May Devoid of All Delight:
January, the Merchant's Tale and the
Romance of the Rose

by Michael A. Calabrese

THE Roman de la Rose provides one of the best running glosses on the Merchant's Tale. For though the Roman is a mirror for lovers, it also has a thing or two to say about merchants. Because of what it tells us about love and money, we can use the Roman to help answer the central question that has engaged students of the tale: what, if anything, does the merchant have to do with the Merchant's Tale? Looking particularly at the speeches of Reason to the lover in Jean's portion of the poem, concentrating on her discussions of sexual delight and mercantile possessiveness, we will see that the themes of the Roman, as Chaucer employs them in the portrait, prologue and tale of the Merchant make the relationship between the Merchant and his tale dramatically necessary and profound. Reason's words provide a context in which to examine the deeds of old January, and in which to see his relationship to the Merchant, who, we learn, is not only a Merchant but a lover too. Her beautifully woven discussion of youth, age, wealth, love, delight, friendship, and enslaved merchants shows that Amant, January and the Merchant are profoundly similar as moral types, and that Chaucer has drawn from her speeches in fashioning the drama of the Merchant and his tale.

Critics have occasionally noted the similarities between the two works, and we should keep in mind just how closely tied they are. Before beginning a close textual analysis, we should briefly discuss

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some of these links, realizing that the *Roman* was a major influence and inspiration for Chaucer's tale of January.

Both works are about faulty judgment, fantasy, illusion, false seeming, and spiritual blindness. Both January and Amant listen to long, instructive speeches; not, however, to distinguish truth from falsehood but to find support for what they have already made up their minds to do. Though we may say of both Amant and January that "diverse men diversely hym tolde" (1469), the figures only hears what he wants to hear and accordingly rejects those who criticize his planned amorous adventure.

Both works are allegorical, in the sense that they contain figures named "Reason" and "Justinus," and thus high authority, as the poems' audiences would recognize it, is clearly marked in these characters. We judge other characters, like "Faus Semblant" and "Placebo," not only by their names but also by measuring their words against the wisdom of Reason and of Justinus.

Both works are about euphemism, about glossing reality. Both end with explicitly sexual love scenes—that is from our perspective—while Amant and January trap themselves within a euphemistic account of what is occurring. Amant portrays the rape of the rose as his poking his wooden pilgrim's staff into a flower, and January, seeing Damyan and May "swyving," believes he is witnessing some sort of wrestling match. Though both men are not in the same position in these sex scenes—for Amant is poking and January is watching himself cuckolded—both are scenes of self-deceit in which spiritually blind men embrace an illusion, rather than face up to the raw, carnal realities that are the inevitable results of their foolish quests for love. Both live in the world of gloss.

This is not all. Both works are about characters who are looking for ease and fulfillment through exaltation of a worldly good. As D. W. Robertson points out, "Like the dreamer in the *Roman* [January] selects a little bud of 'fresshe beautee' and 'tendre age' as the object of his affections with whom he can lead a life of "ese and hoolynesse"

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1 All references to Chaucer's poetry are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Dean Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). All references to the *Roman* are to *La Roman de la Rose*, ed. Ernest Langlois (Paris: Librairie de Fermin-Didot etc., 1914).

2 The *Roman* is allegorical, and the *Merchant's Tale* is symbolic narrative. I am here referring to the areas in which these two genres meet.

but with particular attention to "ese." Finally, both poems are about false paradises, idolatry, and in many ways, mirrors.

This wealth of similarity and influence invites us to use the Roman to help explicate the images and themes of Chaucer's tale. By analyzing all that we know about the Merchant in light of the Roman, it will become clear that Chaucer has a dramatic purpose in having the Merchant tell the tale of January. For the Merchant, being also a lover, shares much with both Amant and with January, the senex amans. And, in turn, these amantes have a lot in common with the Merchant since they are not only lovers but also in a very profound sense "merchants."

To speak of the "dramatic purpose" of the Merchant and his tale may concern critics who have worked to transcend the dramatic theory of the tales set forth by Kittredge and others who have seen the tale as primarily a confession or a revelation by the Merchant about his own troubled marriage. Critics, such as Bertrand Bronson, Peter Beidler, and most recently, C. David Benson wisely warn of the dangers of using the tale, one of Chaucer's greatest, merely to explicate a 30-line, very conventional prologue that appears in only half the Canterbury Tales MSS. Some see the Prologue as an afterthought creating problems that even Chaucer would have ignored if he had noticed them. Beidler warns that playing the game of understanding the Merchant through January's story is very dangerous:

Because January has slack skin about his neck which shakes when he sings, so the Merchant must also. Because January's wife climbs a pear tree to join her lover, so must the Merchant's wife have done. These inferences, based on my reading backwards from the Merchant's Tale into the character and

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7 Brown, based on Manly and Rickert, contends that "there is general agreement that the manuscripts which contain the prologue represent Chaucer's final intention" (142 and note). For a discussion of the suitability of the Prologue in light of the ms. evidence, see E. Talbot Donaldson, "The Effect of the Merchant's Tale," in Speaking of Chaucer (London: Athlone, 1977), 32-34.
biography of its teller, are every bit as defensible as inferences that the Merchant is old, that he is sexually inadequate, and that he is a cuckold. That is to say, they are not defensible at all.9

Such warnings are wise and serve as an excellent guideline for my discussion. For my interest in the Merchant is more iconic than personal. I am interested in the Merchant, not as a psychologically real human being, but as a moral type, and thus I try to avoid the traps of fallacy and supposition that draw us away from a close reading and appreciation of the tale. It is possible and necessary to shun presumptuous "dramatic" criticism and still be sensitive to the conventional characteristics that both January and the Merchant display in their relations to marriage and to money, for these characteristics have resonances in the culture that we must examine to understand the tale and its instruction.

Beidler, ignoring the central instructional importance of the tale, will not even go this far: "The Merchant and January share, perhaps, a common interest in things worldly, but in social and financial situation they are quite dissimilar."10 He is right in that Chaucer has made no obvious effort to make January a replica of the English merchant, but is hasty in treating their interest in "worldly goods" as if it were simply a hobby that the two share. "The story which he tells," says Beidler, "is simply the story which he tells, on the way to Canterbury, as part of his pact to entertain and edify his fellow pilgrims."11 We must realize that Beidler's position comes as an attempt to lay to rest some outlandish assumptions and to steer interest away from the Merchant's "autobiographical confession of his own marital difficulties." Likewise Benson fears attributing "all the corrosive skill and dark power of what many see as one of Chaucer's most challenging tales to the unspecified disappointments of a new husband."12 But, despite the wisdom of this anti-dramatic reaction, such criticism misses the richness and depth of a reading that takes the General Prologue and the prologue of the tale into account, a richness that becomes visible when we analyze the tale in the light of Reason's speeches in Jean's Roman, to which we must now turn.

Reason first discusses love in its relation to procreation and de-

10 Beidler, 9.
11 This and the following quote, Beidler, 13.
12 Benson, 15.
light. Her transitions are smooth and seamless and we must watch how she moves from these themes to age and youth. Delight is merely nature’s way of assuring procreation, continuation of man’s “divine self,” for this is the goal of love; anyone who denies this ultimate end for the sake of delight does not travel the right path and thus “II se rent, / Comme sers e chaitis e nices, / Au prince de trestouz vices” (4426–28). Reason then immediately launches into a discussion of how youth causes men to immoderately desire delight. Youth is delight’s “chambermaid,” pushing men into vicious snares:

Par Jennece s’en va li ons  
En toutes dissolucions,  
E suit les males compagnies  
E les desordenees vies . . .

Jennece met ome es folies,  
Es boules, es ribauderies,  
Es luxures e es outrages,  
Es mutacions de courages,  
E fait comencier teus mellees  
Qui puis sont enviz desmellees.  
(4439–42; 4463–68)\textsuperscript{13}

Since youth inspires delight, Old age, says Reason, liberates men from delight, leading them to the right path. However, not many appreciate this liberation, and they try to preserve youth. When they finally awaken from this illusion, they look back shamefully and wonder if they will be able to escape the grave consequences of their folly:

Mais Vieillece les en resache.  
Qui ce ne set si le resache,  
Ou le demant aus anciens  
Que Jennece et en ses liens;  
Qu’il leur remembre encore assez  
Des granz periz qu’il ont passez  
E des folies qu’il ont faites;  
Don les forces leur a soutraites,

\textsuperscript{13} “Man passes his youth in every dissolution, follows evil company and disordinate lives [for Dahlberg’s incorrect “ways”] . . . Youth pushes men into folly, debauchery, ribaldry, lechery, excesses, and fickle changes of heart; it creates situations so complex that they are scarcely ever untangled” (96–97). All translations and page references are from Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, The Romance of the Rose, trans. Charles Dahlberg (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1983).
Avec les folies volentez
Don il seulent estre tentez,
Vieillece, qui les acompaigne,
Qui mout leur est bone compaigne,
Qui les rameine a dreite veie
E jusqu'en la fin les conveie.
Mais mal empleie son service,
Que nus ne l'aime ne ne prise,
Au meins jusqu'a ce, tant en sai,
Qu'il la vousist aver en sei,
Car nus ne veaut veauz devenir
Ne jennes sa vie fenir.

(4477-4496)

Reason thus advises Amant to shun delight, telling him that if he does not, he will realize the truth only when he is old and has wasted his youth—if he even lives that long (4621ff). Let us pause here at this, the end of Reason's first sermon, to see how her views on procreation, age and youth relate to January.

January tells us that despite what others say, he knows why men should get married:

I dote nat; I woot the cause why
Men sholde wedde, and forthermoore woot I
Ther speketh many a man of mariaghe
That woot namoore of it than woot my paghe
For whiche causes man sholde take a wyf.
If he ne may nat lyven chaast his lyf,
Take hym a wyf with greet devocioun,
By cause of leveful procreacioun
Of children to th' onour of God above,
And nat only for paramour or love;
And for they sholde leccherye eschue,
And yelde hir dette whan that it is due;
Or for that ech of hem sholde helpen oother

"But Age takes men away from Delight. Let whoever does not know this either learn it here, or ask it of the old whom Youth has held in her grasp. They will still recall enough of the many great perils which they have passed through and the follies that they have committed. When Old Age, their good companion on their journey, has taken from them the forces which ruled them in youth and the willful follies by which they were habitually tempted, she leads them back to the right path and guides them right up to the end of their course. But her favors are badly employed, since no one loves her or values her, at least, I know, not to the extent where he would wish to have old age for himself. No one wants to grow old, nor does Youth want to finish her life" (97).
In meschief, as a suster shal the brother,
And lyve in chastitée ful holily.
But sires, by your leve, that am nat I.

(1441–56)

January says a man should marry for lawful procreation of children for the honor of God, what the Parson calls "engendrure of children to the service of God," which is the "cause final of matrimoyne" (Parson's Tale, 938), and what Genius calls "lawful" sexual "labor" without base thought, that will lead men to paradise (1950ff.). However, January's words are ironic, for he has no spiritual motive for marriage, no desire to create for the honor of God. Having a wife is his means of perpetuating his economic security beyond the grave by passing on his wealth and property to an heir.¹⁵ R. A. Shoaf shows further that though January does intend to procreate, since he lustfully parodies Nature's art, his desire is not life-affirming, regenerative, or natural.¹⁶

As January ironically embraces "leveful procreacioun" for the honor of God, he rejects a chaste married life, separating himself from the chaste with the authoritative "that am nat I," because he considers himself, not senex but rather young and strong enough to "do al that a man belongeth to." Here we see that his motives for marriage are not only expedient and mercantile but also lustful.¹⁷

¹⁵ Stephen Knight states that, "though [January] does recognize procreative power, this is only valuable so that his 'heritage,' which here means no more than money, does not go to a stranger" (1438–40). Stephen Knight, Geoffrey Chaucer (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 114.

¹⁶ "When January approaches May in his garden, his labors upon her body are an all too easily imagined mockery of Nature's labors at her forge or in her mint. In the iconography as well as the written tradition of the goddess, her forge is both implicitly and explicitly assimilated to the pudendum, and her hammers are the male genitalia. Hence when January hammers on May's anvil inside his pudendum-paradise, he is simply a man (hammers) coupling with a woman (anvil or forge) as Nature dictates; from another perspective however, one which sees his arrogance in fashioning the garden and his attempted usurpation of nature, he looks like nothing so much as a puny smith, trying to assume Nature's powers, imagining himself her substitute while in fact he can only corrupt her work." R. A. Shoaf, Dante, Chaucer and the Currency of the Word (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim Books, 1983), 195.

¹⁷ In his survey of reasons for marriage, January lists all those the Parson does except the last, which is the most vicious and most closely describes January's sexual behavior, particularly in his private garden (see 2050–51): "The fourthe manere is for to understonde, as if they assemble oonly for amorous love and for noon of the foreseyde causes, but for to accomplice thilke brennynge delit, they rekke neveere how ofte. Soothly it is deedly synne; and yet, with sorwe, somme folk wol peyney hem moore to doon than to hire appetit suffiseth" (Parson's Tale 942).
While young, January tells us, he "folily despende" his body, but now he refuses to let old age liberate him from the delights that entrap a man in youth, for as Reason says, "Car nus ne veaut veauz devenir / ne jennes sa vie fenir" (4495–96). January embodies this youthful desire that foolishly refuses to die and enslaves men to delight. After Reason describes this trap, she maintains that eventually the old will realize the folly of their ways "when their memories awake" (4517ff.). We see this happen at the end of Gower's Confessio Amantis when Venus holds up a mirror to the aged Amans and his life-long love wound finally begins to cool. But January, even when he awakens from the sleep of blindness, does not see his folly. He represents what the young Amant will be like if he continues to reject Reason and never liberates himself from delight. In light of Reason's speech then, we see not only the sinfulness of January's action, but the incongruousness and the indecorousness of simply being a senex amans, of insisting on preserving a state of being from which he should be celebrating his liberation, as Gower's Amans does at the end of the Confessio.

Like Amant, then, January has no use for Reason's first sermon. He rejects the chances she offers for liberation and fulfills all the negative models with which she warns the lover. With death approaching, says Reason, old age is supposed to be thinking on the "talent de sei repentir" (4527). January perverts this, for his desire to think "somewhat" on his "soule" (1402) means thinking on his wealth by perverting natural and sacred procreation and thinking on his body by plunging himself more deeply into earthly delight. His motives for marriage are thus both mercantile and lustful.

Reason's next discourse, which she conducts in increasingly explicit economic terms, concerns friendship, which she immediately contrasts to another kind of love that Amant should avoid—a false love that is popular among the avaricious:

C'est feinte volenté d'amer
En cuerms malades dou mahaing
De couvettise de gaaing.

(4772–75)\(^{18}\)

This "love" is really the lovelessness that plagues the man who

\(^{18}\) "It is the simulated desire of loving in hearts sick with the disease of coveting gain" (101).
“keeps his wealth and guards it from [his friends]” (4822). Such men think themselves loved and loving, but they are no more than fools. This lovelessness breeds ignorance and folly, and no true friendship. For paradoxically it takes misfortune, not deceitful good fortune, to create and test true friendship. Adversity brings knowledge (science), and wealth brings ignorance (4957ff.). One enlightens man while the other deceives:

Donc il fait graingneur avantage  
Puis que d’un fol a fait un sage,  
La mescheance qu’il receit  
Que richece qui le deceit.  

(4971–74)19

Everything that Reason says is rich and important so we can immediately relate her economic analogies to January. May is, in January’s eyes, his riches, his prosperity, the fruit of his “tresour” as he calls her, or as Shoaf says, his “coin.” Accordingly, she keeps him in ignorance and fosters his self-deceit. If he had looked on her more accurately as bad fortune—as Justinus says as “Goddes whippe,” as his “purgatorie”—he could come to the enlightenment, to the “graingneur avantage” of which Reason speaks.

Even when it should be blatantly obvious that May is bad fortune, not earthly paradise but a deceitful lusty vamp—an appropriate purgatory—January remains blind, still thinking her his “liefe,” stroking her womb, what Shoaf would call her mint in which January has perversely engendered his coin. He is deceived by what he thinks are his riches, his profit. His ignorance is hardly blissful, for it is like that of the merchant in Reason’s speech, who thinks he loves and is loved, but is really a fool, prevented from true love due to his avarice. Reason’s language in this passage is tricky. She says that the rich man is not wise but is as “cornarz” (foolish) as a “cers ramez” (many branched stag), and again that he is not “sages” but rather “uns beaus cers ramage” (4809ff.). “Cornarz” means “foolish,” but also “horned,” as the references to the branched stags makes clear, and thus “cuckolded” and “deceived.” Through this pun, Reason associates foolish merchants who think they are loved, with foolish, cuckolded husbands. Thus her climactic “N’est ce mie grant cornardie”

19 “Thus the misfortune that he receives brings him a better bargain than the riches which deceive him, since it has made a wise man out of a fool” (104).
January's fate is the natural fate of the "rich man who thinks himself loved" in Reason's speech. By inviting such folly unto himself and by rejecting Justinus' enlightened perspective on marriage, January has once again rejected Reason's remedy for ignorance, just as, in light of Reason's first sermon, he rejects the liberation that old age should bring to men. Bad Fortune, like old age, can, according to Reason, make a fool into a wise man, but they both can do nothing for spiritually blind January, who learns from Justinus about as much as Amant learns from Reason.

Reason's abundant economic references now plunge her into an explicit discussion of money and those who traffic in money—merchants (497ff). We should pause here, however, to retrace the logic of the seamless development of her second sermon, to see exactly how we have gotten to this point. If I may paraphrase, Reason seems to have said, "Amant, your love is not a spiritual friendship, but rather is based on delight and will lead you to death" (4763ff). Another kind of love that should be condemned is one that those who desire to covet gain think they have. These men neither love nor are loved; they deceive themselves, trusting in the fleeting gifts of fortune. Bad fortune, however, is a better source of true friendship, for adversity proves who your true friends are. Thus know that riches can never make men happy."

We must not let Amant's inability to see the point of this progression prevent us from synthesizing Reason's complex analogies and seeing what he is supposed to learn from them. The point is that Amant's desire for the rose is as foolish, vicious and hopeless as a rich man's desire for money. Both desires breed ignorance of true love and friendship and blindness to Fortune's instructive power. They are two traps, two snares, two dimensions of exclusive, worldly desire. Aware of this context then, we can look specifically at Reason's comments about money and merchants and continue to relate her words to old January. An awareness of her subtle merger of lust and avarice is, as I have already begun to show, central to our understanding of Chaucer's tale.

20 I thank M. Roy Harris for help with these lines. See Greimas, A. J. *Dictionnaire du l'ancien français*. Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1969, 142, s.v. *corn*. For *cornart* (accusative of *cornarz*) Greimas gives *marri trompe*. 
Because merchants always desire to acquire, they are ever in a state of fearful torment (4983–88). Their fear of losing what they have already gained and their desire to have what they "will never see themselves having," lead Reason to state authoritatively, "E si rest veirs, cui qu'il desplaize, / Nus marcheanz ne vit a aise" (5071–72). Reason then relates these ideas back to the central topic of love and charity, showing their opposition to usurious mercantile avarice:

Ne ce n'est fors par le defaut
D'amour, qui par la monde faut;
Car, cil qui richeces amassent,
S'en les amast e il amassent,
E bone amour par tout reinast,
Que mauvaiste ne la faisast,
Mais plus donast qui plus eüst
A ceus que besoigneus seüst,
Ou prestast, non pas a usure,
Mais par charité nete e pure,
Pour quei cil a bien entendissent
E d'oiseuse se defendissent,
Ou monde nul povre n'eüst
Ne nul aever n'en i deüst.

(5135–48)\(^{21}\)

Avarice and usury create a sterile, loveless world.

Reason then explains that avaricious men, "Li chaitif boterel terrestre," have made their possessions their masters [De leur aveir ont fait leur maistre (5165)]. They submit their natural freedom (franchise) to "vil servitute," and they are "tuit serf a leur deniers" (5159ff.). The riches they think they hold really hold them in slavery. They suffer, thus, the same enslavement as those steeped in youthful delight, for these Reason has already likewise called "sers e chaitis" (4427, and see above). Reason can harmonize the two, emphasizing the lovelessness and slavery of lust and avarice because man, through sin, has already done so "by making love a piece of merchandise" (qu'il

\(^{21}\) "Nor does this situation exist except through the lack of love, which is absent from the world; for, if those who heap up riches loved and were loved—if right love reigned everywhere, not seduced by wickedness, and if those who had more either gave more to those whom they knew to be needy, or loaned, not at usury, but out of charity pure and simple, as long as the recipients directed their efforts toward good and kept themselves from idleness—then there would be no poor man in the world, nor ought there to be any" (107).
ont faites amours vendables 5150). Reason is a good teacher; though she has been talking about merchants, she has never left the subject of love, for all that she says refers to Amant’s desire.

Reason’s first speech applies mainly to Amant’s identity as the lover. This current discourse applies more to the mercantile side of his character. Reason is trying to tell Amant, though he does not know it, that his desire for the rose makes him a merchant, bound to ignorance and slavery due to his idolatry. And just as Amant desires to possess the rose, just so does January desire to covet and possess May. For January himself, like Amant, has a dual identity; he is not only an amans, but a “merchant” too, and thus Reason’s mercantile analysis applies to his desire as well.  

January is a “lombard knight” from “Pavye.” Paul Olson showed twenty-five years ago that “Lombards” in the late fourteenth century referred to Italian wool merchants competing for contracts with London merchants. In the analogues to the tale, the January figure is often old and often rich, but Chaucer goes further in associating him with commerce by using this topical, professional tag. Further, he gives him the name January, which comes etymologically from the two-faced god “Janus,” who is often considered the god of merchants.  

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22 For a very recent and succinct analysis of possessiveness, commodity, and the generally mercantile tenor of the tale, see Knight, 112–16. See also Donaldson’s observation, 44–45, that “the Merchant’s Tale was most carefully written to present the kind of world that can come into being if a man’s approach to love and marriage is wholly mercantile and selfish—if he believes that he can buy a wife as a domestic beast that will serve his every wish and, somehow, fulfill his most erotic fantasies.” Quoted also in Brown’s notes, 260.


Olson continues, “Chaucer’s Merchant knew what he was doing when he chose to tell a scurrilous tale about a Lombard from Pavia. ‘Lombard’ had come to stand for enemy and commercial rival, and ‘Pavian,’ in a less emphatic way it seems, for usurer” (263). Note that Langland uses the word similarly in Piers Plowman: C text IV, 194; VI 241. 46 (Couetysse’s confession), Piers Plowman An Edition of the C text, ed. Derek Pearsall (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1978).

Olson becomes less helpful when he applies his historical study to create a psychological motive for the Merchant—to attack the Clerk’s romanticized view of Italy and of marriage. This “dramatic” reading has evidently caused scholars to neglect the rest of his argument.

24 See Olson, “Merchant’s Lombard Knight,” 262. Olson cites Arnulf of Orleans’ commentary on the Fasti, in which he calls Janus “deus mercatorum.” Brown, 254ff., surveys the resonances of “January” and “Janus.” See also Burrow, 203 ff., for further
His treatment of May most definitively betrays his mercantile identity, revealing that in the Merchant’s Tale, as in the Roman, love has become a piece of merchandise. Olson, in another neglected article, says January loves May “not as a person but as a thing,” that having shopped for her in the “commune market-place” (1583) in his mind, he marries her “as money, as property, as the last luxury of a prosperous life time,” and that he uses her as an “insurance policy” to insure for himself a life of bliss and ease to protect him from adversity, and the transience of fortune. He pays for her in essence with “the good price of feoffment with his land and his real estate in town and tower,” and he intends to use her to generate heirs to pass on his “heritage” (1438ff).

Having made such an investment, January is anxious to keep May under lock and key, so he builds a garden, for which he has the only “clyket” and in which only they two can go and where he engages in most illicit activities. The mercantile implications of his actions are important, for, as Olson tells us, “to the medieval mind, the husband who locks up his wife is like a miser locking up his treasure.”

Our comparison with the Roman corroborates this point, for January hoards May just as the fearful, worrying merchants in Reason’s speech hoard their wealth. Reason warns Amant about the foolishness of these compulsive hoarders, telling him, “Si ne fait pas riche riche / Celui qui en tresor la fiche” (4975–76). She again speaks of this practice as unnatural, adverse to God’s wishes, and physically dangerous:

Aus richeces font grant laidure
Quant il leur toleront leur nature.
Leur nature est qu’eus deuent courre
Pour genz aider e pour secourre,
Senz estre a usure prestees;

implications of January’s name. Further linking January with merchants, Robertson notes that “Gemini, the sign under which January is deceived . . . is the house of Mercury, lord of eloquence as well as of merchants” (257).


26 Olson, “Chaucer’s Merchant,” 206. Olson’s essay on the connections between January’s avarice and lust are invaluable. He does not discuss the Roman, but mentions it once in a footnote noting “Amis’ grouping of the sins of La Jaloux with the sins of avarice which have beset civilization since the Golden Age” (206). Amis’ grouping, especially in the context of Reason’s speeches, thus further links lustful possessiveness and avarice.
A ce les a Deus aperestees:
Or les ont en prison repostes.
Mai les richeces de teus ostes,
Qui meauz, selonc leur destinees,
Deusent estre traynees,
Se venchent enourablement,
Car emprés aus honteusement,
Les trayient, sachent e hercent;
De treis glaves les cueurs leur percent:
Li premiers est travauz d'aquerre;
Li seconz, qui les cueurs leur serre,
C'est pueur qu'en nes toille ou emble
Quant il les ont mises ensemble,
Don il s'esmaient senz cessier;
Li tierz est douleur dou laissier.
Si con je t'ai dit ci devant,
Maiement s'en vont decevant.
Ainsinc Pecune se revenche,
Come dame e reine franche,
Des sers qui la tienent enclose.

(5183–5207)

She culminates her discussion of foolish merchants with a dramatic apostrophe to "riches," which indeed seems addressed to the "fruit" of January's "tresor":

O! douces richeces morteus,
Dites, donc estes vous ou teus
Que vous faciez beneurees
Genz qui si vous ont enmurees?

(5257–60)

27 "They do great evil to riches when they pervert them from their nature. Their nature is that they should fly to the aid and comfort of poor men, without being loaned at usury. God has provided them for this end, and now men have hidden them in prison. But riches, which, according to their natural destiny, should be led, revenge themselves honorably on their hosts, for they drag them ignominiously behind, they rend them and stab them repeatedly. They pierce their hearts with three blades. The first is the labor of acquisition. The second that oppresses their hearts is the fear that men may rob them and carry off their riches when they have gathered them up; this fear torments them unceasingly. The third blade is the pain of leaving the riches behind. As I have told you before, these deceivers walk the earth spreading evil. It is thus that Riches, like a free lady and queen, revenges herself upon the slaves who keep her locked up" (107–08).

28 "O, sweet mortal riches, say, are you then such that you gladden men who have thus imprisoned you?" (108).
We must carefully examine these bitter paradigms, to see how January, in committing avaricious lechery, fulfills them. He, like the merchants, suffers sharp pains from his gains. The “fyr of jalousie” that his wife should fall “in som folie” with another man torments him, as Reason says of the merchants, “senz cessier.” Further he seems to respond to the third “blade” of Reason’s list—the fear of leaving riches behind—with the wish to have his possession of May transcend even death: “For neither after his deeth nor in his lyf / Ne wolde he that she were love ne wyf, / But evere lyve as wydwe in clothes blake” (2077–79).

That Reason portrays covetousness’ three torments as “blades” has a special application to the tale, for January often speaks of knives and wives together, thinking that, “A man may do no synne with his wyf, / Ne hurte hymselven with his owene knyf” (1839–40). The irony of his next usage is particularly thick, for just before being cuckolded, when he wants to gently exhort May to be “trewe” to him, he tells her he would rather “dyen on a knyf” than offend his “trewe deere wyf” (2159ff.). While unknowingly referring to the piercing punishments he suffers for his avaricious treatment of May, he specifically tells her to be faithful because he has chosen her “Noght for no coveitise.” He neither recognizes his covetousness, nor realizes that he can and will hurt himself with his own knife. By hoarding his wife as a possession, by turning her into stored up treasure, he is tormented by the blades of riches that torment anxious rich men in Reason’s speech. In a word, January does to May what the merchants do to money; he puts her in to a garden which is, like the merchants’ storehouse in Reason’s speech, “enclosed al aboute” (2143), and he ironically thinks himself immune to the sharp consequences and the eventual revenge that the imprisoned riches will take.

This revenge involves, in addition to the worry, torment and slavery that riches cause, the lack of economic growth that a hoarding merchant suffers, for as Reason says, “Preuz n’est ce pas faire en tel garde, / Au meins a celui qui la [Pecune] garde” (5215–16). She earlier said “L’aveirs n’est preuz fors pour despender,” while the avaricious think that “aveirs n’est preuz fors pour repondre” (5167, 5170). To understand this lack of profit and how it relates to January, we must consider Reason’s claim that covetous men, opposed to God’s design, pervert the “nature” of their riches. For January suffers a similar profitlessness from his hoarding of his riches, May.
Merchants think they profit by hoarding, but since God ordained that riches should be spent for the benefit of all men, avarice, by refusing to spend, or by loaning "a usure" can bear no fruit. Reason said before that the rich foolishly consider themselves loved, and now she adds that they erroneously consider themselves prosperous. The profit that she talks about is a spiritual profit, gained by rejecting selfishness and investing one's self in a community of men. Reason uses economic metaphors with Amant because she wants him to liberate himself from the fruitlessness and profitlessness of his lustful quest. Her point is that he is like the merchant who thinks he is gaining, but ultimately can find no "preuz."

January falls into the same trap, for he thinks himself fortunate and thinks that by hoarding May and impregnating her he has profited. But as I said earlier, his act is one of fornication for economic security and thus leads to the same false, abhorrent profit that the merchants think they enjoy. Those who store up wealth "en tresor" "Certes Deu n'aime ne ne doutent" (5121), says Reason. Just so is January's hoarding and usurious begetting, for he has made clear, as we have seen, that he wants children not for the honor of God above, but for unnatural youthful delight and the preservation of his "heritage." Both types of profit, economic and sexual (and with January we cannot separate the two), are selfish, exclusive, worldly, unnatural, sinful, and against God's design.

Thus, though both poems end with scenes of engendering, the mercantile contexts in which the poets have cast the fornicators vitiate any redemptive, sacred or honorable implications. Not Nature's redemptive power, but rather avarice, foolishness and sin win out. The profitless fertilization scenes thus culminate the mercantile entrapment of the two amantes. Again, January's use of May reflects Reason's description of the merchants' use of money. Reason's entire discourse is about procreation as divine profit, and she uses economic language to emphasize Amant's distance from this pure goal. January, as a merchant seeing procreation as an economic activity for personal profit, acts out her teaching as a negative exemplum. If Reason had known about Chaucer's tale, she would have gladly told it to the young amans. She could have told him further that January holds May in his hand like the figure of Avarice he saw on the wall of Deduit's garden holds her purse, if she thought it would help.

The central image in the tale that brings together in one place the many themes I have been discussing in January's garden. Reason, as
we have seen, constantly talks about the evils of storing up treasure. The image of putting something “in walls” (enmurre), she sees as hopeless and incapable of bringing happiness. Not only is the garden such a structure, a prison in which to foolishly store up treasure, but it has various distinctive features that further display how January has merged lust and avarice. The description also shows that Chaucer has the Roman in mind in composing the Merchant’s Tale.

In the course of ten lines Chaucer gives a score of significant details:

\[
\text{Amonges othere of his honeste thynges,}
\text{He made a gardyn, walled al with stoone;}
\text{So fair a gardyn woot I nowher noon.}
\text{For, out of doute, I verrailly suppose}
\text{That he that wrooth the Romance of the Rose}
\text{Ne koude of it the beautee wel devyse;}
\text{Ne Priapus ne myghte nat suffise,}
\text{Though he be god of gardyns, for to telle}
\text{The beautee of the gardyn and the welle}
\text{That stood under a laurer alwey grene.}
\text{Ful ofte tyme he Pluto and his queene,}
\text{Proserpina, and al hire fayerye,}
\text{Disporten hem and maken melodye}
\text{Aboute that welle, and daunced, as men tolde.}
\]

(2028–41)

Chaucer emphasizes the stoned walls that recall the walls of the merchants’ storehouse in the Roman. He then mentions the Roman specifically, referring to the garden of Deduit—that “tropological Eden” in which Amant, with the help of Oiseuse, begins his narcissistic quest for the Rose. The “Edenic” resonances of both January’s and the Roman garden is of course proven by Amant’s belief that Deduit’s garden is “parevis terrestre” (636) and January’s insistence that a wife is man’s “paradys terrestre” (1332). Chaucer then gives us Priapus, whom he bills as god of Gardens, but whom we must see as

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30 The question is, of course, is this the voice of January or the Merchant. It does not matter, since this is undeniably January’s sentiment, as his “I shal have myn hevene in erthe heere” proves (1646).
the phallic god, especially based on what January and May do there. Not only do we get the phallic god, but also Pluto and Proserpina, the god of avarice and the goddess of wealth, who appropriately do some dancing, for in the Roman, the dance is an invitation to carnal desire. Because of these references Olson rightly calls the garden a "phallic Eden," and "Eden of the economic man."\textsuperscript{31}

By comparing January's garden to Deduit's garden and by further portraying it as the prisons and treasure houses in which merchants in the Roman lock up their wealth, Chaucer merges, because January has done so, the imagery of sexual and mercantile delight. Both lovers, or we could say both "merchants," deceive themselves, for Amant, in his desire to possess the rose, and January, in his desire to possess May by enclosing her in a garden, both need to learn, as Reason tells Amant, that the only stable goods are those which are "enclosed" within yourself, that all the rest are fleeting gifts of unstable Fortune:

\begin{verbatim}
Car sachiez que toutes vos choses
Sont on vous mèmes encloses;
Tuit autre bien sont de Fortune...
   tuit si [Fortune] fait sont trop douteable,
Pour ce qu'il ne sont pas estable.
Pour ce n'est preuz l'amour de li
N'onc a preudome n'abeli.
\end{verbatim}

(5341–43; 5351–53)\textsuperscript{32}

Reason again uses "preuz," as she does when discussing merchants, emphasizing that no "profit" can come from the love of any of Fortune's gifts, whether, sexual delight, wealth, or, in January's case, a combination of the two in May.

January thus fulfills every negative exemplum in Reason's speeches; he is trapped in every snare and misunderstanding that Amant is, and like Amant, will not listen to reason to liberate himself from his perilous folly. But Chaucer has not merely lifted Amant from the Roman into his own story. As we have seen, January is far more complex than his younger ancestor. For in the Merchant's Tale, instead

\textsuperscript{31} Olson, "Chaucer's Merchant," 211, 208; see 211ff. where he explains the economic significance of the two gods.

\textsuperscript{32} "For know that all your possessions are enclosed within yourself. Every other good belongs to Fortune. . . . All her deeds are too dangerous, because they are not stable. For this reason, love of her is neither profitable nor in any way pleasing to a worthy man" (110).
of presenting an allegorical Amant hearing his desire reflected in speeches (which he does not understand) first about the evils of sexual desire, and then about mercantile possession and cupidinous usury, Chaucer instead has merged these themes, and merged the iconic identities of Amant as lover and merchant into January, the senex amans and Lombard knight.

January is more pathetic and dire a character because he is the amans that never learned. He is old now, his “slakke skyn” hanging about his neck, and though, still being an amans, he is lecherous and “coltish,” his execution of the factum is a slow and tedious process (1832ff). Critics have often said that in the Merchant’s Tale, Chaucer has put Old Age from the garden wall into the garden of love.\(^{33}\) I would add to this that January is also part Avarice from that same wall, and that most importantly, as I hope to have shown, an old Amant, dramatically and pathetically acting out a bitter exemplum of all Reason’s warnings to the lover.

January, as his name indicates, is still a symbolic figure, but Chaucer fleshes him out, makes him vivid, as he does with Faus Semblant, La Vieille and Amis in creating the Pardoner, the Wife of Bath and Pandarus. Chaucer draws from the iconic figures in the Roman and creates from them characters whose actions show what happens if one tries out their misguided philosophies in the experiential world. Chaucer’s dramatization of the Roman, specifically of Reason’s speech to the lover, justifies and indeed necessitates our use of the Roman to gloss the Merchant’s Tale. The Roman is not our secret code, or a formula, but it gives the necessary genealogical background and the philosophical context in which we may understand January’s actions.

But Chaucer does more than dramatize the Roman discussion into January; he also fashions a dramatic episode that includes the teller of his tale. Since in name, in implied profession and in lustful inclination, January is associated with merchants, we must now consider how his adventure reflects on the Merchant himself.\(^{34}\) To separate

\(^{33}\) See Fleming, 32.

\(^{34}\) Here is where critics get into trouble, becoming too unnecessarily biographical about the Merchant. For a survey of “dramatic” readings, most of which see the tale as an elaboration of the Merchant’s marriage troubles, see Beidler, 4ff. It is easy for Beidler to disparage these elaborate, psychological, confessional, biographical dramatic readings, but when faced with Olson’s stark contention that January and the Merchant are both “Merchants” he can only say that he is not “much impressed” with Olson’s effort. He then defends the Merchant as most likely a good merchant “honest
the Merchant from January would be separating themes and images bound up in Chaucer's culture, for we see how Reason, in one long, reasonable breath weaves lustful delight and mercantile desire inseparably together.\textsuperscript{35} Knowing the strength of this connection—indeed the tale is \textit{about} this vicious merger—and working with the details that Chaucer gives us in the Merchant's portrait and \textit{Prologue}, we can discuss the relationship between teller and tale. For the portrait is almost exclusively about his trade and his money (10 of 15 lines refer to his money dealings); his prologue is exclusively about the woes of marriage, and his tale, as we have seen, is about money and marriage, or I should say, money as marriage, or marriage as money, about a fearful merchant who stores up his wife, and clutches her avariciously by the hand.

As Jill Mann has shown, in her chapter "The Omission of the Victim," even though Chaucer does not moralize about the Merchant's economic practices, he still provides us with a series of conventional descriptive details to identify what kind of fellow the Merchant's portrait represents. Regarding the Merchant's selling of "sheeldes," his "bargaynes" and his "chevyssauce," Mann tells us that "these statements look like innocent praise of the Merchant's success in business, but their phraseology is derived from the estates satire on fraudulent business practices." "Chevyssauce," she says, "suggests shady dealings" when it simply means "profit," and far more often "the word is a simple euphemism for usury." She cites Gower's and Langland's figures of "Avarice," both of whom are associated with usury and "chevyssauce."\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{35} As Olson says, "Hevene," 204–5, "The shift from the love of a woman to the love of possessions required no very great leap of imagination in Medieval times, since, to the Medieval mind, the acquisitive vices were essentially matters of love: 'Avarice ... is a likerousness in herte to have earthly thynges,' the Parson asserts (X, 740). Medieval thinkers knew that the desire to possess a woman and the desire to possess any other purely physical object proceeded from the same root." Olson then notes that "the whole fifth book of the \textit{Confessio Amantis} interprets avarice in terms of the metaphor of sexual love."

We must also remember how hateful Reason feels about usury and how she contrasts it with use of money based on “charity” (par charite). She further speaks of usury as a false means of gaining wealth and happiness:

Car usurier, bien le t’afiche,
Ne pourraient pas estre riche,
Ainz sont tuit povre e soufraine,
Tant sont aver e couveiteus.

(5067–70)\(^{37}\)

Reason is not contrasting usurers to the very wealthy, but to the truly wealthy, those who work lawfully for their bread, do not consider treasure worth “treis pipes,” and thus are “riche en abondance / S’il cuident aver soufisance” (5063–64). Furthermore, we know that Reason is closely associating usury with merchants, because this passage (5067–70) directly precedes her decisive “Nus marcheaz ne vit a aise,” which we have discussed before.

Thus, according to Reason’s commentary on merchants and usury, which constitutes, as we learn from Mann’s work, part of a larger anti-merchant tradition in which Chaucer writes, we can link the Merchant’s crimes to those of January, whose mercantile identity we have established. They both live in fear for loss of their wealth: the Merchant is greatly concerned that the precious trade route “Bitwexe Middelburgh and Orewelle” stay open “for any thing.” They are both merchants who manipulate their wealth, looking for “encrees” and “wynning.” But as Reason says, and as Amant’s and January’s actions show, such “profit” is false and vicious and hateful to God. For these reasons, then, the Merchant’s Tale is his tale, about, as his denial in his prologue ironically reveals, his “owene soore.”

It may be anticlimactic to conclude with an analysis of the Merchant’s controversial prologue, since many critics think it insignificant, or mainly a reference to the tale the Clerk has just told.\(^{38}\) But in the context created by the themes and images of the portrait and tale, I think we can make some interesting observations about the Merchant’s introduction. We have been trying to find out what the Merchant’s Tale is about, and thus we have to analyze what the Merchant

\(^{37}\) “For usurers, be well assured, could never be rich; instead, they are so miserly and covetous that they are all poor and tortured” (106).

\(^{38}\) See Beidler, 14–15.
himself thinks the tale is about, and what this means based on what we know about him from his portrait.

The Host asks the Merchant to “tell us part” of the sorrow and care of marriage, since he has been complaining of his “wyves cursednesse” and of her “passyng crueltee.” The Merchant says he will “gladly” tell such a tale, but declines to speak of his own pains. He thus bills his tale as a non-autobiographical tale of the evils suffered by “wedded men.” The tale is then about a foolish old man who actually gets married and becomes blind and even more foolish. This is basically what the Merchant promised, and his vile portrayal of the groom January makes sense in light of the Merchant’s view of marriage as foolish, filled with care and sorrow.\(^{39}\) Beidler subscribes to this view, seeing the “encomium” at the beginning of the tale to be ironic, and the teller to be, above all, “anti-marital.”\(^{40}\)

In this way then, the prologue and tale make sense together: the unhappy husband tells a tale about a man desperately eager to get married, in all the haste he can, who winds up deceived and cuckolded by his wife. The tale is so successfully anti-marital in the Canterbury context, that the Host, seeing it as a tale about a wicked wife, tells us that he himself wishes he were not “teyd” to a woman. But in light of the Merchant’s portrait, and in light of the mercantile connections we have made between him and January, the final irony really has little to do with marriage at all, with the Merchant’s shadowy wife or with his alleged self-hatred.\(^{41}\) It is simply that the Merchant

\(^{39}\) It is important that we do not associate the Merchant with Justinus, as Beidler, 18–20, wants to do in his attack on the Merchant-January connection. Justinus is talking about seeing marriage as potential purgatory; he has a proper view of Fortune’s instructive power. Further, his advice is not anti-marital or misogynistic, as is his sane, calm, and wise advice on finding the “right” woman shows (see 1519ff). The Merchant, however, has no such enlightened perspective; he sees marriage not as a potentially beneficial purgatory, but as hell, with a wife who “overmaches” the “feend.”

\(^{40}\) Beidler, p. 17, points out this connection: “The Merchant’s Prologue serves . . . as does almost everything in the tale itself, to emphasize important characteristics of January. . . . In context, it emphasizes his foolishness, his blindness to truth, his obtuse single-mindedness. By including in the Prologue a condemnation-in-advance of January’s views of marriage, Chaucer has insured that his readers will receive the correct impression of him right from the start.” See also Brown’s thorough defence of the unified narrative voice in the Prologue and the Tale, 141–51. Brown argues that the contemptuousness, and loveless bitterness of the Merchant is displayed in both prologue and tale: “Prologue and tale, far from being in conflict, reveal two sides of the same personality, both crippled by the failure to love,” 143.

\(^{41}\) Olson goes farther on this issue but becomes perhaps unnecessarily biographical: “The Merchant has a wife who like May has deceived him, a wife who is a figure for the wealth which has seduced him into usury, avarice and sophistry (l. 270–284) and
thinks he tells a story about wives and marriage, but really tells a story about a merchant, about a fearful, hoarding, usurious merchant, whose riches betray him. "January's love of May," says Olson, "reflects, in heightened colors, the face of his own commercial love of the world's goods" and thus January is the Merchant's "moral image." 42 Though it does not seem that the Merchant will talk about merchants, for he does not tell his tale to be about them, and though he says he will not speak about his "owne soore," he does just these both. 43 His tale, then, functions to characterize him, like January, as a man who misconceives and misdeems, who does not see the evils, dangers, sinfulness, foolishness, and profitlessness of his mercantile exploits. The Merchant thinks that wives deceive and that marriage is a "snare," but he does not see that May is, in January's eyes, the fruit of his "treasure," that she is his wealth, and thus an image of the riches that can never, as Reason tells us, make a man rich. And he does not see that January's unborn child is, like the "encrees" of his own "wynning" a foul and unholy profit, born of avarice and lust.

Thus we must see the Prologue as the Merchant's failure to draw the proper parallel between himself and January. For it is not their marriage woes that link them, but their marriage to "worldly goods." Just as Amant does not see how Reason's speech about merchants relates to his desire for the rose, the Merchant does not see how his "merchant's" tale relates to his own deeds and to his own spiritual state. This is the point of Reason's second sermon to the lover and the point of the Merchant and his tale. Chaucer's obvious interest in misconceiving and misdeeming, so violently powerful in January,

yet left him a debtor (I, 280)" ("Chaucer's Merchant," 213). It is possible that the wife is a figure, as in January's case, for his wealth. The metaphorical connections between the two could provide for this, and this would deepen the irony—he thinks he complains about his wife, but does not realize that he is, like January, really "bounden in the snake" of avarice and usury.

42 Olson, "Hevene," 204, 206.

43 Olson points out how that though the Canterbury Tales are in so many ways about the love of money, the radix malorum, "the Merchant's Tale, told by the representative of the class commonly and possibly justly regarded as most guilty of the vice, says nothing directly concerning the subject." The key word here is "directly," for as Olson goes on to say, "The failure to open up the subject is not a lapse if one considers the character who is speaking, and it becomes a positive success if one considers how he speaks" 204. For an analysis of mercantile themes in Chaucer's depiction of the Franklin see also N. R. Havelock, "Chaucer's Friar and Merchant," Chaur 13 (1978): 337-45.
and his close use of the *Roman*, here and throughout the *Tales*, argues for seeing this thematic parallel between the two poems. The Merchant learns as much from his own tale as Amant learns from Reason, and as much as January learns from Justinus; that is to say, nothing at all. Herein lies the "drama" of Chaucer's Merchant.

*University of Virginia*