Chaucer) describing all of the substance of love. The poem gives a full description of the Garden of Love, which is an enclosed garden.

³¹ Priapus. Over-endowed fertility god, whose identity as a god of gardens is known only through a reference in Boccaccio's *Teseida*, an analogue of Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*.

³² Pluto and Proserpina. King and queen of the underworld.

him. She looked at all times for the day when her heart would break. 2096

On the other side, Damian had become the most sorrowful creature that ever was, for neither by day nor by night could he speak a word to fresh May upon his subject, or upon any such matter, unless January were to hear it, who had his hand upon her at all times. But notwithstanding this, by writing back and forth and by secret signals, he knew her mind; and she knew also the purpose of his intention. 2106

O January, what does it matter even if you could see as far as ships sail? It would be just as well to be deceived when blind as be deceived when a man can see. Lo, Argus³³ with a hundred eyes, as much as he could pry or pore, still he was hoodwinked; and, God knows, so are others that believe truly that it is not so. But to pass over all that is a pleasure, and I say no more. 2115

This fresh May, of whom I have been speaking, pressed into warm wax the little key, which January carried, the key to the small gate through which he often went into his garden. And Damian, who knew her plan well, secretly counterfeited the key. There is no more to say, but there shall soon occur some marvel through this key, which you shall hear, if you will wait. 2124

O noble Ovid, God knows you speak truly! What deception is so long and painful that a lover will not find out in some way? People may learn from Pyramus and Thisbe³⁴; though they were watched everywhere at all times and strictly, they had an understanding, whispering through a wall, in such a way that none could have detected such a trick. 2131

But now to my tale. Before eight days had passed, before the month of July, it happened that through the urging of his wife January caught so great an appetite to amuse himself in his garden, with none but the two of them, that one morning he said to May, "Rise up, my wife, my noble lady, my sweetheart; the turtle dove's voice is heard, my sweet dove; the winter is gone, with its drenching rains. Come forth, now, with your dove-like³⁵ eyes!" 2141

"How fairer are your breasts than wine! The garden is enclosed all around; come forth, my white spouse; surely you have wounded me in my heart, O wife! I have known no

³³ Argus. A giant with a hundred eyes, who was also called Panoptes (all-seeing). Hera put him to guard Zeus mistress Io, but Zeus sent Hermes to kill the giant. Argus was then transformed into a peacock. (in2greece.com)

³⁴ Pyramus and Thisbe. Star-crossed lovers whose attempt to flee their families and be together ends in their deaths. Chaucer tells their tale in *Legend of Good Women*, 706-923.

³⁵ Dove-like. Chaucer uses the more familiar Latin term, "columbine" in this case.

blemish in you. Come forth, and let us take our indulgence. I chose you for my wife and my solace." 2148

Such old words of folly he used. To Damian she made a sign that he should go ahead of them with his key. This Damian then opened the gate and in he darted, and he did so in such a way that none could see or hear him. And soon he was sitting quietly under a bush. This January, as blind as a stone, holding May by his hand and with no other person, went into his fresh garden, and quickly clapped the gate shut. 2159

"Now wife," he said, "here is none but you and I--you, who are the creature I love best. For by that Lord that sits in high heaven, I would rather die on a sword than harm you, dear faithful wife! For God's sake, think how I chose you, not for any greed, in truth, but only for the love I bore you. 2167

"And though I am old and can not see, be true to me, and I shall tell you why. Three things you shall win by this, surely: first, Christ's love; and honor for yourself; and all my heritage, town and tower. I give it to you, make out the charters as you wish; this shall be done tomorrow before the sun goes down, so surely may God bring my soul to heaven. First I ask that you will kiss me as a sign of this covenant, and though I am jealous, do not blame me. 2177

"You are so deeply imprinted in my thought, that when I consider your beauty and with it my old unsuitable age, surely, though I die for it, I cannot endure to be out of your company, for the sake of love; and this is the very truth. Now wife, kiss me, and let us roam about the garden." 2184

This fresh May, when she heard these words, answered January mildly; but first of all she began to weep. She said, "I have a soul to guard as well as you, and also my honor, and that tender flower of my wifhood, which I secured to your hand when the priest bound my body to you. Therefore, I will answer thus, by your leave, my dear lord: I pray to God, may the day never dawn when I would not die, as foully as woman can, if I ever do such shame to my kindred, or so smirch my honor, as to be false. And if I commit that offence, let me be stripped and put in a sack, and drowned in the nearest river. I am a gentlewoman, and not a wench³⁶. Why speak you thus? But men ever are faithless and women always receive new reproaches from men; you have no other pretext, I believe, than to speak of distrust and reproach to us." 2206

And at that word she saw where Damian sat in the bush, and she began to cough and made signs with her finger that Damian should climb up a tree which was laden with fruit; and up he went. For truly he knew her purpose well and every sign that she could make, far better than January, her own husband. For she had told him in a letter all of this matter and how he

³⁶ Wench. Woman of lower degree.

was to act. And thus I leave him sitting up in the pear-tree, and January and May roaming pleasantly. 2218

Bright was the day and blue the firmament; Phoebus sent down his beams of gold, to gladden every flower with his warmth. At that time he was in Gemini, I believe, but little removed from his depression in Cancer, which is the exaltation of Jupiter. And so it happened this bright morning-time that in the further side of that garden was Pluto, who is the king of fairyland, and many ladies with him, following his wife, Queen Proserpina, one after another, straight as a line. You may read the story in Claudian³⁷, how he fetched her away in his grisly chariot, while she was gathering flowers in the meadow. 2233

This king of fairyland then sat himself down upon a bank of green and fresh turf, and without delay he said thus to his spouse: "My wife," he said, "no creature can say no; experience always proves the treason that women do to men. I can tell ten hundred thousand notable stories about your infidelity and frailty. O Solomon³⁸, wise, richest in wealth filled with wisdom and earthly glory, your words are worthy to be remembered by every creature that knows wit and reason. 2245

"Thus he praises the goodness of man: 'Among a thousand men still I found one good, but of all women I found none.' These are the words of the king who knows your wickedness. 2249

"And Jesus, the son of Sirach³⁹, I believe he only seldom speaks respectfully of you. May a wild-fire and corrupt pestilence fall upon your bodies tonight! See you this honorable lord? 2254

"Alas, because he is old and blind, his own man shall make him a cuckold. Lo, here in the tree he sits, the profligate! Now of my royal power I will grant to this old, blind, worthy knight that he shall recover his vision, when his wife will do him wrong. Then he shall know what a harlot she is, both to her dishonor and of others besides." 2263

Proserpina said, "You shall, if you so wish; but by the soul of my mother's sire⁴⁰ I swear that I shall grant to her to return a sufficient answer, and for her sake to all women after; that, even if they are overtaken in any guilt, they shall excuse themselves with bold face, and bear down those who would call them to account. None of them shall die for lack of an answer. 2271

³⁷ Claudian. Fourth-century author of *De Raptu Proserpinae*.

³⁸ Solomon. Old Testament figure, king of the Israelites, who had 1000 wives.

³⁹ Jesus, the son of Sirach. Author of the Old Testament book *Ecclesiasticus*.

⁴⁰ My mother's sire. I.e., Saturn.

"Even if a man may see something with both of his eyes, nevertheless, we women shall face it boldly, and weep, and swear, and craftily chide, so that you men shall be as ignorant as geese. What do I care for your authorities? I know well this Jew, this Solomon, found many fools among us women. But though he found no good woman, yet many other men have found women faithful, good, and virtuous. Witness those that dwell in Christ's house; they proved their steadfastness by their martyrdom. Also the Roman histories make mention of many a true faithful wife. But, sir (and be not angry), albeit he said he found no good woman, I ask you to take the man's meaning. He meant this: that in perfect goodness there is none but God, and no man or woman. 2290

"Ah, for the love of the one true God! Why do you make so much of Solomon? What does it matter that he built a temple, God's house? That he was glorious and rich? So likewise he made a temple to false gods; how could he do a thing more forbidden? By God! As fairly as you plaster his name, he was a lecher and an idolater, and in his old age he forsook the true God. As the Bible says, if God had not spared him for his father's sake, He would have rent the kingdom away earlier than He did. I care not a butterfly for all the dishonor that you men write of women. I am a woman; I must speak or else swell until my heart should burst. 2306

"For since he said we are chatterboxes, so surely may I keep all my tresses whole, I will spare nothing out of any courtesy to speak harm of him who would do villainy to us." 2310

"Lady," said this Pluto, "be angry no longer: I give it up. But since I swore my oath that I would grant him his sight again, I warn you that truly my word shall stand. I am a king; it is not fitting that I should be false." 2315

"And I," she said, "am a queen of the fairies. She shall have her answer, I maintain. Let us have no more words bout this. In truth I will oppose you no longer." 2319

Now we return to January, who was in the garden with his fair wife, and sang more merrily than a popinjay, "I love you best, and ever shall, and no other." So long he wandered among the alleys until he had come near the pear-tree where this Damian sat on high, very merry among the fresh green leaves. 2327

This fresh May, so bright and fair, began to sigh, and said, "Alas my side! Now sir, for anything that may happen, I must have some of the pears that I see, or I must die, so sorely I long to eat of the small green pears. Help, for the love of our Lady in heaven! I tell you truly, a woman in my situation may have so great an appetite for a fruit that she may die unless she would have it." 2337

"Alas" he said, "that I have not here a boy that could climb!
Alas, alas, that I am blind!" 2340

"Yes, sir," she said, "no matter; but if you would agree, for
love of heaven, to clasp that pear-tree within your arms (for I
well know you distrust me); then, so I might set my foot on
your back, I could climb up well enough." 2345

"Surely," he said, "there should be nothing lacking here, if I
could help you even with my heart's blood." 2347

He stooped down, and she stood on his back and caught hold
by a branch and went up. Ladies, I pray you, be not angered; I
cannot avoid the truth; I am a rough man. And at once this
Damian pulled up her smock, and in he thrust. 2353

And when Pluto saw this great wrong, he restored his sight to
January and made him see as well as he ever could. And when
he had his sight again, never was there a man so glad of
anything. 2358

But his thought was evermore on his wife, and he cast his two
eyes up into the tree, and saw Damian with his wife. And he
set up such a roar and a cry as a mother does when the child is
dying: "Out! Help! Alas!" he began to cry. "O rude, bold lady,
what are you doing?" 2367

And she answered, "Sir, what ails you? Have patience and
reason in your mind. I have helped you in both your eyes.
2370

"On peril of my soul, I lie not; it was taught me that to heal
your eyes there was nothing better than to struggle with a man
up in a tree. God knows, I did it with good intent." 2375

"With a man up in a tree!" he said. "May God grant that you
both die a shameful death! It was worse than that; he
copulated with you, I saw it with my eyes; if not let me be
hanged by the neck!" 2379

"Then," she said, "my medicine is all false; for certainly, if
you were able to see well, you would not say these words to
me; you have some glimmerings, but you do not have perfect
sight." 2383

He said, "I see with both of my eyes as well as I ever could,
God be thanked! And by my word, I believe it was as I said."
2386

"You are bewildered, good sir, bewildered," she said. "This
thanks I have because I have given you your sight. Alas, that
ever I was so kind!" 2389

"Now, Lady," he said, "let us forget all of it. Come down, my
love, and if I have spoken wrongly, God so help me as I am
sorry for it." 2395

"Yes, sir," she said, "you may think as you will; but, sir, a
man that wakes out of his sleep cannot speedily comprehend a
thing or see it perfectly, until he is thoroughly used to the
daylight. Even so, a man who has been blind a long time
cannot immediately see so well, when his sight is newly
restored, as he who has seen for a day or two. Until your
vision is settled for a time, many sights may beguile you. Be
careful, I pray you; for by the Queen of heaven many men
think they see a thing, and it is entirely otherwise than it
seems. One who misapprehends, misjudges." 2410

And with that she leaped down from the tree. Who was glad
but this January? He kissed her and embraced her often and
gently stroked her, and led her home to his palace. Now, good
men, I pray you, be ever of good cheer. Thus ends my tale of
January, and God bless us, and his mother, Blessed Mary.
2418

Here is ended the Merchant's Tale of January.

Epilogue to the Merchant's Tale

"Eh! God's mercy!" said our Host. "Now I pray God keep me
from such a wife! Lo what tricks and wiles are in women!
They are ever as busy as bees to deceive us simple men, and
they will ever swerve from the truth, it is well proved by this
Merchant's tale. 2325

"I have a wife as true as steel, without doubt, though she may
be otherwise a poor one; but she is a blabbing shrew with her
tongue and has a heap of other faults. 2429

"No matter about that, let such things pass. But, do you know
what? May it be said secretly, sorely I regret that I am tied to
her. But if I were to count up every fault of hers, certainly I
would be too foolish; and I say this with good reason, for it
would be reported to her by some one of this company; by
whom, there is no need to say, since it is women who know
how to give out such things. And my wit suffices not to tell
all. Therefore my tale is ended. 2440

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