In his article of 1973, Norman E. Eliason expressed a commonly held view concerning the naming of Januarie and May in Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale":

... the metaphor involved in applying these month names to the old husband and his young wife is anything but obscure nor one which demanded much ingenuity of Chaucer.¹

Though written over twenty years ago, Eliason's view is generally held to be as true today as when it was first expressed. While the article rightly warned against over-interpretation of the names in the Canterbury Tales, I believe that the naming of Januarie and May is, on the contrary, sufficiently obscure to have resulted in two distinct misunderstandings on the part of modern critics. The first misunderstanding concerns the calculation of their ages according to the months by which they are named. The second is that Januarie is an extremely old man, on the point of death.

The story of the old man married to the young woman seems so familiar that it is often presumed to mean the same for a modern audience as for the original audience of the "Merchant's Tale." Yet the behaviour appropriate to the stages of life, and marriage between people of incompatible ages, were subjects addressed by the medieval authorities quite differently (and much more categorically) to the way in which they are currently addressed. The tale is rarely examined within this medieval context, with the result that the ages of the protagonists are never considered to have been calculated very precisely. This paper will argue that the evidence of medieval texts addressing the issue of the ages of man calculates that Januarie is precisely at the transition point from middle to old age at the outset of the tale, and that though young, May is firmly in the early stage of adulthood.

To address the first misunderstanding: it has long been acknowledged that the names Januarie and May symbolise the incongruous ages of the two characters by analogy with the months of the year.² The depiction of these months in the medieval calendars has comprehensively been explored.³ It has been tempting not to
examine the relative ages of the husband and wife more closely because the incongruity between them seems so obvious. Therefore, Januarie has often been described no more precisely than as 'very old' and May as 'very young'. However, the relative positions of the names January and May in the calendar of months is frequently misunderstood. It is often assumed that the calendar year began on 1 January as much in Chaucer's time as now. But according to this reckoning, Januarie ought not to be an old man, but a baby, at the very beginning of his life! In addition, far from being young, May would be in the fifth month of her twelve month span, nearing the mid-point of her life. To this end, it has been asked of Chaucer:

Why did he name the young wife May and the old husband January? May and December have been familiar in modern times as nicknames for such a pair.

What can be forgotten is that in England until 1752, the year began, not on 1 January but on 25 March, despite the tradition that New Year's Day continued to be celebrated on 1 January according to the earlier Roman calendar. Therefore, the characters Januarie and May were named after the months of the year following the contemporary medieval English calendar. Accordingly, the name Januarie is appropriate for a character nearing the end of his life, but not yet at the end of it.

This leads me to the second misapprehension, that Januarie is at the very end of his life. Januarie is more than sixty years old at the outset of the tale. Words such as 'senility' have frequently been used to explain his behaviour, when 'vanity' and 'folly' can explain it equally well. There is an implicit assumption that because life was more hazardous in medieval times, sixty years must have been an extremely old age. In fact, while the average life span was much shorter than today, if a person lived through the high-risk stages of infancy to early adulthood, they stood a good chance of living as long as old people today, especially if they were wealthy and lived well, like Januarie. Modern statisticians calculate that sixty years was not an exceptionally old age in the Middle Ages, and that many people lived longer than this.

Contrary to the frequent assumption that Januarie is at the end of his life, he seems more likely to be on the cusp between middle age and old age, hence his haste to change his life and beget heirs to whom he will leave his property. Accordingly, at the outset of the tale, he is ageing but not yet on the brink of death. Though the length of time that passes during the tale is not specified, Januarie crosses from middle age to old age and starts to decline, losing his sight towards the end. Though symbolically blind for most of the tale, his physical blindness seems to be a symptom of old age. By analogy with the medieval English calendar, at the outset of the tale he is under two months away from the 25 March or the end of his life, figuratively speaking. If Chaucer had reckoned by the Roman calendar we use today where the year begins on 1 January, he might indeed have named the old knight, not after December, the final month of the year, as J. S. P. Tatlock suggested, but most likely after November.

May's age is not given, but when Januarie resolves to take a wife, he warns Placebo and Justinus that:

I wol noon oold wyf han in no manere.
She shal nat passe twenty yeer, certayn.

(IV 1416-7)

It is therefore likely that she is twenty years of age, or just under. While May is young, the Wife of Bath was first married at the much younger age of twelve, and accordingly, May's actions reveal her to be a competent (if devious) adult rather than the juvenile victim she has occasionally been described. Though she is passive at the beginning of her marriage, she becomes increasingly more active, gaining both the dependence of her husband and the service of a lover by the end of the tale.

The ages of the protagonists then seem deliberately to have been chosen, deviating slightly but significantly from the schemes of other writers on the same subject. The ballade 880 of Eustache Deschamps about the
incongruous marriage between two characters named January and April is generally agreed to have influenced Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale."\textsuperscript{16} If this was so, it has been asked why Chaucer altered the wife's name from April to May.\textsuperscript{17} Following the medieval calendar, April would be a younger woman than May, perhaps without the adult competence of the wife in Chaucer's "Merchant's Tale." The month of May, rather than April, was also traditionally associated with lust and love. It is clear that the name May, and the age it implies, is more fitting for such a character. Gower also used the device, but instead chose the names December and May, portraying a slightly younger husband according to the medieval calendar.\textsuperscript{18} It therefore seems likely that Chaucer deliberately chose the name January rather than December for the older character that it implied to his audience.

The action of the tale seems to bear out these arguments. Januarie pretends to his friends that he wishes to marry in order to amend his life before he dies:

\begin{quote}
Freendes, I am hoor and oold,
And almoost, God woot, on my pittes brinke;
Upon my soule somwhat moste I thynke.
(IV 1400-2)
\end{quote}

But inwardly, he indulges in rapturous anticipation of the worldly delights of marriage. His proffered reason to marry in order to live a holier life in his declining years is clearly an excuse, for instead, he wishes to marry for pleasure and in order to produce heirs.\textsuperscript{19} His hasty choice of a young and beautiful (though otherwise undistinguished) wife proves this. Justinus judges Januarie's wishes to be folly (IV 1655), and it is folly, not holiness nor dotage, which prompts his choice of wife. It does not occur to him that his wish for heirs and a young wife to bear them is inappropriate for his time of life, for he has persuaded himself that his desire to marry stems from common sense.\textsuperscript{20}

In the same conversation, he contradicts his earlier assertion that he is nearing death when he assures his friends that:

\begin{quote}
I feele my lymes stark and suffisaunt
To do al that a man bilongeth to.
(IV 1458-9)
\end{quote}

Clearly Januarie is confused about the behaviour appropriate to his age, and does not know whether he should behave like an old or a young person, describing himself alternatively as 'almoost ... on my pittes brinke' and 'nowhere hoor but on myn heed'. His confusion seems to stem, not from senility, but from the fact that he is undergoing the transition from middle age to old age. From his youth, he retains his worldly appetite for possessions, feasting and women, though he cannot satisfy his young wife and loses the faculty of sight. For most of the tale, his age is telling against him but he has not yet reached total decrepitude. But towards the end, as he grows older, it seems that he stops pretending that at his age he is a suitable match for May:

\begin{quote}
whan that I considere youre beautee
And therewithal the unlikely elde of me.
(IV 2179-80)
\end{quote}

He has finally crossed the threshold into old age.

Concerning whether sixty years was considered to be an unusually old age in the Middle Ages or not, there seem to have been two distinct opinions on the average life-span. Pope Innocent III asserted in his treatise \textit{De Contemptu Mundi} that, contrary to biblical lore, the span of a man's life numbered sixty years, not three score and ten.\textsuperscript{21} Following Innocent III, Deschamps described the expected maximum of a man's life as sixty years, and stated that, by thirty, women were old. Januarie echoes this opinion when he declares:
I wol no womman thritty yeer of age;
It is but bene-straw and greet forage.
(IV 1421-2)

Yet many other medieval authorities calculated a longer life-span than De Contemptu Mundi.

The medieval schemes dividing a man's life reduced it most often to three, four, six or seven stages, and these schemes very often imply that a sixty-year-old man was not at the end, but at the penultimate stage of his life. It has been suggested that Chaucer knew the text of the second-century astronomer Ptolemy, entitled Tetrabiblos, in which the stages of life are equated with the seven known planets, placing a sixty-year-old man not in the oldest category ruled by Saturn from sixty-eight years until death, but in the penultimate age from fifty-six to sixty-eight ruled by the planet Jupiter. Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) divided the ages of man into a six-part scheme in his Etymologiae (XI ii). While Isidore probably did not influence Chaucer directly, his encyclopaedia formed the basis for many medieval lexica until the late Renaissance. In the Etymologiae, the fifth age extends up to seventy years, before the period of senectus until death. Isidore described the transitional nature of the fifth stage in a way which demonstrates Januarie's confusion about his age: 'It is not yet old age but neither is it any longer youth'. Because he is neither young nor very old at the beginning of the tale, Januarie seems not to know how he should behave.

The eleventh-century dictionary of Papias, Elementarium Doctrinae Rudimentum, also divides a man's life into six ages, following Isidore. In this text, the fourth age is called youth or manhood and lasted up to forty-nine years, followed by the fifth age up to seventy years. As in Isidore's Etymologiae, the fifth age is a time of transition, 'having fallen away from youth towards old age but not yet reached it'. According to Papias, decrepitude is confined to the sixth and final age from seventy onward. Dante described a scheme of four ages in the Convivio (IV xxiv 3). The third age he called 'sennetute', old age, lasting from forty-five to seventy, in which man declines from the second age of greatest perfection, to the fourth and final age of 'senio' or senility. While Dante generally followed Aristotle's scheme of three ages, where the second age is the prime of life, he added a fourth age to define the period of senility from that of sentient old age. Dante surmised that 'senio' could last about ten years until death. Januarie falls into the third age, one of change and decline stretching from the peak of maturity to old age, but still one in which he retains his mental faculties.

According to these and other schemes, Januarie falls most often into the penultimate category of decline but not yet death. A parallel can be drawn with the seven-stage scheme of Ptolemy in which the last two stages are ruled over by the planets Jupiter and Saturn respectively. Januarie seems to be crossing over from the sixth age of Jupiter into the final age of Saturn. In these terms, Chaucer's Knight provides a comparison to Januarie, for he has been described thus: 'we have to think of the wise "meeke". ... Knight as being himself in passage from the Sixth to the Seventh Age. Put in this perspective, it is clear that, while he is old, Januarie is not actually on the point of death any more than is the Knight. The difference between them lies in the fact that while the Knight embodies the Aristotelian concept of middle age being the moral prime of life, Januarie embodies all that is reprehensible about middle age, following the homiletic tradition with which Chaucer was very likely familiar, and which is evident in the fourteenth-century poem, The Parlement of the Thre Ages.

The Parlement of the Thre Ages provides a useful parallel to the character of Januarie in the "Merchant's Tale." Youthe, Medill Elde and Elde embody the preoccupations of each age: enjoyment, wealth and death. While Januarie is most closely equated with Medill Elde, he seems to encompass the negative aspects of all three: he aspires to sensual pleasures though he has lost the physical capacity, he is concerned with begetting an heir to whom he can leave his wealth, and he is beginning to dwell on his own mortality. Januarie never left the pursuits of youth behind, and is struggling now to maintain those of middle age. Old age will force him to abandon all his pursuits, the inevitability of which he only realises by the end of the tale. The Parlement of the Thre Ages represents a man's life as one day from sunrise to sunset. The "Merchant's Tale" represents it as one year in
which Januarie and May have reached incongruous, though transient stages. The transience of life's stages and the consequences of one's actions are issues which May has not yet begun to address, but which Januarie will be forced to, having reached the threshold of old age. Elde explains with awful clarity:

Thou man in thi medill elde hafe mynde whate I saye!
I am thi sire and thou my sone, the sothe for to telle,
And he the sone of thiselfe pat sittis one the stede,
For Elde is sire of Midill Elde, and Midill Elde of Youthe.
(645-8)

Januarie is most similar to Medill Elde in the Parlement, who is also sixty years old and represents the zenith of middle age:

Hym semyde for to see to of sixty yere elde,
And perfore men in his marche Medill Elde hym callede.
(150-51)

Like Januarie, Medill Elde has many possessions, and enjoys a prosperous life. Januarie's concern for his wealth, proverbial among aristocratic Lombard merchants, prompts him to want heirs to inherit his property:

Yet were me levere houndes had me eten
Than that myn heritage sholde falle
In straunge hand, and this I telle yow alle.
(IV 1438-40)

By contrast, the character of Elde has transcended any interest in worldly things and considers only death. Januarie's consideration of death is farcical as he wonders whether his marriage will be too blissful to allow him to go to heaven afterwards. As the archetypal figure of age, Elde is clearly much older than Januarie:

The thirde was a laythe lede lenyde one his syde,
A beryne bownn alle in blake with bedis in his hande,
Croked and courbede, encrampeschett for elde.
(152-4)

While Januarie resembles Medill Elde for most of the "Merchant's Tale," his journey from middle to old age is noticeable by the end. Like Elde, he grows blind; he cannot walk by himself but needs the support of his wife, and his jealousy of May increases the feeble he grows. Old age crept up on Elde when he least expected it: the same is happening to Januarie.

The three ages in the Parlement are described as thirty, sixty and one hundred years. These ages seem to represent the zenith or total of the three stages of life, rather than the average ages, even though according to Innocent III and Deschamps, at sixty years of age, Medill Elde should be at the end rather than the middle of his life. It has been noted that the three ages derive from the parable of the sower (Matthew XIII 8) and biblical exegesis. In particular, the age of sixty years 'was regarded as a perfect number because it was at this age that Isaac was said to have produced sons'. That Januarie claims pious reasons for his intention to marry at the age of sixty only highlights his vanity in attempting to emulate Isaac, however unwittingly. The numbers thirty, sixty and one hundred in the parable of the sower were equated by patristic authors with varying levels of perfection. Sixty was taken to symbolise continence, widowhood and the contemplative life. Such symbolism highlights the inappropriate behaviour of Januarie, who is by contrast lecherous, luxurious and never sincerely concerned for his spiritual well-being. Therefore, while Januarie thought it fitting to emulate Isaac (whether knowingly or not) and father sons at sixty, the Church fathers indicated that it was more fitting to remain continent at sixty; that marriage was the state appropriate to the young. In this way, Januarie contravenes ecclesiastical as well as natural laws, though he cites both to justify his actions.
There seems to be a deliberate element of irony in Januarie's choice to have children at sixty like Isaac. At the beginning of the tale, Januarie expounds on the wisdom of women, citing the example of Rebecca, the wife of Isaac:

Lo, how that Jacob, as thise clerkes rede,
By good conseil of his moodor Rebekke,
Boond the kydes skyn aboute his nekke,
For which his fadres benyson he wan.
(IV 1362-5)

Though Januarie intends to demonstrate wifely wisdom, his example is one of wifely deception. When Isaac lost his sight, Rebecca substituted their second son Jacob for their firstborn Esau so that Jacob received the blessing from his blind father that was intended for his brother. Later in the tale, May is advised by the priest at her wedding to behave like Rebecca, 'In wysdom and in trouthe of mariage' (IV 1705). Yet when Januarie's sight fails, May, like Rebecca, takes the opportunity to deceive her husband. This biblical motif, cited twice throughout the tale, acts as a forewarning which prepares the audience for May's deception of Januarie in the garden.

While earlier and contemporary medieval texts exploring the issue of middle age and old age can shed light upon the character of Januarie, May's stage of life is more elusive to set in context. The medieval texts addressing the ages of man seldom address the ages of woman, and when they do, it is usually only to point out the differences from a masculine norm.33 By and large, the "Merchant's Tale" is told from the perspective of Januarie, not from that of May, and therefore she is almost completely silent. All we are told is:

But God woot what that May thoughte in hir herte.
(IV 1851)

However, it can be argued that the reminiscences of the Wife of Bath about her first three rich old husbands in her "Prologue" may indicate what May thought in her heart. Though lacking the contextual evidence to examine May's stage of life more precisely, it is clear that her evident youth does not preclude her from conducting herself with adult capability. Though the Merchant seems to criticise the Wife of Bath through the mouth of Januarie, who complains:

And eek thise olde wydwes, God it woot,
They konne so muchel craft on Wades boot,
So muchel broken harm, whan that hem leste,
That with hem sholde I nevere lyve in reste.
(IV 1423-6)

Alison has already declared that she was at her most manipulative and effective when she was young, married to her three old husbands. Januarie's supposition that young women are more malleable in the hands of their older husbands has already been undercut by the Wife's confessions. His mistake becomes apparent as his wife gains more and more control within the marriage while he gets older and weaker. The fate which Youthe in The Parlement of the Thre Ages predicts for Medill Elde, that mourning will be brief after his death (258), came true for Alison's old husbands and will most likely come true also for Januarie.

In one sense, the naming of Januarie and May by the months of the year transforms the characters from people into abstract, static phases of life. Their names are only relevant to the stages of life they have reached during the tale. Is it possible to imagine that the husband was called Januarie when he was twenty, or that the wife will be called May when she is an old woman? Or do their names change as they enter different phases of life? In this way, the audience is almost discouraged from imagining that the characters are mortals whose lives change according to the laws of nature, because their names only have meaning for their present stages of life. Yet on
the other hand, their names ensure that the issues of time and change are highlighted in the tale and are therefore impossible to ignore.

For the "Merchant's Tale," as for so many of his works, Chaucer took a popular device, that of the old husband and the young wife, and shaped it to a precise purpose. Once it is perceived that Januarie and May are named according to the months of the medieval calendar, where January is the eleventh month and May is the third, their relative ages in the tale become clear. And these relative ages are specific. Everything in the tale indicates that Januarie is at a particular time in his life, having reached a specific age. His actions are those of a man passing from the last stage of middle age to the first part of old age. His description of himself as 'on my pittes brinke', intended to convince his friends that he feels the onset of death, seems more aptly to describe his transition from middle to old age. He has reached a cross-roads in his life, where he anxiously assures his friends that he is young for his age, but also makes hasty provision for his last years. Like Janus, the two-headed Roman god often used in the medieval calendars to symbolise the month of January looking back to the old year but also facing the new, Januarie is at a threshold where he faces both the past and the future. He tries to retain the lifestyle of his past while becoming ever more aware of the restrictions of old age: the events of the tale are precipitated precisely because of this situation.

Yet it has been easy to overlook the specificity of Januarie's stage of life, and tempting simply to call him very old and exaggerate his age. Correspondingly, it has been tempting also to exaggerate May's youth, and designate her no more precisely than as a young girl. Yet this too belies her actions in the tale which are those of a competent young adult. Such exaggeration does not highlight the incongruity between the protagonists (which is already perfectly clear in the tale). Instead, it clouds the precision with which the characters are drawn and renders their actions less clear to the audience.

Notes


2For example, see Emerson Brown, Jr., 'Chaucer and a Proper Name: January in the Merchant's Tale', Names 31 (1983), pp. 79-87.


4For example, see Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter (1973), p. 155, where January and December are described as 'the beginning and end of the year's turning ...'


6This issue was addressed by R. L. Poole in 'The Beginning of the Year in the Middle Ages' Proceedings of the British Academy 10 (1921), pp. 113-37. Poole demonstrated that March was considered the first month in England following ecclesiastical practice, while the astrological year began in January following Roman reckoning. See also J. C. Eade, The Forgotten Sky: A Guide to Astrology in English Literature (Oxford, 1984), p. 33-4. Hence there was always some ambiguity in contemporary accounts, though it is evident that medieval and Renaissance authors themselves understood the year to begin in March, e.g., E. Spenser, The Shepherd's Calendar, ed. W. L. Renwick (London, 1930), p. 12. The relevance of the beginning of the year in the Middle Ages to Januarie and May in the Merchant's Tale was referred to by Emerson Brown Jr. in 'The Merchant's Tale: Januarie's "Unlikely
Elde", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 74 (1973), pp. 92-106, p. 96. Despite this, there is still a certain amount of confusion concerning the beginning of the year in the Middle Ages, and the issue is rarely taken into account.


9 For example, the assumption that Januarie is 'closer to the end of a normal life span in Chaucer's age than in our own', J. Boothman, "'Who Hath no Wyf, he is no Cokewold": A Study of John and January in Chaucer's *Miller's* and *Merchant's Tales*, *Thoth* 4 (1963), pp. 3-14.


11 See J. C. Russell, 'Late Ancient and Medieval Population', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 48 (1958), pp. 22-35, p. 22: 'Actually, if one lived through all of the dangers of the first thirty years of life, he had normally a fine constitution and good immunity against ordinary diseases and might live a long time even by modern standards'; and again at p. 35: 'The human constitution probably differed little from ours: the upper limit of age of those who survived the diseases and wore out was about one hundred years, as it is today'.

12 Philippa Tristram (1976), p. 69, noted that while the Reeve and the Merchant are often taken to represent old age in the *General Prologue*, they more accurately suggest 'prosperous middle years'. Januarie is also taken to personify old age when he more accurately represents the transition from middle to old age.


17 Emerson Brown, Jr. (1983), pp. 80-81


20 See George D. Economou, 'Januarie's Sin against Nature: The *Merchant's Tale* and the *Roman de la Rosé*, *Comparative Literature* 17 (1965), pp. 251-7, pp. 254-5; See also Mortimer J. Donovan, 'Chaucer's January and


The schemes were comprehensively examined by J. A. Burrow in The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought (Oxford, 1986).


J. A. Burrow (1986), p. 42-3. However, Burrow noted that where the seven-stage scheme was used in medieval English poetry, the stage of Jupiter represented the zenith of power, echoing the status of Jupiter as king of the gods, rather than the declining stage of the planet Jupiter in the Ptolemaic scheme.

Isidore, Etymologiae, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1911), XI ii 6: 'Quinta aetas senioris, id est gravitas, quae est declinatio a iuventute in senectutem; nondum senectus sed iam nondum iuventus, quia senioris aetas est ...'


The unusually great ages assigned to Youthe, Medill Elde and Elde in The Parlement of the Thre Ages were discussed by Russell A. Peck in The Careful Hunter in The Parlement of the Thre Ages, English Literary History 39 (1972), pp. 333-41, p. 338: '... it seems curious that the poet would consider ... a 60 year old as Middle Age. Perhaps his point is that by defining each at the extremity of his measure he keeps us mindful of the inevitability of each one's passing on to the next degree. Youth has scarcely begun to realize what youth is before he becomes Middle Age, etc.' Likewise, Januarie has not come to terms with what it means to be middle-aged, before he begins to pass into old age. See Mary Dove, The Perfect Age of Man's Life (Cambridge, 1986), p. 20.

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