



License applied: [CC-BY-NC 4.0](#)

DOI: 10.38173/RST.2024.27.1.10:121-127

Title:	<i>'THE MERCHANT'S PROLOGUE AND TALE': AN IDEA OF CHANGE</i>
Author:	Gassim DOHAL

Section: Social Sciences

Issue: 1(27)/2024

Received: 24 December 2024	Revised: 1 February
Accepted: 6 March 2024	Available Online: 15 March 2024

Paper available online [HERE](#)

‘THE MERCHANT’S PROLOGUE AND TALE’: AN IDEA OF CHANGE

Gassim DOHAL¹

ABSTRACT:

IN GEOFFREY CHAUCER’S THE CANTERBURY TALES (C. 1387), THE MERCHANT’S STORY IS ABOUT AN OLD KNIGHT WHO DECIDES TO MARRY FOR THE FIRST TIME AT THE AGE OF SIXTY. THE GIRL HE CHOOSES TO MARRY IS TOO YOUNG TO BECOME THE RIGHT MATCH.

THE PILGRIMS IN CHAUCER’S MASTERWORK GO THROUGH CHANGES THAT ARE DOCUMENTED IN THIS LITERARY TEXT. THESE ALTERATIONS CAN TAKE MANY VARIOUS SHAPES AND TAKE MANY DIFFERENT FORMS. THE MERCHANT IS ONE OF THESE TRAVELERS. IN THE FOLLOWING DISCUSSION, I WILL LOOK AT HOW ‘THE MERCHANT’S PROLOGUE AND TALE’ HANDLES DIFFERENT TYPES OF CHANGES. BY READING THIS ARTICLE, READERS WILL REALIZE THAT TRANSFORMATION IS NOT LIMITED TO ONE FORM OR SHAPE IN OUR LIVES. ALSO IT WILL OPEN A WINDOW ON LOOKING AT OTHER TALES FROM THE SAME PERSPECTIVE

KEY WORDS: CHAUCER, THE MERCHANT, CANTERBURY TALES, TRANSFORMATION

INTRODUCTION

The ‘Merchant’s Tale’ is one of Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*; a touchstone of Medieval Literature. The tales are told by a number of pilgrims travelling from Southwark to Canterbury. The pilgrims, who come from various levels of English society, paint a vivid picture of English life in the fourteenth century. They have the opportunity to be entertained as well as offer their ideas on a variety of themes.

The ‘Merchant’s Tale’ is about a noble knight who decides to marry as he chooses; he determines to have a wife of lower birth than his so that everything will be in his hand. The tale is “basically a fabliau” and “has the obligatory triangle-jealous old husband, restless young wife [and] lusty squire-and the inevitable act of adultery achieved through trickery”[1]. After writing an article about transformation in the ‘Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale’[2], I noticed that the idea of transformation might be the focus of studying ‘The Merchant’s Tale.’ The moment at which January decides to marry, marks a point of change. After his decision, changes take many forms and shapes.

In Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, a group of pilgrims represent a spectrum of English social classes, paint a striking picture of life during the fourteenth century. They get the opportunity to amuse themselves and voice their opinions on various subjects. Benson[1]

¹ PhD, Independent Researcher, Gizan, Saudi Arabia, dr_waitme@hotmail.com

states that "there are two transformations in the tale, that of the loathly lady and that of the knight" (p. 11) in his introduction to *The Canterbury Tales*. Scholars and critics typically focus on the two changes that Benson has identified. After reading the aforementioned quotation, I have noticed that 'The Merchant's Tale, has some transformations as well.

'The Merchant's Tale' is usually discussed and referred to while studying *The Canterbury Tales* in general. 'The Merchant's Tale' is rare to be addressed separately. When it is studied in a separate way, the focus turns into feminism, marriage, and the like, as in Yakar [3], and Shoqairat and Kraishan [4]. Here I will address the aspect of change, which serves the main goal of the entire journey and serves whatever is related to the spiritual change.

This article will make use of discourse analysis. Through a text analysis, the main changes that take place in 'The Merchant's Prologue and Tale' are identified. The discourse of the entire tale looks at the general and overarching meanings that are expressed within the text. Through close reading, this article will mainly highlight various changes that have affected the main characters. In fact, careful, critical reading of a text is necessary to gain a thorough comprehension of it. This article will concentrate on the most significant changes in 'The Merchant's Prologue and Tale' (hereafter referred to as *M's P&T*).

MAIN TEXT

Indeed, pilgrimage itself is a type of change; pilgrims leave the secular world and set out to Canterbury, a symbol of spiritual world. Regarding definition, transformation is a change that might take place in form, appearance, nature, class, behavior, situation, understanding, etc. To "transform" means, according to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* [5], to "change the shape, appearance, quality or nature." Hence, transformation is not limited to form and appearance, but it implies the change of nature. It becomes clear that some changes are more memorable, unforgettable and conceivable like the metamorphosis of the hag in the 'Wife of Bath's Tale,' yet there are many changes that take place in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. In this article, the focus will be on the 'Merchant's Prologue and Tale.' This tale is one of the marriage group tales. Initially, marriage requires a change of one's life and living for the sake of continuity.

From the very beginning of his Prologue, the Merchant calls his wife--Coghill's translation of Chaucer is what is quoted from in this article--"a shrew in all" (*M's P&T*, line 10). He justifies his judgment; "For if a fiend were coupled to my wife, / She'd overmatch him, you can bet your life" (*M's P&T*, lines 7-8), and "her studied cruelty / Surpasses everything" (*M's P&T*, lines 13-14). Unlike January, the principal character of his tale, "the Merchant is not blind to the cruelty of his wife" [6, p.57]. Everyone expects him to talk about his marriage, but he changes the topic right away, saying, "but on the personal score / I'm so heart-scalded I shall say no more" (*M's P&T*, lines 31-32).

From the 'General Prologue' (*GP*) of Chaucer's masterpiece, we learn that the Merchant talks and looks so solemn and impressive that few people know that he is deeply in debt. According to the prologue, "he told of his opinions and pursuits / In solemn tones" (*GP*, lines 284-5), and "motley dress 'so stately in administration'" (*GP*, line 291). To some extent, he manages to transform his behavior; "none knew he was in debt" (*GP*, Line 290).

Nothing mortal stays without change; January, a worthy knight, changes his mind to marry at last:

Now when this knight had passed his sixtieth year
– Whether for holiness, or from a surge
Of dotage, who can say? – he felt an urge

So violent to be a wedded man. (*M's P&T*, lines 40-43)

He wants to transform the type of his living "to lead a life of ease, a holy life" (*M's P&T*, line 416). He knows that he is going to die; death is a change. Thus he "might beget an heir" (*M's P&T*, line 60). As I have mentioned that marriage is a type of transformation; the concept is explained when marriage is compared with bachelorhood;

[Bachelors'] liberty is that of bird or beast,
They've no restraint, no discipline at least,
Whereas a married man achieves a state
Of bliss that's orderly and fortunate. (*M's P&T*, lines 69-72)

However, Justinus, January's friend, confirms that:

I find [bachelorhood] a routine, a synthesis
Of cost and care, and wholly bare of bliss. (*M's P&T*, lines 335-36)

On the other hand, January thinks that he can transform and mold a young girl into the type of wife he wants to have:

when they're young
A man can still control them with his tongue
And guide them, should their duty seem too lax
Just as a man may model in warm wax. (*M's P&T*, lines 213-16)

Marrying May, January transforms her rank; "For January had become her knight" (*M's P&T*, line 514) after we have been told that

Her rank was not so great, to tell the truth,
But still she had her beauty and her youth;
She was the girl he wanted for his wife,
To lead a life of ease, a holy life. (*M's P&T*, lines 413-16)

A Wikipedia contributor argues that "she did it for social betterment and possibly some kind of inheritance, Januarie being a rich man" (Wikipedia contributors '*The Merchant's Tale*') [11]. This Cinderella motif which is indeed a kind of transformation is found largely in literature.

Anyhow, this young lady changes the Squire Damian's life into distress for

He was so ravished by the sight of May
As to be mad with suffering. (*M's P&T*, lines 564-65)

This transformation affects his health "And hastily the boy went off to bed" (*M's P&T*, line 568). Even January misses his squire at this time so that he asks his wife to

Go up and have a look at Damian
And entertain him; he's a gentleman. (*M's P&T*, lines 713-14)

In turn, May obeys her husband, and calls on Damian; according to the tale,

Fresh young May
With all her women took the shortest way
To Damian's room and sat beside his bed. (*M's P&T*, lines 721-23)

The previous line stresses the idea that has been stated earlier that May is "fresh" and "young"; two characteristics January assures earlier that "a man may" exploit to "model in warm wax" any woman (*M's P&T*, line 16). The question here is who is going to "model" whom. Apparently, it is not January who is going to take the chance of modeling- a kind of transformation- May. Later, we will see how January's squire will "model" the wife.

The 'Merchant's Tale' develops in a dramatic way;
And Damian, when at last he saw his chance,
Secretly took his purse and billet-doux,
Couched in the sweetest phrases that he knew,

And put it in her hand. (*M's P&T*, lines 726-30)

More than she is “fresh”, “young”, and easy to “model”, January himself describes his squire Damian in an attractive way:

‘I’m very sorry for it,’ said January,
 ‘And he’s a gentleman, to tell the truth,’
 The old man said, ‘and if he died, poor youth,
 It were a pity; he’s a lad of worth.
 I don’t know anyone of equal birth
 So wise, discreet and secret, and so able;
 Thrifty and serviceable too at table. (*M's P&T*, lines 695-701)

The third element that helps in transforming her attitude towards Damian is psychological; her emotions towards a sick person:

And such her pity for that sick young man
 She could not rid her heart of Damian,
 Or of the wish to see his troubles ended. (*M's P&T*, lines 669-71)

As a result, Damian’s letter changes her concept of Damian as merely her husband’s squire into one she does “grant the satisfaction he desired” (*M's P&T*, line 789). Hence, Gestsdóttir [7] believes that May does “represent wicked disobedient” wife (p. 21). Later, she assures Damian’s letter positively and responds in the same epistolary way:

Soft May felt pity, you must understand.
 She wrote a letter in her own fair hand
 In which she granted him her very grace.
 There needed nothing but the time and place
 To grant the satisfaction he desired;
 He was to have whatever he required. (*M's P&T*, lines 785-790)

Thus the result of her action is direct and effective; his worst health is transformed into a better state:

And up rose happy Damian on the morrow;
 Gone was all trace of malady and sorrow. (*M's P&T*, lines 799-800)

Life changes; the Merchant argues, “Changeable Fortune, O unstable Chance” (*M's P&T*, line 847). Here he refers to life in general in order to take his listeners to another physical transformation. The sight of January is transformed into blindness; he “went blind; quite suddenly he lost his sight” (*M's P&T*, line 861). In turn, his blindness changes his behavior; he becomes more jealous and

Of jealousy embittered everything,
 For so outrageous are the thoughts it rouses
 That neither when at home nor in the houses
 Of his acquaintance, no, nor anywhere
 Would he allow his wife to take the air
 Unless his hand were on her, day and night. (*M's P&T*, lines 878-83)

On the other hand, and in addition to epistolary method, she exploits “private signals, [to let] Damian knew her mind” (*M's P&T*, line 897). Even the way of communication transmute into another one; these lovers can see each other and use signs to explain what they want instead of the normal old way of private writing and waiting for chances to meet each other. The tale demonstrates that January “is unable to wield the power over his wife that he believes he rightfully possesses” [6, p. 54].

On the other hand, Pluto, the “king of Fairyland” (*M's P&T*, line 1023), warns that
 But seeing that I swore

Upon my oath to grant him sight again,
I'll stand by what I said, I tell you plain.

I am a king, it fits me not to lie.' (*M's P&T*, lines 1108-11)

January's squire betrays him by having his wife when May

Went up into the tree, and Damian

Pulled up her smock at once and in he thrust. (*M's P&T*, lines 1148-49)

According to Wikipedia, "Though several of the tales are sexually explicit by modern standards, this one is especially so." (Wikipedia contributors '*The Merchant's Tale*'). Instantly, Pluto transforms January's blindness into full sight he can see what is going on around him:

And when King Pluto saw this shameful lust

He gave back sight to January once more

And made him see far better than before. (*M's P&T*, lines 1150-52)

On the other hand, Proserpina, the "Queen of Fairyland" (*M's P&T*, line 1112) promises that

Now, by my grandsire's soul, though she is young

I'll put a ready answer on her tongue

And every woman's after, for her sake. (*M's P&T*, lines 1061-63).

Before January's recovery of his sight, we have not had a chance to read for May, using her own voice and words; the narrator provides us with what she is doing, but not what she says; she is similar to the ravished girl of the 'Wife of Bath' Tale' [2]. It is a patriarchal culture where women have no voice. In that sense, Marcotte [8] argues

January's version of marriage is common in the patriarchal culture of the Middle Ages; he views women as property, and his beliefs reflect an idealized philosophy in the tale. January believes women are essentially slaves valued for pleasure and reproduction (p. 29).

Yet in the 'Merchant's Tale', May is helped by the the "Queen of Fairyland" and provided by the answer; this is a transformation in the turn expected from her. But after January's roaring and saying that he has seen Damian "[Pull] up her smock at once and in he thrust" (*M's P&T*, line 1149), and confirms "I saw it with my very eye" (*M's P&T*, line 1174), she is transformed into an eloquent capable person who can persuade her counterpart easily. She says

'Well, think,' she said, 'as it may please you best,

But, Sir, when suddenly a man awakes,

He cannot grasp a thing at once, it takes

A little time to do so perfectly,

For he is dazed at first and cannot see.

Just so a man who has been blind for long

Cannot expect his sight to be so strong (*M's P&T*, lines 1192-98).

Hence, January is "cuckolded by a manipulative female figure" (Wikipedia contributors '*The Merchant's Tale*'). Indeed, "January is duped by his wife" [8, p. 29]. She adds after jumping down from the tree:

For certainly if you could really see

You'd never say such words as those to me;

You caught some glimpses, but your sight's not good. (*M's P&T*, lines 1177-79)

Accordingly, "the tale concludes with January blindly submitting to his sly wife, May" [6, p. 5]. Indeed, Wade [9] notices that "January's willingness to be convinced that he has not been duped reveals his desire to remain deluded about his own morals and ethics" (p. 18).

Such a conclusion is not even predicted by January himself. Moreover, the conclusion of the tale is not convincing for May is not punished for her betrayal and dishonesty. By the way, Vaněčková [10] tries to justify this conclusion by saying that “January’s wife May accepts a young lover and cannot really be judged for it because her husband is old and she does not love him” (p. 59).

CONCLUSION

Transformation takes different forms, and this fits *The Canterbury Tales* because the pilgrims leave the secular works and set out to Canterbury; this is a transformation for eternal reward becomes their goal. In particular, Geoffrey Chaucer’s the ‘Merchant’s Prologue and Tale’ include many transformations that take different forms. One of the main changes is May’s social low rank. With the interference of Proserpine, May is given a voice to refute her husband’s accusation; this is a transformation in May’s expected nature in a patriarchal society. In addition to January’s regain of sight, there are many changes enlisted in this article. In his tale, the Merchant elucidates for his listeners what women are able to achieve and how they manage to find a way in their daily lives in order to challenge any difficulty they face. In both the ‘Merchant’s Prologue and Tale’, he draws up a message for men to consider and understand the other gender. The Arthurian knight of his tale becomes aware of his milieu and changes his behavior towards May when he becomes blind. Despite his prudence and the procedures he has taken, May manages to overreach him. Finally, January finds it difficult to return to his earlier state of being single, accepts her unconvincing explanation, and hugs her.

REFERENCES

- [1] Benson, L. D. (Ed), *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd Ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987.
- [2] Dohal, G. H., Transformation in Chaucer's the 'Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale'. *World Journal of English Language*, Vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 121-126, 2021. Available: <https://doi:10.5430/wjel.v11n2p121>
- [3] Yakar, A. P., May as a Figure of Resistance in the Merchant's Tale, *Hacettepe University Journal of Faculty of Letters*, Vol. 38, no. 2, pp. 548-561, 2021. Available: <https://doi.org/10.32600/huefd.888264>
- [4] Shoqairat, W., & Kraishan, M., Toward a Theoretical and Analytical Framework for the Study of Sexual Humour in Chaucerian Fabliaux, *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 7, pp. 1659-1667, July 2023. Available: <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.1307.08>
- [5] Transform. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*. Regularly Updated. [Online document], 1987.
- [6] Dueck, E. C., "The Wife of Bath's Coverchiefs and Conjugal Sovereignty in Four Chaucerian Marriage Tales," thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2007. Retrieved from <https://summit.sfu.ca/system/files/iritems1/2688/etd2829.pdf>
- [7] Gestsdóttir, S., "Chaucer's female characters in the Canterbury Tales: Born to thralldom and penance, and to be under mannes governance," Doctoral dissertation, 2010. Retrieved from <https://skemman.is/bitstream/1946/4941/1/thesis.pdf>
- [8] Marcotte, A., "Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*: Rhetoric and Gender in Marriage," University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations, 2007. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/591>
- [9] Wade, M. W., "Aesthetic Problem of Distance in Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," Thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1969. Retrieved from <https://shareok.org/handle/11244/25929?show=full>
- [10] Vaněčková, V., "Women in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*: Woman as a Narrator, Woman in the Narrative," Master's Diploma thesis, Masaryk University, 2007. Retrieved from https://is.muni.cz/th/74590/ff_m/chaucer.pdf
- [11] Wikipedia contributors. 'The Merchant's Tale,' *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 28 Oct. 2021. [Online document], accessed 28 Oct. 2021.
1. Benson, C. D., *The Canterbury Tales*: Personal Drama or Experiments in Poetic Variety? In P. Boitani and J. Mann (Ed.), *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
1. Chaucer, G., *The Canterbury Tales*. Trans. and Ed. N. Coghil, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977.
2. Fein, S., "Other thought-worlds," in P. Brown (Ed.), *A Companion to Chaucer*, 2002, pp. 332-48, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.