Receding Images of Initiators and Recipients—Yet Another Reflection on The Merchant’s Tale

Gwen Griffiths

“And it is al other than it semeth
He that mysconceyveth, he mysdemeth”

Critical opinions on Chaucer’s Merchant’s Tale (Mer T) range widely, with unhappy results, as readers have tried either “to save the tale” or “to save the author” Schlesusener comments further. “The alternatives contradict each other so flatly that the proponents of one view inevitably suspect the motives and the intelligence of their opposition”2 Disparate views on the MerT cover

1All citations of Chaucer’s works are from The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed F N Robinson, 2nd ed (Oxford Oxford UP, 1957) The following abbreviations are used in this article The Canterbury Tales = CT, General Prologue = GP, The Merchant’s Tale = MerT

both affective (we like/dislike the tale) and evaluative responses (each character wins or loses to some degree, the male/female roles in marriage are/are not worked out) I should like to suggest here that this diverse reception and lack of agreement about its meaning actually attest to the success of Chaucer’s tale Here Chaucer actually prompts multiple responses to his text, but allows no definitive reading Any continuing critical disagreement gives evidence of the persistent gap which exists between author and reader of any text, while within this text Chaucer shows that, while author and reader must participate in attempts to bridge that gap, such attempts consistently founder

Variable responses result from those parts of the tale which, in focusing upon the question of narrator/narratee reliability, authority, and responsibility, destabilize the complex author/text/reader relationship Usually the focus is upon the (un)reliability of the narrator, but the parallel question of the reliability of narratee reception is equally important3 The “reader” must also try to decide her/his response to the various recipients within the narrative, which can range from empathy to rejection, from belief to disbelief. As distortions by narrators and narratees accumulate,

we are challenged to consider the pervasively deconstructive influence of unreliability, undermined authority, and irresponsibility upon any attempted reconstruction of a text which so resolutely resists closure.

The merchant narrator, of course, dominates the tale, attempting to enforce his point of view upon his direct narratees, the other pilgrims. His heavy-handed "(mis)shaping" of his discourse works to try to force those he addresses to accept only his point of view, while yet prompting us, as readers, to distrust his overzealous rhetorical "persuasion." The harder the merchant works at defying the parameters of his embedded narratives, the more he destabilizes the text for his audience.

As well, there are within the text several embedded "speakers"/narrators (each of whom presupposes a parallel "hearer"/narratee), whose reliability is also difficult to accept simply because the parameters of the embedding are progressively destabilized as the disparity (différence) between what each perceives, as the relationship between words and their meaning continually undermines our perceptions of them Chaucer's range of "hearers", whose response to any of the embedded "speakers" is as diverse, anticipates the idiosyncrasies of audience response 4.

In analysis of text, the question of "Who speaks?" is frequently addressed, the problem of just who may be "hearing", other than the apparent narratee, rarely receives such attention 5. The

4See M K Sutton's comments on how narratees function to shape a narrator's tale in How Listeners Shape Stories A Model for Readers in Brown's Fo's le Yarns, *Journal of Narrative Technique* 16 (1986) 117–30 Of course, they may also function to show the mis/shaping of text which can occur between author and reader Cf W Daniel Wilson on "reader" identification with narratee roles in a text ("Readers in Texts," *PMLA* 96 [1981] 848–63) Although referring primarily to speech acts, Alessandro Duranti notes the importance of the audience as co-author of a text Since much of the discussion here about addressee/addresses relates to speech acts within the narrative, the idea that "every act of speaking is directed to and must be ratified by an audience" (243) has important implications for the exchanges examined from the MerT and the relationship between "signifiers" and their "signifieds" ("The Audience as Co-Author An Introduction," *Text* 6 [1986] 239–47)

The speaker of the Prologue creates the illusion that each pilgrim will "tell" his tale to an audience other than the pilgrims, an audience directly addressed in the GP, yet with no actor role within CT.

And shortly for to tellen as it was,
Were it by aventure, or sort, or cas,
The sothe is this, the cut fil to the Knyght,
Of which ful blithe and glad was every wyght,
And telle he moste his tale, as was resoun,
By foreward and by composicioun,
As ye han herd

[A843–49a]

The narratee, "ye" (A849), is at the same narrative level as CT's pilgrim narrator. But this narratee opposition only accounts for direct communication between them, it does not allow for indirect address and its effect upon an audience.

At its simplest an addressee is the actor who communicates directly with other actors (addressees) within the narrative frame (cf E2160–206). To this obvious pairing must be added other actors, co-present but not directly addressed (cf E2207–08). For example, when January addresses Placebo, Justinus also hears the message, and later, in the embedded Pluto/Proserpine narrative, Pluto's direct address to Solomon is heard by Proserpine. In a more complex transaction, the merchant narrator, as speaker of his own discourse, breaks his story's parameters to address in turn the pilgrims outside the narrative (cf E2122–24), the fictional actors within his own fictive tale (cf E2107) and characters outside the story, both of whom are located at a more embedded level of the narrative frame (cf E2125). In the last two examples, the pilgrims, as indirect addressees, conflate two roles. Meanwhile, the GP "ye" are indirect addressees throughout as they "hear"/
"overhear" the merchant narrator's tale, reported by the pilgrim narrator, yet remain that narrator's direct addressee. All of the discourse is available to them, and beyond them to any extrinsic "reader" (cf A858).

For this discussion, these several levels of "speakers" (addressers/narrators) and "hearers" (addressees/narratees) have been categorized as shown in the following figure. Corresponding narrator and narratee roles are linked and then ordered into two groups. initiators, those who "speak" (initiate a discourse), and recipients, those who "hear" (receive a discourse). The term recipient is used here when one or more levels of narratee/addressee have simultaneous access to the one discourse.

Some of the complexities of the narrator/narratee relationship and the effect on the "author"/"reader" relationship are most easily appreciated in the innermost opposition paired above (adresser and addresse). Here the number of levels of direct and indirect address, where the process of switching levels easily destabilizes meaning, helps to undermine the idea that all narrative relationships can be reduced to a simple set of binary oppositions. The MerT clearly demonstrates this process as each small interaction is reflected in a larger one, culminating in the figure of the merchant himself as narrator.

At the most embedded level of the tale is the Pluto/Proserpine story (E2225–319). This is not an embedded narrative in the sense that one of the actors in the tale recounts her/his own further narrative. Rather the merchant narrator himself transgresses the boundaries of his own narrative to intrude with another story. Its intrusiveness in the January/May story mirrors the

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7Rummon-Kenan 1–96 proposes a typology for narrators and narratees in which the one is directly opposed to the other in a binary structure. The terminology used to delineate the various levels of narrator and narratee tends to be cumbersome. She also proposes a hierarchical structure for narrative levels within a text. Applied to CT 91–92 the levels of narrative may be classified as follows:

- **extradiegetic level**: the introduction and presentation of the pilgrims by the narrator of CT.
- **diegetic level**: the pilgrimage itself, encompassing all events on the way including the tales told.
- **hypodiegetic level**: (a second-degree narrative) the individual tales told by individual pilgrims.

For a different approach, see Chatman's differentiation between the narrator of the discourse and the character within the story (Seymour Chatman, "Characters and Narrators," *Poetics Today* 7 [1986] 189–204).
intervention of the gods in the fortunes of husband and wife. In this particular discourse, consisting principally of dialogue, the covert focus is the authority of Solomon and the argument turns implicitly on his reliability as a maker of discourse, and explicitly upon how to receive his discourse. Pluto chooses one reconstruction of the text, Proserpine another.

In the reported dialogue between Pluto and Proserpine, Pluto as addressee first speaks directly to Proserpine. She is his imme-

Chaucer, initiator of the discourse of CT
the fictional character of Chaucer as pilgrim who narrates CT
the merchant, the fictional narrator who has supposedly created his own discourse
any fictional actor/character who addresses (communicates with) other actors/characters directly/indirectly within or outside the tale
direct (i) any fictional actor/character within the tale who receives communication directly from such fictional actor/character

(ii) an actor/character (e.g., authority figures, pilgrims) outside the tale who directly receives communication from an actor/character
indirect, any fictional actor/character inside or outside the tale who “overhears” the communication
the fictional pilgrims, to whom the merchant narrator directs his tale
They are silent addressees of the MerT
the “you” addressed by the pilgrim narrator, the narratee who “hears”
the pilgrimage narrative. They are silent addressees
any reader/hearer of the text of CT

Fig 1
diately present addressee, and Pluto assumes that she will accept his authority unquestioningly "My wyf," quod he, "ther may no wyght seye nay" (E2237) In the midst of this direct address, Pluto suddenly addresses Solomon directly (E2242–45), making Proserpine his indirect addressee The implications should be quite plain for her anyone who has any wit and can reason knows that Solomon's words (which Pluto goes on to cite in a further level of embedded address) ought to be remembered and needed—covertly, "If you don't agree, Proserpine, you are witless" For him two messages coexist overt praise to Solomon and covert warning and admonition at Proserpine But she is not easily coerced and does not accept the covertly mediated message As recipient, her rejection challenges the primacy of both addressers' authority as she attaches different meanings to Solomon's words (cf E2246–48 with E2287–90) Her narratee role is one of active assessment and unanticipated reconstruction of an initiator's discourse (E2276–304)

Because Proserpine does not acknowledge the conventional primacy of Solomon's authority, she rejects Pluto's indirect, and the following direct, messages The demonstrated double, yet irreconcilable, meanings, and thus the unreliability of Solomon's text, directly destabilize Pluto's own authority as initiator, and indirectly January's and the merchant's, especially since Pluto's defeat in argument by a woman mirrors similar defeats for January within the tale, and for the merchant outside the tale

To this must be added the uncertainties raised because of the way in which the story of Pluto and Proserpine has been manipulated by the merchant His reference to Claudian's version (E2230–33) can function to remind his audience of the familiar story, yet he immediately presents his own misspaken version So distorted is it, and so demonstrably is the merchant a maker of fiction, that any of his recipients must be uneasy about the merchant's version of "truth" Such misgiving is mirrored in Pluto's and Proserpine's differing responses to Solomon's text What has

^See D Brewer on the effect of this classical myth on the final event in the garden in Chaucer The Poet as Storyteller (London Macmillan, 1984) 117–18 Chaucer cannot be said to be unfamiliar with the classical story (cf House of Fame 1511–19) In the MerT it seems to be a deliberate distortion by the merchant narrator See Emerson Brown, Jr, "Biblical Women in the Merchant's Tale Feminism, Antifeminism, and Beyond," Viator 5 (1974) 387–412
occurred in the microcosm of the Pluto/Proserpine narrative is reflected throughout the macrocosm of the January/May narrative to which we now turn.

Foregrounded by narrator comment, the first exchange between January, Placebo, and Justinus results in contrasting responses to the one discourse:

Diverse men diversely hym tolde
Of mariage manye ensamples olde
Somme blamed it, somme preyed it, certeyn

[E1469–71]

The interrelationships between direct and indirect addressers and addressees in this part of the disclosure are set out in the following figure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addresser</th>
<th>Addressee</th>
<th>Message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) January</td>
<td>Direct friends,</td>
<td>Desire to marry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E1400–68)</td>
<td>represented in</td>
<td>Request for help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Placebo, Justinus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Placebo</td>
<td>Direct January</td>
<td>Reinforce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1478–518)</td>
<td>Indirect Justinus</td>
<td>desire/request</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Justinus</td>
<td>Direct Placebo</td>
<td>Pursue desired action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E1521–65)</td>
<td>Indirect January</td>
<td>Marriage not necessarily the best state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d) January</td>
<td>Direct Justinus</td>
<td>Desist from desired activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E1566–71a)</td>
<td>Indirect Placebo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e) January</td>
<td>Direct Placebo</td>
<td>Reject authority cited in addressee response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E1571b)</td>
<td>Indirect Justinus</td>
<td>Accept his previous addressee response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f) Placebo</td>
<td>Direct January</td>
<td>Reject for opinion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E1572–73)</td>
<td>Indirect Justinus</td>
<td>Reject addressee response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reinforce desire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Opinion totally rejected</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The rest of the friends are a constant audience throughout this exchange. Placebo and Justinus make explicit the contrary opinions possible in such an audience. Of course, the pilgrims are also “overhearers” of the debate on the (dis)advantages of marriage.
Placebo's name wittily anticipates the nature of his response "flattering complaisance." He mirrors any recipient too easily beguiled, or too willing to reflect, a narrator's overt message, as his addressee's authority is accepted overtly and apparently unquestioningly (e.g., E1478–81; 1488, 1490, 1498–1500, 2b above) "That I consente and conferme everydeel / Youre wordes alle and youre opinoun" (E1508–09). Such too flattering agreement with January may alert an audience to mistrust Placebo's response as January's direct addressee and as initiator of his own discourse. Our reassessment of his reply, however, may only happen retrospectively when the image of a stooping January recurs in the tale (cf. E1738–39, 2345–49). Much depends upon which connotations, from high praise to ironic ridicule, a recipient immediately selects for Placebo's phrase "heigh corage," used to praise January's quest (E1513–15). Placebo's addressee role here increases uncertainty for those other recipients who can perceive that, while overtly he flatters and affirms, covertly his discourse mocks and subverts January's authority. The attitudes are irreconcilable.

The importance of direct and indirect addressee roles is particularly evident in Justinus's responses to January's and to Placebo's discourses. Placebo responds directly to January (2b above). His indirect addressee, Justinus, clearly hears the words, since he responds in direct address to Placebo (2c above). Justinus also covertly rejects Placebo's overt authority (Solomon E1483ff), substitutes a different one (Seneca. E1523ff) and his own experience (E1544–53). As one of January's initial direct addressees (2a above), Justinus is an active, independent narratee as he rejects the addressee's argument and authority. He remains opposed to marriage, reflecting an attitude only slightly modified from that of the merchant (cf. E1213–23 with E1544–53).

In an excellent demonstration of how effectively an addressee can get at one addressee by means of direct speech to a different addressee, January is provoked to respond (2d above) to Justinus's direct address to Placebo (2c above), which has been an oblique attack on January's views. January is Justinus's most offended indirect addressee (cf. E1567–69a). He reinforces one "reading" of his discourse and rejects the other (2d above), by both direct and indirect address. That is, Placebo overhears January's direct

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rejection of Justinus's opinion, and Justinus overhears January's immediately following direct request for Placebo's opinion (2e above) Other friends, who overhear this exchange, also learn indirectly the approved response to January's request, since they are still recipients of January's discourse and the whole exchange. However, a destabilizing factor is that this approved response depends upon January's deluded views.

January's rejection of authorities, foregrounded by the reiterated "th" in his negative reaction to Justinus (E1567), and his (and Placebo's) inaccurate citation and rejection of various authorities, inevitably draw "reader" attention to the question of addressee authority January's status, which never approaches Solomon's, is undermined, particularly as his argument depends more upon passion than reason, and especially since he ultimately rejects the asked-for advice. This destabilization mirrors the deconstruction of the seemingly reliable authority figure of the Pluto/Proserpine story.\(^{10}\)

As well, January's conflicting self-image does little to affirm his reliability. He unwittingly contradicts himself as he tries to gain audience empathy, first dwelling on his age (E1400–02), and then asserting his ability to consummate his marriage and beget offspring (E1457b–59, 1464–66).

It is quite evident, from this changing three-way relationship of addressees and addressee, both direct and indirect, that a discourse can elicit more than one response. The result of the markedly different narratee responses in this exchange, and January's demonstrated preference, is that January pursues his illusions to his own apparent detriment "Readers" may also perceive how their readings of the "author's" text can become increasingly skewed because of the gap between initiator and recipient.

If further evidence of how mis/readings occur is needed, it may be found in the example of a narrator who can not only deliberately construct two different discourses simultaneously, but also a discourse with contrary significations. May functions as a narrator and narratee who is intentionally misleading and most unreliable.

\(^{10}\)Douglas A. Burger, 105 shows how the quotations used by Placebo, January, and Justinus function to show a "mockery of discussion and deliberation" ("Deluding Words in The Merchant's Tale," Chaucer Review 12 [1977–78] 103–10)
In the comic twists and plottings of the fabliau genre, May's discourse, in her first meeting with Damyan and in the potentially three-way interaction in the garden, reveals her mastery of deceit. It is, of course, such adroit ability to function at different levels that contributes to the upside down success of any fabliau. This is fully exploited in the MerT, where other unenlightened recipients are always present during May/Damyan encounters.

May and Damyan exchange covert written messages in the presence of others. They are in turn the addressers and direct addressees of their separate letters. There are no indirect addressees to these, though extrinsic recipients obliquely learn something of the letters' contents through the merchant narrator's mediation (E1996–2000). Damyan's soft words to May, his only directly reported words in the discourse (E1942–43), foreground the secrecy of his message. Two disjoint messages function simultaneously since, at the same time, Damyan and May also exchange spoken messages directly (the words remain unreported), in socially conventional terms, which apparently convey no hidden meaning to indirect addressees co-present (e.g., E1935, E2007). Such addressees (all May's "wommen" E1933, and see E2005–07) are presumably direct addressees at times during the social visits to the ailing lover, but here they mirror the naive, literal-minded recipients (like a possible aspect of the Placebo model), tied to the obvious externals of a discourse, and oblivious to other levels. They anticipate January's later role.

The merchant narrator's intrusion into the story (direct address to the fictional narratee [E1945]) has two functions. It foregrounds May's swift compliance with Damyan's plan, since it occurs between her swift transition from Damyan's bedside (E1934) to January's (E1947), and it points up the importance of the exchange of written messages and physical signs. As indirect addressees, extrinsic recipients have access to more information than do January or the companions, and are even provided with a "reading" for the events. The narrator's refusal to "tell," "tells" much. May's deliberately manipulative narrator role mirrors the merchant's.

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May's separate discourses, communication by word and by gesture, also characterize the final episode in the garden. The interrelationships of addressee and addressee are set out below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addresser</th>
<th>Addressee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a) January</td>
<td>Direct May</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i) spoken words</td>
<td>May reinforces January's delusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E2138–48, 2160–84)</td>
<td>(E2187–206)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii) body language</td>
<td>Indirect Damyan as overhearer/observer (unknown to January)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E2157–59)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) May</td>
<td>Direct January</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i) spoken words</td>
<td>Accepts surface signification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E2187–206)</td>
<td>Indirect Damyan as overhearer (known to May only)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii) body language</td>
<td>Direct Damyan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(E2150, 2208–10)</td>
<td>Blind January is not an indirect addressee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig 3

January's blindness, real and symbolic, makes him completely oblivious to one of the discourses (3b11 above). Although co-present, he is neither direct nor indirect addressee of May's physical signs to Damyan; January believes that he and May are engaged in a single discourse May encourages January’s self-delusion by maintaining physical contact with him (3a11 above), and her directly addressed words could signify loyalty (3b1 above). Yet such meaning is irretrievably deferred when an audible cough and other silent, yet visible, signals to Damyan (3b11 above) subvert May's protestation of fealty to January. Her words are mere placebos for January, since here, like Placebo, May merely reflects what January wants to hear and thus becomes an unreliable, irresponsible narratee. January's reconstructions are implicitly denied and he mirrors the role of the literalist or the naive, easily beguiled recipient who "hears" only the immediately available meanings of a discourse (cf those present at Damyan/May meetings). Consumed by "heigh fantasye," January is limited because he tries to translate the illusion of reality in the mirror's surface (E1577–87) into actuality.12

On the other hand, the discourse of May's body language, available only to Damyan, direct addressee of such physical discourse

12Cf Burrow 200–01, 205
(3but above), effectively shares meaning. This is possible because Damyan has been given the key to the body language code, symbolized in the physical key to the garden. As initiator, May supplies both keys (cf. E2104–06, E2116–21, E2212–16) Yet January and Damyan (although co-present during May's two discourses) do not share any discourse.

The spoken word to January sets up one possible meaning, body language, a quite different code, denies that meaning. Later action validates the primacy of the latter code, and implicitly challenges the effectiveness of words to convey meaning.

Damyan, as direct and indirect addressee of the discourses, is able to derive meaning from both codes, and to select easily the one favored by the addressee, the initiator of the discourse (cf. Placebo's response to January's discourse). But he gains such perception through complicit deceit, and so Damyan, in turn, is an unreliable and irresponsible recipient—a perfect partner for May.

May demonstrates her capacity to achieve her ambitions by exploitation when she persuades January to help her scramble up the tree to Damyan. The availability of more than one meaning for the one speech is also wittily exploited by the initiator of the discourse (and we could choose between May, merchant, pilgrim narrator, and "author" here) to provide something of a parody of part of the action in the biblical Eden. May asks January for the fruit of the tree, and then for help to reach her objective. He thinks pears, she thinks Damyan. The direct addressee is fooled by the addressee. The indirect addressee (and we could choose between, or all of, Damyan, fictional pilgrims, fictive audience, and "reader"), who can perceive more than can the direct addressee, can enjoy the joke hugely—particularly when that gullible direct addressee wishes aloud that a young man were nearby to help (E2338–39). In true fabliau style, the complexity and the game results in one set of words and actions meaning one thing to one set of actors, and something quite opposite to another set.

The denouement of the tale exploits such difference when May turns the evidence of January's own eyes from reality to illusion, and creates a different "reality" for him (E2368–410). It is a magnificent realization of Proserpine's promise for her as May.

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15: Links to the garden in the Romance of the Rose are also available. See Brown, "Biblical Women" 404, on the effects of the garden scene and his note 60 for reference to the garden as Paradise. See also Burrow 204, 206, 208, and Bruce A. Rosenberg, "The 'Cherry-Tree Carol' and the Merchant's Tale," Chaucer Review 5 (1970–71) 264–76.
shifts terms to make their meaning even more indeterminate. Her adroit argument and exploitation of the gap between words and meaning make her a formidable unreliable narrator. The fictional narratee and the "reader," as indirect addressees, "see" the whole performance and are thus prompted to reflect upon their own capacity to perceive and yet be deceived (E2407–10). In such a context, the narrator to whom we must pay most attention in this tale is the merchant himself.

There is no pretense that the story of January and May exists independently of its narrator, the merchant is the overt initiator of his discourse. Major and minor disruption of intrusive narrator comment, which constitutes approximately 20% of the total discourse, is evidence of this narrator’s presumptuous control of recipients’ perceptions. Direct address should impart an impression of reality and authority to characters outside and within the tale, and persuade all recipients of the narrator’s veracity. But excessive use of the device has the opposite effect, since it destabilizes the relationship between speaker and hearer and functions as one of the signposts in the game between “author” and “reader” of how to reconstruct this text.

Another signpost is the merchant’s attempt to establish the incomparable bliss of January’s and May’s wedding (and thereby their love). He addresses directly the poet Marcin, a character outside the tale.

        Hoold thou thy pees, thou poete Marcin,

        To smal is bothe thy penne, and eek thy tonge,
        For to descryen of this mariage

        [E1732, 1736–37]

Unfortunately, “swich myrthe” at the marriage is too closely linked to “tendre youthe” and “stoupyng age” (E1738–39), and the incomparable bliss loses some bloom. “Swich” is sufficiently indeterminate to allow a recipient (who may be Marcin, fictive audience, or “reader” here) to select from a range of “joyous acclaim” to “guffawing, sniggering ridicule” at the coupling of youth and capering age. The merchant narrator’s direct challenge to his recipient/s to improve upon the rhetoric simply fore-

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grounds the indeterminacy “Assayeth it yourself, thanne may ye witen / If that I lye or noon in this matiere” (E1740–41) This narrator can apparently accommodate any recipient’s point of view. We are invited to laugh with or at the protagonists, yet hesitate over the correct choice when confronted by “lye”15. The question of truth in fiction is neatly posed, and a recipient confronted by such possibilities cannot readily find an answer.

A further gap faces recipients when the narrator moves from apparent approval of one relationship to approval of another. Thus, the merchant narrator’s later attempt to elevate the love between Damyan and May is quite incompatible with the first. He breaks the parameters of his story with direct address to Ovid (E2125ff) whose reputation as a renowned creator of fiction scarcely enhances the merchant’s own reliability, and this merchant’s highly selective version of the Pyramus and Thisbe story merely reinforces the effect. The May/Damyan union could be seen as a complete reversal of the experience of Ovid’s lovers, for those unrequited lovers’ tragic death is clearly avoided here as their un consummated love finds brisk, not to say brusque, reality in the May/Damyan union.16 The foregrounded allusion makes false possibilities available to recipients. A persistent gap remains, perhaps only a naïve and inexperienced narratee, unaware of the pre-text, could continue to rely upon such a narrator.

Yet despite the merchant narrator’s obvious control of his tale, he persistently tries to shift responsibility for events in the “story” to the actors themselves. As he directly addresses his own fictional actors, recipients are implicitly asked to concur with the fiction that the actors could change the course of events if only they would heed their narrator’s rhetoric. The merchant narrator uses such means to link current events, and to raise uncertainties about future ones. It ensures that we are alerted to multiple possibilities.

For example, we can anticipate Damyan’s future role as a cuckold quite early as the merchant narrator shifts blame for coming events first on to Damyan because he is inflamed by passion, then

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15Cf. Burger 107–09n1 for a different interpretation.
16See Emerson Brown, Jr., on the function here of the Pyramus and Thisbe story in “‘Hortus Inconclusus’ Significance of Priapus and Pyramus and Thisbe in the Merchant’s Tale,” Chaucer Review 4 (1970) 31–40. Symbolic consummation may be found in the comparison made by Ovid between the spurtng blood of Pyramus’s death wound and a jetting, broken pipe (Metamorphoses iv 55).
on to January because he lacks perception. Narrator intrusion (E1780–82) foregrounds the merchant narrator’s direct address to these two fictive characters and marks the link between Damyan alone in bed and January and May together in bed. May’s ultimate switch of partners becomes inevitable.

Yet this narrator remains changeable. He turns from blame of Damyan (E1783–87) to a covert plea for narratee empathy towards the lovesick swain, presented as a conventional, frustrated courtly lover languishing for love, burning with desire, and unable to help himself (E1866–67, 1875–77, cf. 1774–79). The narrator warns Damyan (E1869–70), but the semblance of reality is undermined by another superimposed fiction that May will not respond to Damyan’s declaration (E1872b–73). Repetition of “I spoke,” supported by “I seye” within the space of just four lines, emphasizes the merchant’s overt manipulation of the discourse and his fiction-making. It also strongly underlines the change in focus of direct address. As the merchant turns his attention to Damyan, we know that the fictional narratee, the pilgrims, are to “overhear” these words as indirect addressees.

Now wol I spoke of woful Damyan,
That langwissheth for love, as ye shul heere,
Therefore I spoke to hym in this manere
I seye, “O sely Damyan, alse!”

[E1866–69]

Should any recipient still consider that the merchant narrator is wholly responsible for his tale, then this storyteller shows that he can always find someone else who can be blamed for events (cf. Fortune, E2057–68). Thus recipients are being covertly persuaded to accept certain beliefs, and to anticipate particular events while responsibility for actions and events is constantly deferred (cf. E1967–76). If naive, a recipient may believe that the characters and events are self-actualizing, and the merchant narrator a mere vehicle for the message. Alternately a recipient may enjoy the metafictional game being set up and anticipate, with pleasure, a tale which ends with the reversals common to the fabliau genre. For all addressees and addressers are shown to be variously unpredictable. May dissembles, Damyan is treacherous, January is limited, and only Fortune is constant in her inconstancy. She may prove, finally, to be the best figure for initiators and recipients alike—reliable in their unreliability.
Even when he does not directly address recipients, the merchant narrator’s intrusiveness can still function as a sign of his essential unreliability. An apparent refusal to show bias functions retrospectively to foreground narrator attitude and alerts us early to such unreliability.

Were it for hoolynesse or for dotage,
I kan nat seye,
day and nyght he dooth al that he kan
T’espien where he myghte wedde be

[E1253–54a, 1256–57]

The implied detachment of “I kan nat seye” does not cohere with the earlier passionate denunciation of the merchant’s own marriage (E1213–39). He has such definite views on this subject that the choice of “dotage” seems inevitable. A recipient can have little confidence that the merchant’s discourse will lack bias.

As the merchant’s words on marriage pour out, his misuse of biblical exempla to attempt to elevate the married state does little to restore any confidence. Overtly the exemplum of Adam and Eve in an earthly paradise reinforces January’s effusively sentimental views (E1265). But the merchant selects only part of the story, and in deleting the connotations of “distresse,” which attach inevitably to its conclusion, undermines his proposition. With the accumulation of an intrusive “as I gesse” (E1335), overbearingly emphatic repetition (E1335), and heightened praise (E1337–54), any recipient may be excused for suspecting that the narrator really equates the married state with the end of the Eden story, and not with the bliss of its beginning.

Deconstruction of the argument about wives’ obedience to husbands and the misapplication of the four biblical exempla, which purport to support the final assertion that women’s advice ought always to be heeded, function similarly. The exempla chosen ought to validate the merchant’s argument. They do not. These same four exempla are also misused in the Tale of Melibee, where, similarly, they tell against the narrator to function as a warning to the narratee to test carefully all that that narrator says.

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17 Cf. Burger 106. See Brown, “Biblical Women,” for a full discussion of the effect of these exempla in MerT.

sibly each female biblical character chosen here gave good counsel, however, the male partner was never the beneficiary of that counsel, some other person always was. However, to recognize this, a recipient must be familiar with each story and its contexts.

This places greater emphasis upon the recipient’s role in influencing the audience’s reconstruction of the author’s text. Literary experience and knowledge is shown to be an integral part of this relationship. The problem for naive recipients is that they may be as easily deluded as is January by May, because they have only limited access to the total discourse, and are utterly dependent on the reliability of its initiator. It is essential that all recipients not only recognize gaps left by a narrator (even if these cannot always be filled), but also learn to treat cautiously any “filling” proposed by him.

And this narrator merchant is not at all averse to gaps. Even when he declines to elaborate on a particular event, his apparent self-effacement becomes overt intervention and actually foregrounds the gap. For example, whenever sexual union is mentioned, the merchant narrator often invites an almost prurient interest in the action he declines to describe.

Such coy refusals to “tell” do not cohere well with other revealed aspects of the merchant narrator’s attitudes. He first adopts an unexpected sensitivity in relation to January’s and May’s sexual activity. “But lest that precious folk be with me wrooth, / How that he wroghte, I dar nat to yow telle” (E1962–63).

He lacks similar sensitivity when he narrates the Damyan/May sexual union. Here his direct address is to a particular class of

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19 Otten takes a somewhat different view of the effect of these exempla in MerT. She proposes that the four women are Deliverance types and states that “to see them in this role is to see them as Chaucer and his audience did in the Merchant’s Tale” (283). This sweeping claim is difficult to substantiate, and her conclusion, that at the end of the tale everyone is delivered, since even May has a Deliverer role even though she is also a Deceiver, surprises somewhat. Too much of the intertext seems to have been ignored, as has also been done with the story of Pluto and Proserpine. Otten finds no “apparent unhappiness in [their] marriage” (283). Such conclusions require “readers” to perceive only the literal level of the merchant narrator’s version and to ignore any effects of the intertextual links, a dangerous practice with an unreliable narrator. Brown, “Biblical Women,” comments that a literal view can only be taken “by concentrating on the letter of the biblical text and remaining blind to higher meaning. Such literalism in spiritual matters contradicts the basic theory of Christian exegesis” (398).

20 Brown, “Beyond Old Controversies.” The merchant narrator “weaves complicated euphemisms which tend to reveal rather than mask his preoccupation with unseemly topics” (145n17).
narratee, and this foregrounds the importance of a recipient's preconceptions and perceptions upon interpretation of the discourse "Ladies, I prey yow that ye be nat wrooth, / I kan not glose, I am a rude man—" (E2350–51) The personal statement has two functions: it foregrounds the narrator's control of his discourse, and the difference between this sexual act and the earlier January/May sexual encounters. This difference is highlighted further by his re-adoption of the coy stance when he reports January's discovery of the activity in the tree

And saugh that Damyan his wyf had dressed
In swich manere it may nat been expressed,
But if I wolde speke uncurteisly

[E2361–63]

"Speke uncurteisly" functions retrospectively with "rude" (E2351) to direct attention to this narrator. Recipients can enjoy the joke that he is boorish—or ignorant, common, uneducated, dull-witted, unsophisticated, or even artless. However, the "art" of his discourse would confirm none of these latter denotations. But he may indeed be boorish. His earlier pretence of being too refined to "tell" explicitly is only a veneer of respectability, he is actually uncouth, discourteous, and lacking in judgment. All his earlier attempts to elevate the love between January and May are confirmed as little more than sniggering ridicule in which he invites recipients to join, especially when they recall January's attempt to woo May in words reminiscent of the Song of Songs (E2138–48)

January's effort to equate himself with the biblical lover is indeed ludicrous, and a dismal failure, a failure made explicit by intrusive direct narrator comment ("Swiche olde lewed wordes" [E2149]), which also draws attention to the merchant narrator himself. The word "lewed" not only means "inappropriate," "unpolished" or "of limited learning," but can accrue connotations of coarseness or lasciviousness because of the subject matter referred to. No single meaning seems quite appropriate in the

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21Meanings for "rude" are from the Middle English Dictionary 870–71. Richard Firth Green (153) attributes this reluctance to tell as "conservatism" because of the recent presence of women at court. Presumably the "conservatism" is Chaucer's, as poet. It would be pleasant to believe that the merchant narrator also possessed such courtesy ("Women in Chaucer's Audience," Chaucer Review 18 [1983] 146–53).
22Cf. Rosenberg 270, Brewer 117
23CT: MerT E2149 is cited in the Middle English Dictionary 932–35 as a reference for the
context. Disjunction persists, connotations of lasciviousness imply a certain prurience, while the rhetoric of the discourse is anything but plain or unlearned. Recipients must allow for the narrator's *pose* as an unlearned man, while being expected to recognize his learning from rhetorical devices and citation of authorities which decorate his discourse, thereby judging that the merchant is neither ignorant nor coarse. But the "author" may be "telling" against his own narrator to show that the merchant's learning and attitudes are but a facade masking an inherent coarseness.

The game thus extends to the relationship between the "author" and his merchant narrator figure. The abrupt description of the sexual act in the pear tree may actually be considerably more appropriate for a merchant's discourse. Difficulties inherent in the reconstruction of the author's text by the audience persist, as recipients must attempt, at any given time, to accommodate an unreliable narrator, whose meaning floats, and who seems too ready to adopt whatever mask he deems appropriate for his purpose and for his recipients. And this not with the purpose of enlightening them and drawing them into a closer relationship, but rather with deluding and manipulating them almost as if they were mindless puppets. A certain arrogance, if not contempt, in this narrator's attitude must prompt uncertainty of response.

Analysis of the narratee roles is simplified if the various direct and indirect narratees/ адрессees within a text such as the MerT can be conflated under the one term *recipient*. While the text does not change, "meaning" may be variously realized among a multiplicity of direct and indirect receivers. For example, Proserpine's personal dismissal of authority ("What rekketh me of youre auctorites?" [E2276]), represented by Solomon, as an effective source for Pluto's claims, and the collective "ye" of the direct address ("'as faire as ye his name emplastre,'" [E2297]) make the challenge to recognize the inconsistencies of any narrator available to every recipient of the MerT Pluto, the pilgrims, the fictive audience, and all "readers"/"hearers" are challenged to test the initiator of the discourse.

meanings of "unsophisticated", "unpolished" for "lewed" ("leued") as applied to literary works. However, its context in MerT makes other listed meanings available.
Not only the question of who hears, but also the question of who speaks here is not easily answered. Overly it is the one I have earlier called Pluto's direct addressee Proserpine. However, the tale is purportedly initiated by the merchant, therefore, we must question whether the merchant is deliberately or unknowingly undermining his own authority. Beyond this, the story of the pilgrimage and the tales themselves emanate from the pilgrim narrator. Perhaps he is the one who questions authority and draws attention to his own fiction. Yet the creator of the whole discourse of *CT* is the poet, Chaucer. From that perspective the whole question of the authority of a narrator in a text and of the initiator's ultimate authority must be considered at a further level. But this particular chain of initiators demonstrates the difficulty of any attempt to define just whose ideas are being promoted in this text. The poet, Chaucer, is well veiled by these multiple reflections of narrators/addressers and addressees/narratees. The term *initiators* is not as useful as a collective term as is *recipients*, and the binary opposition is again disrupted.

In the MerT the narrator/narratee relationships are reflected in a multiplicity of increasingly imperfect and blurring images which destabilize the author/text/audience relationship. Shared meaning depends upon “authors”/narrators and “readers”/narratees alike, as the overt narrators/addressers attempt to prescribe narratee/addressee responses, only to be met with diverse, sometime perverse, and often unpredictable, responses. The more the narrator's stance shifts, and the more overtly manipulative the discourse, the less certain is any agreement of response among recipients.

Reinterpretation of signification in the Pluto/Proserpine story undermines narrator authority and highlights the narratee role. The diametrically opposed narratee responses of Placebo and Justinus to January result in no validated reconstruction of January's text. Of the diverse texts in the May/January/Damyan set, only the one encoded in physical signs can be said to be selectively reconstructed with any degree of success. Damyan's reconstruction negates the dominance and primacy of verbal signs, while that final, most overt physical sign is in turn denied by May's shifting verbal language. Narrator concern about narratee response is demonstrated most effectively in the dominant, if not domineering, merchant narrator's control of the discourse. He
reveals his fears that he cannot ultimately control the responses of his audience, any more than he can control his wife. With a multiplicity of possible indirect addressees, as well as the direct ones, uncertainty about just how the text may ultimately be reconstructed, and by whom, is skillfully shown through this narrator's relationship to his various recipients.

All the motley array of "hearers" within and outside the tale display various aspects of unreliability and irresponsibility, especially when they reject authority. With the exception of the Parson, the diverse and unpredictable pilgrims themselves exhibit a range of these qualities, revealed through their own tales. And the merchant implicitly claims that the ladies of his audience are particularly influenced by their own prejudices. Yet even Marcellian and Ovid, a poet and a fiction-maker, dragged in by the merchant to authenticate his text, are hardly reliable and authoritative figures. Neither do the merchant narrator's own fictive characters function as unparalleled examples of reliability and responsibility.

With such a variety of possible narratee responses, we are warned that it is clearly not at all difficult to "mysconceyve" what we think we see/hear/read. Our divergent responses to this tale validate what it demonstrates, encapsulated in the address to Fortune, that the only certainty is the uncertainty of narratee response. Therefore, if it can be accepted that the pursuit of any definitive meaning is endless, then this tale can be deemed a success.

Neither tale nor author requires rescue, and diverse critical responses give no cause for suspicion. Rather such diversity and divergence should lead to acclaim for a most successful and witty demonstration of that matter that drives many an author—how will the reader receive the tale?

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24For example, see Nolan's comment on the Parson's role in CT: "What Chaucer emphasizes in the Parson's portrait is the coincidence of word and deed, of Christian teaching and high moral conduct" (161)