

THE MECHANICS OF COURTLY LOVE AND THE MECHANIZATION OF WOMAN IN
MEDIEVAL ANGLO-NORMAN ROMANCE

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates one of the tales within Geoffrey Chaucer's greater works, *The Canterbury Tales* with a focus on the connection between the prologue of the tale teller and the story that he shares with the other pilgrims. Masochism and antifeminism are two of the most prominent features of Chaucer's Merchant, an impoverished man parading as successful, husband to a woman whom he detests. With a business deep in debt and a wife he refers to only as a shrew, the Merchant attempts to bolster his credibility within the group of pilgrims by weaving a narrative about marriage, lust, and cuckoldry.

This thesis explores the dynamics of the Merchant and his tale from a variety of perspectives in order to more deeply understand the motivation behind the tale that is told and the person who tells it. The Merchant's failing marriage spurns the chauvinism that is deeply imbedded in his tale as he preaches the importance of obedience and vilifies women who resist or disobey their husbands. While the Merchant offers the qualities of a successful marriage as inherent fact, it is clear that he has instead shaped his opinion as a result of his own unsuccessful marriage, blaming female disobedience rather than his own deficiencies as a husband.

Additionally, this thesis delves into the story that the Merchant tells of two lovers called January and May and the way in which the female body operates as capital within the narrative. Employing a Marxist understanding of commodity on top of Wills' ideas on prosthetics, this thesis underscores the way in which May is used constantly as a resource for her husband. Further, this thesis explores the function that May plays in her marriage to her husband and how her body is used as an extension of January and other male influence and her own agency is stripped from her.

To my wonderful parents, Dale and Sarah, who teach me everyday by simply being who they are, my brother, Barry, for being the embodiment of brevity and precision in ways that I cannot, and to Thomas, for being the metronome to my erraticism.

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INTRODUCTION

Scholarly discussions of marriage Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* often focus on the commonly known "marriage group" including the tales told by the Wife of Bath, the Clerk, the Franklin, and the Nun's Priest. *The Merchant's Tale* is a narrative that is often overlooked in favor of these more common tales of sex and gender difference and power in marriage as a social structure. When scholars seeking to address marriage in *The Canterbury Tales* do choose to focus on the *Merchant's Tale*, they often use it as a jumping off point from which to detail the role of matrimony in the Middle Ages, or they address the way in which the *Merchant's Tale* functions as a response to other narrators within the marriage group.¹

When it does attract critical attention as a core text in the marriage group, *The Merchant's Tale* is frequently viewed one of the most problematic texts of the marriage cycle due its complicated portrayal of wedlock. In his essay "The Marriage 'Encomium' in '*The Merchant's Tale*:' A Chaucerian Crux," Donald R. Benson discusses the role of the Merchant as a speaker compared to January's speech throughout the tale itself, highlighting the similarities between storyteller and character.² Benson suggests that January merely "recapitulates" the theme and attitude of the Merchant in his introduction to his tale, signifying the ouroboric and blurred relationship between the tale and the teller (54). In regard to marriage, Benson says, January and the Merchant desire one in the same: for a wife to exist in response to her husband's desire and will (56).

¹ J.S.P. Tatlock considers the placement of the tale within the larger marriage group in "Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*."

² Norman T. Harrington also comments on the role of narration in "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale: Another Swing of the Pendulum."

Shifting focus from speech to the larger issue of marriage, George L. Kittredge underscores the importance of the Merchant's tale as part of the marriage group in "Chaucer's Discussion of Marriage," noting that the antifeminism of his tale is both a reaction to the tales told by the Clerk as well as the Wife of Bath, but also a tale which is to some degree created by his own marriage (10). Although Kittredge does not directly discuss the tale in terms of January and May, he does focus on the relationship between Merchant and the immediacy of the pilgrims who are listening to his tale. With a bit of extrapolation, one might assert that Kittredge is suggesting that the chauvinism that pervades the entirety of the Merchant's tale is not solely a mechanism of his tale, but a quality that the Merchant himself possesses. Kittredge points out the Merchant's repetitive "local allusions" to the Wife of Bath leading up to his tale; paired with the biting remarks he makes about his wife, it is clear that the Merchant's tale is less a reaction to the other tales of the marriage cycle than it is an expression of the Merchant's beliefs about women and marriage (9). Here, Kittredge provides a reading that establishes a platform for a return to a discussion of gender and power in the tale. If language is one form of dominance in the tale, then the function of objects and things within the economic circulation between January and May also render a reading of the tale as one that participates in contemporary discussions of gender and technological objects.

Among critics of *The Merchant's Tale* most of the dialogue is centered on the function of the tale within the greater *Canterbury Tales*. The content of the Merchant's narrative is often overlooked in scholarship. The story of January and May, and the way in which the female body exists as a prosthetic accouterment to her husband facilitates an understanding of the marriage dynamic that no other tale in the marriage cycle shares: that May's body does not belong to her

and is instead defined by its ability to fulfill January's, stripping her of identity in favor of the prosthetic.

The representation of the female body as not belonging to the female in the *Merchant's Tale* is justified by criticism that perceives the difference between agency and object in feminine sexuality. For instance, Elaine Hansen's writings on gender and male fantasy also speak to this dynamic. In "Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender," Hansen is quick to underscore the role of misogyny in the marriage dynamic, comparing the Merchant's brutal treatment of May who has committed the same sin as Allyson, a fellow member of the marriage cycle as the Wife of Bath. Hansen traces the treatment of the female in the tale as the repercussions of an unfulfilled male fantasy; in short, that because January (and, similarly, the Merchant) "project themselves and their desires" onto their wives, they set themselves up to be ultimately unfulfilled, which is the crux of their dissatisfaction (250). To Hansen, "May is, in terms of this narrative, devised out of January's thoughts just as Eve is made out of Adam," highlighting the inherent desires of January to seek ownership and control over May's body through marriage in the narrative (251).

In *The Merchant's Tale*, the representation of marriage is one in which use value, objectification, and the treatment of people as prostheses dominate the interpersonal dynamic. January and May do not function as symbiotic participants in a union, but instead represent a marriage where the female body ceases to exist as anything but an extension of her husband's will, want, and desire; in this sense, the female body becomes nothing more than a commodity for his personal use and thus a prosthetic extension of his own will and body. *The Merchant's Tale* is the tale of a woman stripped of agency by husband and matrimony. It recounts the manipulation of her body as January exercises it on behalf of his own needs, desires, and aspirations throughout the tale in order to afford him a lover, a caretaker, and a housemaid.

THE BODILY OBJECT

The *Merchant's Tale* begins as a courtly romance in “Lyumbardye” where a “worthy knyght” with much in the way of prosperitee” and experience of “bodily delyt” considers that now, at sixty years old, he is of the right age to take a wife (Chaucer 1245-52). The knight, who we know to be January, seems to regret that he has not yet wed (yet, on the other hand, he is not all together too upset about his successful bachelorhood), praying to God that he might “knowe of thilke blissful lyf/That is bitwixe an housbonde and his wyf” (Chaucer 1261-62). Though without the experience of matrimony, January seems to think a lot of the married life that will be his, viewing it as “esy,” “clene,” and a “paradys” (Chaucer 1264-65).

Although January has never had a wife, he seems to have a very clear picture of what a wife would mean to his life. Initially, it is unclear why he feels this way. As he reflects upon his life as a bachelor, January does not mention that he had been at all interested in marriage at any point in the last sixty years. Why does he only decide to marry in old age? Predictably, January believes that a wife is the most valuable to a husband when a husband grows old.

To take a wyf it is a glorious thyng,

And namely whan a man is oold and hoor;

Thanne is a wyf the fruyt of his tresor (Chaucer 1267-1270)

Interestingly, January’s view of what marriage would mean for his life has little mention of the type of partner he would take; instead, his focus is that a wife—presumably of any sort—is of the most benefit to him in his old age. Already, January is inadvertently signaling that a wife, as an abstract concept, or as a placeholder, serves his matrimonial ideal.

From the very beginning of January’s musings about marriage, he signals that his notion of wife is more about the role she plays than her personhood. We see this as January’s appeals to

the value of a wife are contained only to the way in which a wife improves the life of her husband. In noting that wives are most valuable to men in their old age, January is doing more than making a comment based on stereotypes of assumptions—he is saying that all wives are beneficial to their aging husbands. It is evident that January's ideas of matrimony are based on the notion that all wives share the same characteristics and abilities and that these are desirable to all aging men.

All of this leaves the reader to wonder: What *about* a wife does January desire? Is it her personality—that she's kind hearted, pious, proper? Or is it something else? Given his experience with women in his bachelorhood (we are told early on that he has much experience with “bodily delyt”), it seems as though January is in the perfect position to know what he looks for in a woman whom he would love and spend the rest of his (short) life with (Chaucer 1249). Instead, it becomes clear that January is less interested in for a woman to love and share his life than he is in finding a wife to fulfill his preconception of what a wife will do for him. First, he knows he should take “a yong wyf and a feir,/On which he myghte engendren hym an heir,/And lede his lyf in joye and in solas” (Chaucer 1271-73). Immediately, January is focused on the body of a woman he has yet even to meet; not surprisingly, he is seeking one that is young and fertile. As he desires these characteristics in any woman he marries, it is clear that January is looking to find a wife with qualities to replace his own; a young body to replace his old one and aid in conceiving an heir. January is not seeking greater happiness in his marriage, but the happiness that her body might bring him when it produces an heir. At this point, as January discusses procreation, we expect to him admiring her body for his own sexual desire; instead, January is focused on what the body might produce, and what the production would mean for him.

While it is clear from his focus on the body of his potential partner that these qualities are important to him, he also makes a point of speaking to the “blisee,” “joye,” and “solas” such a wife would bring him. However, these qualities of his prospective relationship are not as romantic as they might first seem. Although “blisee,” “joye,” and “solas” may be qualities that are byproducts of happy marriages, they are not the particular focus of January’s desire. Instead, January again pulls our attention to the body of his wife, though this time in regard to bodily performance rather than her physicality.

For who kan be so buxom as a wyf?

Who is so trewe, and eek so ententyf

To kepe hym, syk and hool, as is his make?

For wele or wo she wole hym nat forsake;

She nys nat wery hym to love and serve,

Though that he lye bedrede til he sterve. (Chaucer 1287-92)

In this passage January first offers the rationale behind his feelings about marriage, and suggests that marriage will bring him a woman who will be true to him in sickness and health, and love and serve him until his death. From this account, there is no reciprocity between a husband and wife in January’s world; instead, there is a husband and his wife who serves him. January is not focused nor interested in what he can provide for his wife or the ways that he might be able to please her; instead, January’s understanding of marriage is entirely self interested³. Although January has shifted from the physical, concrete qualities of the kind of woman he wishes to

³ Theresa O’Byrne charts January’s argument about the role of wives in marriage in her essay “‘To take a wyf it is a glorious thing’: Januarie’s *Thesis* on Marriage in the *Merchant’s Tale* (IV. 1263-1392)”.

marry, he has moved into her function within the metaphysical “space” of marriage. This passage illustrates a marriage in which a wife exists solely in her orbit of her husband, situating him as a patriarchal center to which she gravitates.

But January has not finished with the qualities his wife should possess; his notions about his future wife are far more exacting than a young body with the ability to procreate as he desires more from her body in terms of production and function. Making more explicit his feelings about a young wife:

I wol noon oold wyf han in no manere.
 She shal nat passé twenty yeer, certain;
 Oold fish and yong flesh wolde I have fayn.
 Bet is,” quod he, “a pyk than a pykerel,
 And bet than old beof is the tendre veel.
 I wol no woman thritty yeer of age;
 It is but bene-straw and greet forage.
 And eek thise olde wydwes, God it woot,
 They muchel broken harm, whan that hem
 leste,
 That with hem stolde I nevere lyve in rest.
 For sondry scoles maken sotile clerkis;
 Womman of manye scoles half a clerk is.
 But certeynly, a yong thyng may men gye,
 Right as men may warm wex with hands plye. (Chaucer 1416-30)

It is telling that January compares women to meat in order to talk about the value of his young wife; it is almost as if he is aware of his desire to metaphysically consume the woman he marries. By talking about his potential wife in terms of fish and beef, January discusses which is more desirable; literally tasteful to him and which he would enjoy the most. He imagines the bodies of old wives as rough and coarse compared to the soft malleability of one that is young. Further, January views old wives as coarse in more than their bodies, but in their minds as well. He notes that a well-learned woman (“womann of manye scoles”) is less desirable than a “yong thyng” that he can mold himself. As Hansen suggests in “Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender,” it is clear that January seeks a blank slate upon which to project his own desires. Even more than that, January goes on to say that he desires a young bride as she would be easier to shape and structure as if she were warm wax. While January is less focused here on the physical body of a woman he marries, he is still aspiring to control and construct any woman he might call wife.

This passage takes January’s need for control over the female body even further in that he suggests for the first time that he seeks a young woman that he is able to manipulate. By comparing her to wax, January expresses two things: first, that any wife he may marry is completely subject to his will and second, he views her as without characteristic until he exerts that will upon her. Like warm wax, January views any wife he may have as without characteristics he does not give her and, subsequently, without purpose or function⁴. It is only through his manipulation of her does January then suggest that a wife would be worthwhile to him. It is clear that this opinion exists outside the paradigm of January and his wife; January

⁴ Kellie Robertson’s essay “Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto” touches on materiality and the body, related closely to the concept of prosthesis.

makes clear that “men gye” women, further highlighting the latent misogyny throughout January’s speeches (1430).

January’s speech makes it clear that the characteristics of wifhood that he is describing are not drawn from any particular woman. Instead, January presents this view of a wife’s role as if it is assumed. In this way, the tale presents an objectification of the female body, but instead a female body stripped of personality, appearance, and identity that is valuable only for its parts: a young body with which to breed and which can serve him. In this sense, the female body that January outlines exists only in its reaction to the husband to which it is married. In this way, the idea of a complete female body has ceased to exist and is replaced by a prosthetic attachment that functions on behalf of her husband.

Imagining the female body as an extension of masculine will introduces the commodification of the body as it is articulated in Marxist and material feminist thought. In *The Commodity*, Karl Marx defines commodity as an object, which finds satisfaction, through its qualities, in some type of human need for it, however “the nature of [this need] is irrelevant” (Marx 9). We can see the ways in which the female body might be commoditized based on Marx’s standards as January frequently speaks to attributes that May possesses as beneficial to himself—while we know as readers this is not a legitimate “need”, it is clear that January considers them to be. As January views May’s attributes as desirable, he begins to commodify them because, to January, the ability to be young and reproduce is of the utmost importance as a bodily function. This function has what Marx refers to as “use-value”; simply, because January can utilize this attribute of May’s body, it now has value, even if that value exists only to him. In this way, May’s body is viewed as a material or necessary part in a valued function—in this case, May’s reproductive system is of value to January because he desires to produce an heir.

THE PROSTHETIC WIFE

January's quest to have an heir is one of the first things he mentions when he decides that he would like to marry; all of his potential wives have this use-value. Marx notes that this step is the quintessential definition of identifying something as commodity— "A use-value or good only has a *value* because *labour* is *objectified* or *materialized* in it" (Marx 11). We can see remnants of this type of objectification and materialization in early modern love poetry where love-struck writers penned lists of the features that their beloved possessed.

Medieval courtiers too take note of the stock of the female body, though their documentation of women seems less romantic and more inventorial than later writers. This is because, as mentioned before, this "use-value" is wrapped up in a physical function and positions emphasis upon what her body produces in terms of work. In his essay "Commodification and Textuality in the Merchant's Tale," Christian Sheridan agrees that May is presented as a commodity in the eyes of January, nothing that "women...reflect only the value he gives them" (34). January's repeated emphasis on May's physicality translates not as objectification, but as commodification in that January seeks her body for a specific purpose or use (bearing children, aiding him in his old age) and it is her function within his life that he values even more so than her as an actual partner.

Sheridan's notion of reflection is echoed in Slavoj Žižek's essay "Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing." Using Christina Rossetti's sonnet "In an Artist's Studio" for the source of his work, Žižek notes that the female body exists only as a projection of male narcissism; the way the man views her is not how she truly is. This, however, is unimportant—emphasis in both Rossetti's poem and the Merchant's tale remains on the man, as he is the storyteller and dictator of the narrative. Žižek's observations show that the female is only valuable and necessary in her

relationship to the man who possesses her—in short, she is of whatever significance that he gives to her and is only as “inherently” essential as he thinks she is. Žižek uses Jacques Lacan’s argument about courtly love and sexual difference to underscore his argument, noting that the female body does nothing more than “fill a role;” this accounts for Lacan’s observation that “the Lady” who is desired in medieval narratives “is never characterized for any of her real, concrete virtues, for her wisdom, her prudence, or even her competence” (90).

With Žižek’s work as a jumping point, it is fair to extrapolate that he is touching on is the function of a husband’s assumed need in viewing and understanding his wife. “Assumed” because a husband like January perceives a wife as a need and thus her qualities as inherent to her. His narcissism not only projects upon her, but it also creates a system between the couple. First, January views the function of May’s body in terms of what he “needs”—someone to give him an heir, take care of him, and so forth—and second, this projection creates the illusion that January is thus in need of the source of these attributes—the female’s body. January perceives this as his desire for May, when this is nothing more than his desire for the potential articulations of May’s body.

Holly Crocker builds upon Žižek’s image of the female as a blank slate when she suggests that May’s passivity creates the narcissistic projection; she argues that the centrality of a view of male narcissism should be replaced by a revised understanding of agency in the dynamic: May is instead a blank slate that gets assigned January’s projection because of a lack of agency. Crocker assumes that if it were not for her passivity, May would be more of (but not entirely) an equal in her marriage to January. Crocker focuses on the way in which the passive female is a myth that lends way to the orientation of her male counterpart as her conductor. To counteract the passivity of the female, according to Crocker, January feels obligated to “animate

a fantasy of active masculinity”—a performance at which he ultimately fails at by the end of the Merchant’s tale (185). However, in spite of the reality of January’s shortcomings, this does not mean January’s intention to perform this “fantasy” are lacking—Crocker points out that January’s aggressive, hyper-sexualized inner monologue during his and May’s wedding feast rings as mental preparation for marital rape (186). This desire for control (and “active masculinity”) further highlights January’s intention to manipulate and control May, as if his will controls each of them.

In addition to the material that supports Crocker’s argument, January’s prologue shows that he has already begun to commodify an imaginary wife whom he has yet to meet. Reading his prologue with his narrative, it is clear that January has always had these views of women and has always “needed” the same things out of marriage—whether or not May is passive has little to do with January’s basis for marriage and his desire to construct and mold a wife. While passivity may offer an explanation for why January is so easily able to articulate May as a prosthetic extension of himself, it does not change his rationale for marriage nor explain his view of the female body in his prologue.

January looks at potential wives in terms of their attributes rather than as holistic thinking, feeling, emotive beings. In this way, their bodies are capital and capable for producing and serving the men that they marry. As it is the function of the bodies which men desire for means to ends which they seek, it is appropriate to view these bodies, in terms of their functions, as prosthetics.

In his book *Prosthesis*, David Wills produces a collection of essays that, in their own ways, explore the concept of the prosthetic in its ability to add and subtract from the human body. Whether or not they consist of something mechanical, anything added to the body in order

to aid it is, by Wills' account, the prosthesis is a machine. Whatever is added to the body or exists to aid the body is then mechanized, existing as a prosthetic extension of the physical body and functioning only in its response to the body.⁵ Wills' interestingly highlights that there is a transfer in what is natural when a body relies on a prosthetic—in this mechanization, neither the original body nor the new addition are any longer organic, but instead something new in their combination (24).

The concept of adding something additional to what already exists follows suit with a husband's desire to possess a wife with certain qualities for a specific purpose. This desire is to bolster, to build upon, to place something in addition to himself; this desire for a wife is a desire for a prosthetic to do what he cannot or will not due to his own physicality or refusal. Her body is the capital on which he capitalizes; through May he gains a human body to use in addition to his own.

While literal prosthetics were commonplace in the middle ages, the word for a prosthetic was not popularized until a bit later. Sixteenth century Latin via Greek holds claim to the word, assembled (appropriately) from *prostithenai*—from *tethenai* “to place” combined with *pros* “in addition”—literally, Latin explains something prosthetic as something added in addition. While Latin had use and function for this word since the 1500s, it failed to be used in the English language until the mid-1800s and still was only then understood in terms of machinery, perhaps as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Modernly, our understanding of prosthetics would have

⁵ In *Technics and Time*, Bernard Stiegler sets forth the notion of technological mechanization when something “non-living, animate, inert” is transitioned into useful technology (37).

Stiegler's idea of useful technology might inform a reading of January's desire to animate the female body per his desire.

been incomprehensible to our medieval ancestors would did not live in a world of bionic limbs cochlear implants. In spite of this, it is clear that just because the technology did not exist that prosthetics were moot in the medieval world. To situate prosthetics within the world of the Merchant and Chaucer, we must return to the literal, rudimentary Latin construction of the word—a prosthetic is simply something that functions in addition to something else. From this, we can extrapolate that prosthetics are inoperable on their own, perhaps even pointless.

For May to be utilized as a form of technology or prosthetic extension of January, there needs to be a construct by which this shift from human to prosthetic occurs. Holly Crocker offers a possible explanation in her article “Performative Passivity and Fantasies of Masculinity in The Merchant’s Tale” for the means by which January is able to exhibit agency over May. May, Crocker offers, represents the passivity typical to females of Chaucerian narratives—while she is beautiful and attractive, she appears to be more like a “statue” than something human, existing merely in her reaction to January, so much so that she is visible only so far as January makes mention of her (183). This passivity, Crocker points out, is not so much a reaction to masculinity as it is an expectation or prescription of ladies in the courtly love construct. In turn, January’s response to this is to play the part of active, masculine male, Hallmarked by episodes of hypersexualization, aggression, and near-tyrannical control over May. In this way, it is all but an expectation that January will become an operator of May’s body, whether it be in his ability to enact his will over her mentally (further enabling her passivity) or physically, to the ends which he does on their wedding night.

In this way, viewing the female body as a prosthetic to her husband is to say that the female body is in this way incomplete. This concept is illustrated by January’s discussion of a wife in terms of her function to him—he needs her to bear children, he needs her to serve him.

The relationship between January and his wife would only be in fulfillment in what he cannot (or chooses not to) fulfill himself; this is something we do not need to assume, because January makes that much evident. In regard to a relationship between husband and wife, January says, “That woman is for mannes helpe ywroght” (Chaucer 1324). By setting up this dynamic at the beginning of the story, we can see the function of the female body as a prosthetic across the landscape of January’s narrative through exploration of his relationship to the woman he weds, May⁶.

We see May as merely a body to January from the onset of her appearance in the tale; in fact, we do not learn her name until ninety-eight lines after January first mentions having found a woman to wed. Instead, May is introduced to us as a nameless woman, described by January by only her physical characteristics. Somewhat appropriately, January is in bed imagining his future wife’s body when he first decides that he intends to marry her—he details her as having a “fresshe beautee” and being of “age tendre” as he imagines her “mydall small” (small waist) and “armes longe sklendre” (Chaucer 1599-1602). While January speaks to the personality of his wife vaguely (he compliments her “wommanly berynge” as well as her “sadnesse,” “governaunce,” and “gentillesse,” devoting only these two lines as description of her personality (of the eight hundred in which she is present). His focus is entirely on her aesthetics—literally all we know of May is that she is slender, young, and beautiful with a disposition that January takes little time to describe, though we know from his brief description that this must be pleasing to him as well. Combined with the qualities that January assumes a young woman to automatically

⁶ Suzanne Verderber works with ideas of medieval masculine power and agency in her book *The Medieval Fold: Power, Repression, and the Emergence of the Individual*.

have—or that January, like wax, will mold—this appears to be an advantageous marriage for an elderly man seeking care, heir, and “bodily delyt”.

January’s preoccupation with May’s age throughout his description of her also signifies a way in which January is interested in her body. Before January even decides to marry May, he is in search of a body that is young—it is safe to assume that this has something to do with his desire for an heir. More significantly, however, January’s obsession with May’s youth suggests that January is able to feed off of that youth and, at least in his mind, stave off death. At sixty years old, January is far outside the typical age range in which men and women court and enter into marriage. By marrying a woman much his junior, January is able to imagine himself as a young man in courtship as his partner is of courting age. While this is not presented directly in the text, consider January’s desires as they relate to May: he wants someone young, beautiful, and fertile, which we know, from his description, May is. In desiring a partner of these qualities, January imagines these qualities reflecting back upon him: that he is deserving of a wife that is young and beautiful and also able to reproduce with her. In this sense, January thinks about May in terms of how she works with his body because he thinks about his own body in terms of its function—namely, sex. If January were to take someone his age, no matter how beautiful, he would not be able to have an heir. In marrying May, he reimagines himself as a virile potential father.

However, there is little mention of what this marriage means in terms of May. As a young, attractive woman, it is likely that May is not in desperate need for a quick marriage as January. However, January does mention that May is likely from a lower class but offers that her physical appearance rectifies that issue; “Al were it so she were of smal degree,” January states, quickly following with “ Suffiseth hym hir yowthe and hir beautee” (Chaucer 1625-26). This

might mean that May does benefit monetarily as well as socially from a marriage to January. Indeed, the Merchant suggests that May certainly does earn something from her union to January, but fails to tell us in any detail what the marriage might secure for her. Instead, the Merchant says only this:

I trowe it were to longe yow to tarie,
 If I yow tolde of every scrit and bond
 B which that she was feffed in his lond,
 Or for to herknen of hir riche array. (1696-99)

While the Merchant offers his listeners hundreds of lines about the favors and follies of wedlock and still threefold more about May's appearance, what May actually receives as part of the union fails to be mentioned as the Merchant worries that this aside might delay us, forcing us to extrapolate and make guesses as to whether or not this was a marriage May entered due to any specific benefits it might offer her.

On the other hand, what is clear is that there is no formal courtship leading up to January and May's marriage, only seven lines separate May's acceptance of January's proposal (which does not appear directly in the tale) and their wedding day. While we are aware that January believes he will find fulfillment of his ideas about a wife through May, it is safe to say that there is no romantic relationship between the newlyweds. In the Merchant's description of the wedding and subsequent reception, he details the food, music, and general frivolity of the scene but makes mention only of January, noting that Hymen, the Greek god of weddings, "Saugh nevere his lyf so myrie a wedded man" (Chaucer 1731). The Merchant offers an explanation for his lacking description of the married couple: "To smal is bothe thy penne, and eek thy tonge,/For to descryven of this marriage" (Chaucer 1736-37). However, the Merchant does not

seem to have this reservation in describing May's beauty, repeatedly reiterating and refocusing attention on her body as he details the festivities. Within the confines of their wedding ceremony and reception, May exists as nothing more than something to be viewed and for male gaze to rest upon.

After January and May's wedding and consummation, however, we learn more of May's function as a prosthetic extension of January. Her first duty as January's wife (after fulfilling his sexual desire) is to visit the bedside of one of January's ailing squires, Damien.

“Dame,” quod this Januarie, “taak good hede,

At after mete ye with youre women alle,

Whan ye han been in chambre out of this halle,

That alle ye go se this Damyan. (Chaucer 1920-23)

In this case, January is mobilizing May's body to relay his words and be his presence at Damien's bedside; not May's visit to the squire nor his message to him belong to her. To this, the Merchant offers no description of May's thoughts to response to January; instead, we see May immediately on her way to Damien as January ordered. Here, May acts as an extension of January's will, immediate in response to his request. This, January's request shows, is an expectation held for his wife; we are reminded again of January's desire to mold his wife like warm wax. We are seeing, perhaps for the first time, January's want for control over his wife exercised as she is mobilized without response or acknowledgement other than the fulfillment of his request. Her body becomes the prosthetic extension of his, walking through the palace to Damian, as January would have, transmitting January's message to Damian through her mouth.

This fresshe May hath streight hir wey

yholde

With alle hir wommen unto Damyan.
 Doun by his beddes syde sit she than,
 Confortynge hym as goodly as she may.

(1932-35)

After January's order, May "hath straight hir wey" without even a response in acknowledgement to January; from this, we can see that May is also aware of this expectation. There is no conversation between the two characters that have, within a few hundred lines, wed, consummated their marriage, and began to live together—instead, May is presented only as a reaction to January's request, as though she constantly awaits stimuli before taking action. While we know she is heading to her future lover's bedside at the request of her husband, it is not for any action of her own.

The moment where May most prominently functions as a prosthetic of January is when January and May enter the ground's garden. Struck blind, January relies completely upon May to lead him into the garden.

This Januarie, as blynd as is a stoon,
 With Mayus in his hand, and no wight mo,
 Into his fresshe gardyn is ago,
 And clapte to the wyket sodeynly (2156-59)

In this scene, May is literally functioning on behalf of January in a way in which he cannot; because January is blind, May's eyes must in turn be January's in order to travel successfully to his destination. By guiding January, May is reduced to little more than a walking stick, relevant only in her ability to help him successfully reach the garden. Prior to this, January tells May that they will be going to the garden and she will be assisting him to which May, as has been typical

throughout the narrative, fails to respond. Interestingly, we are not even provided with May moving to take January's hand to lead her into the garden; instead, just as January assumes May will immediately take action, we as readers are left to the same assumption.

While it is easy to see the ways in which May exists as commodity and prosthetic in the narrative, her infidelity adds a fascinating dimension to her character. For all the ways in which May functions as a prosthetic addition to her husband, she regularly exercises a small degree of free will in the narrative. We can see this in her decision to carry on an affair right under her husband's nose (or, in the case of the final scene of the narrative, above it). However, it is important to recognize the spaces and conditions around which any act of infidelity takes place.

PROSTHESIS IN COURTLY LOVE

The catalyst of May's infidelity is her visit to the bedside of Damian. As with most of May's actions in the narrative, the visit was determined and ordered by January who was fond of the young, attractive, ill attendant. As we know, Damian's letter professing his love to May is the spark that ignites the remainder of the narrative, giving May the opportunity for emotional refuge with someone other than her husband. While this looks to be a moment where May is able to release herself from January's grip, it is an escape in appearance only. The love affair between Damian and May is not a result of May seeking someone on her own right—she is sent to Damian by her husband, standing in as a prosthetic extension of January. She is not at Damian's bedside because she desires him, but rather because of January's feelings about Damian. Her sole function, until Damian intervenes with the letter, is to be present because her husband has ordered her to do so. The male forces dictating May's desire to her come from both January and Damian, and foreground her lack of agency. Yet, there is no evidence to suggest that May would have begun an affair with Damian had it not been for his confession of love to her. In this case, she does give way to Damian's desires, and it is possible that his desire becomes her own. May exists as an object dictated by the impulse of men—her response to Damian, someone she claims to love and desire, is reactionary. While it is true that May does make a conscious decision to somewhat step outside of the confines of January's order⁷, she does it only after a man, Damian, asks her to. There is no reflex of agency in the birth of the affair, only her agreement; yet again, her actions are based on contract.

⁷ In the essay "Interpreting Female Agency and Responsibility in *The Millers Tale* and *The Merchant's Tale*," Joseph D. Parry touches on the more active role May takes in her affair with Damien.

The location where Damian and May's affair occurs is interesting as well. January's pleasure garden is enclosed entirely by stone; though there are multiple entry points, January's land is surrounded by yet another piece of his own production, symbolically reflecting May's restriction from a world outside of January. The garden walls, along with the physical structure of January and May's dwelling, further underline May's relationship to January; May is just another material thing in the space over which he exercises control. All of the inhabitants of the garden, May through marriage and Damian through allegiance, are contracted to January.

Many scholars have noted the significance of the tree in January's garden and the connotation of the Garden of Eden in Genesis⁸. Much of this scholarship highlights the parallels between Adam and Eve's sin of consuming the fruit of knowledge as well as May and Damian's cuckoldry of January. While this interpretation of the text is logical and in line with Chaucer's style and attention to allegory and illusion, it fails to explore the connections between marital contracts and love that the narrative is wrought from. This tree is one of the only if not the sole item of nature explicitly mentioned in the tale and its branches are precisely the stage for the narrative's final scene. In a story that takes place in otherwise man-made structures, it is representative of chance, free will, and nature—the implication of this, consequently, is that it is inherently good, especially as it recalls biblical Eden. In the garden, the lovers May and Damian have an opportunity to act on their feelings of love and provide an escape for May from January. As May uses January to climb away from a dictatorial husband toward a her lover, she is stepping away from the structure and demands that color her marriage to January and toward

⁸ Emerson Brown investigates the religious symbolism of January's garden and its relationship to the Garden of Eden in "Biblical Women in the Merchant's Tale: Feminism, Antifeminism, and Beyond".

natural, courtly love which her life has otherwise lacked. The garden and the tree represent May's freedom from a husband that has mutated her body into a machine, and her movement toward the tree shows a chance for agency and for her to become a human yet again. Yet, none of this is possible; the tree, like the rest of the garden, is made of organic material, yet is unnatural. Much like May, the garden was sculpted after January's specifications, enclosed by stone that January ordered to be lay. Damian falls short of being an opportunity for May to experience love and agency because, like her, he is contractually obligated to January.

Although May has an increased opportunity for agency as January appears to rely solely upon her, the potential agency is not realized. Despite this being the scene where May and Damian consummate their emotional affair, May merely switches from one man to the other. It is as though May is coded to respond to men in general. While it is appropriate to critique her actions and her infidelity and perhaps even reflexive to assert that she has broken away from January, she continues to be propelled by male desires. Instead of sneaking away for a rendezvous with Damian, May is ordered by one man into a space and lifted into a tree by another. Although we know that May truly desires Damian, she is continuously a responsive subject of his desire—he initiates correspondence, contact, and eventually sex. May's participation in Damian's initiations is consent rather than decision; May allows the affair to take place rather than decides for it to occur. Again and again, May has the opportunity to enact agency in her relations yet instead falls into a routine of contractual response rather than agent impulse.

While the dynamic between May and Damian appears to be less prescriptive than between the union of January and May, it is only so at face value. Damian's troubadour-reminiscent approach to love seems to be the opposite of January's selfish rationale for marriage,

but is it truly all so different? From what we know of the Merchant's account of Damian's courtship of May, it is quite unlike January's marriage philosophy. Damian immediately falls in love with May upon his first sight of her and is struck ill for thought that his love is unrequited. May is the antidote for Damian's illness—quite literally, her love is his cure. Without May, Damian is damned to poor health and it is only when she is sent to his bedside does his condition improve. Although Damian's need for May appears to be more good natured and vested less in her material value, we are reminded that Marx's concept of "use-value" relates to what he gets from the object less so than what the object, May, is actually materially worth. It is apparent that Damian places a high value upon love and happiness—as Damian's love for May rectifies an illness as well as, theoretically, makes him happy, Damian ascribes a high "use-value" to May that motivates him to have her. Yet again, May exists only to facilitate something for a man.

CONCLUSION

Interestingly, January's expectations about the function of women in marriage are not expectations that he places upon the potential wives themselves; instead, January's message is aimed at other bachelors like himself. This is evident in what scholars refer to as January's marriage "encomium" toward the beginning of his tale, before he has even laid eye upon May. This long, thorough examination of the function of women within the lives of the men that they wed greatly mimics a homily for its thesis—"to take a wyf it is a glorious thing"—and the way it addresses other men in tone in language. We know January is speaking strictly to unwed men for two reasons: first, because his central message is concerned with convincing listeners of the merits of marriage and second, January refers to his listeners as "he" and "you" exclusively.

In her article "'To take a wyf is a glorious thing': January's *Thesis* On Marriage in the *Merchant's Tale*," Theresa O'Bryne expertly details the general structure of January's argument and the methods by which it attempts to gain traction from its audience. O'Bryne points out that January's message is rooted in a similar message by the Greek philosopher Athonius and breaks down the structure of each argument to hone in on the major points (153). To O'Bryne, his argument in support of marriage is structured around these basic ideas: "marriage is paradise on earth," "a wife will grace one's old age," "wives are obedient and loyal," and "a wife is a good keeper of a household" (155). As we can see, January's primary interest in marriage derives around the very function of the wife who he presents generally, as if all women possess these features.

These arguments appear less innocent when compared to the arguments that January is trying to dispel in the text. Of course, January is not merely spouting his opinion of wife and marriage merely for his own sake; instead, January is in a fierce debate with Theophrastus.

Presenting Theophrastus' counter-argument as if he were present, January hopes to truly prove that the merits of marriage outweigh the difficulties, yet Theophrastus' voice—as presented by January—sheds light on what is between the lines of January's argument. First, January details Theophrastus' primary counterargument—that rather than marrying and taking care of expensive wives, men would have much more success employing servants who better care for households and men themselves. This mention of servants directly relates to January's interest in the body as a prosthetic, as servants exist solely for their function within their masters' household. Even though January presents this argument as belonging not to him but to Theophrastus and we are to believe that January truly disagrees with this notion, the fact that he acknowledges the similarity in duties between wife and servant shows that January is completely aware of his desire for the function of prosthesis (whether wife or servant) over his desire for the union of marriage. In fact, rather than rebutting Theophrastus' counterargument with evidence that a relationship with a wife is valued over the mere function of a servant, January instead merely insists that wives are obedient and can keep house just as well as servants.

When we look at January's conclusion to this debate compared to his interactions with May later in the text, it is clear that January did not nor had ever planned to view May as a wife with whom he wished to build a life and relationship, but instead a prosthetic body existing to complete an incomplete function within his household. O'Bryne summarizes January's conclusion expertly: "Marriage, thanks to the wife, ensures stability and guards against misfortune" (155). This notion is one that we see played out repeatedly both before January's marriage and after May becomes a part of his household: she is a vessel for an heir, a nurse to the ill, a cane for walking—nothing but a vacant body with the potential to fulfill masculine expectation.

As we see May's body as a prosthetic extension of January's (and, though to a lesser extent, Damien's), it becomes evident that May's body, in both her marriage to January and affair with Damien, no longer belongs to her. The union of marriage and the courtly love dynamic both allot for Chaucer's male characters to commodize May, whether it be for what she fulfills for them emotionally, in Damien's case, and functionally, for January. In this way, we understand two things about love and marriage in the *Merchant's Tale*: the male body is incomplete in terms of what it cannot yield alone—be it an heir, a caretaker, or pseudo-servant—and the female body is valued for what it can do or create rather than what it is, recalling Marx's notion of commodity. Through this, we can better understand January's want for a wife as working two-fold, as he desires the function of her body for his own benefit and aims to build upon his own body via a female prosthetic to supplement his own. This dual desire for control and mechanization is what motivates January throughout the narrative and showcases the way in which the female body is commoditized and objectified not aesthetically but functionally.

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