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Engl. 313/2  
July 21, 2005

**Chaucer: *The Canterbury Tales*, "The Merchant's Tale"**

**Question 8: Merchant, January and Irony**

As with a number of the Canterbury tales, the prologue to "The Merchant's Tale," is of key importance. Since we define irony by the disparity between what we "know" and what we are "told," the merchant's views on women, and marriage in particular, as set out in the prologue provides us with the "knowable" and so allow us to recognise the irony implicit in his tale; and it is with the reading of irony that the self-deceit of January is made glaringly obvious.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, central to this irony is the difference between the merchant and January. The gulf which separates them is first manifest in their respective supplications to God. This begins with the merchant's prologue: "We wedded men, lyven in sorwe and care/ . . . God shilde that it sholde so befalle!"(line 1128-1132) The counterpart to this comes then from January: "Preyinge oure Lord to graunten him that he/Mighte ones knowe of thilke blisful lyf/That is bitwixe an housbonde and his wyf . . ."(line 1158-1160) Unless we decide that the narrator is unreliable, in

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<sup>1</sup>Unless the tale is read without recognition of its ironic tone, part three of the question should ask rather how the narrator undermines January rather than how he undermines himself.

the literary sense, then we must grant him ultimate authority, allowing him intimate knowledge and understanding of the tale he tells. Although a case might be made for the merchant as an unreliable narrator, it seems more of an intellectual possibility than an accurate reading.<sup>2</sup> Since this is the case, there can be little doubt of the irony intended by the merchant in his narrative, and we should immediately recognise January's views of wedded bliss within the context of self-delusion. Accordingly, when the merchant offers the warnings of Theophrastus, concluding with: "This sentence. and an hundred thynges worse/Writeth this man, ther God his bones curse!" we are to understand entirely the opposite, and that this sentence and a hundred things *better* are concurrent with the merchant's opinion.

Beside the irony demonstrated by the dissimilarity between prologue (Merchant's philosophy) and tale (January's philosophy), another method used to convey the ironic structure of the plot is achieved through massive exaggeration. This is first introduced through the contrast between January's previous life of joyous hedonistic bachelorhood and the new and joyously

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<sup>2</sup>Further proof of the merchant providing the authoritative voice can be seen in the way January finally decides upon a wife, which is: "But nathelees, bitwixe earnest and game";(line 1594)and also in the way he listens to Placebo for advice, knowing by Placebo's own admission, that he will only say such as his lord wishes to hear.

anticipated life of wedlock; and the sudden abandonment of the first in preference to the second strikes an immediate warning bell to the attentive reader. This abrupt change of heart is an initial form of exaggeration, and leads, not surprisingly, to the more conventional sort which takes as its subject January's idealistic view of marriage.

Even without reference to any of the above, we are still able to read the merchants tale within an ironic framework, for January undermines his own opinions. This occurs repeatedly throughout the tale, mostly in respect to professed views of what a wife is and what marriage means. Thus we are told: "Love wel thy wyf, as Crist loved his chirche.(line 1384) And yet January insists upon a partner ". . . fair and tendre of age."(line 1407) January later offers the traditional ecclesiastical view of marriage:

If he ne may nat lyven chaast his lyf,  
 Take hym a wyf with greet devocioun,  
 By cause of leveful procreacioun,  
 Of children to th'onour of God above.(line 1446-1449)

But such noble sentiments are another example of irony, of the multi-layered self delusion, for when January first thought of marriage, it was as: "The lusty lyf, the vertuous quyete,/That is in mariage hony-sweete."(line 1395-1396) Essentially, January views marriage as a sanctified life of lust. The "holy life" he expects is both entirely appropriate to the lusty self-deluding bachelor as well as to the *fabliau* genre.

Indeed, even the use of genre demonstrates the all pervasive

irony of the tale, for it features many aspects of the Romance, as made clear by the direct reference to *Roman de la Rose* by Guillaume de Lorris. Many of these qualities are tied to the courtly love convention, including the walled garden and use of personification. And yet Chaucer turns courtly love upside down: the lady is of lower birth, she is not an object of devotion but of lust, and the relationship is consummated--over and over again. We can fairly say then that "The Merchant's Tale" is a *fabliau*, but it is a *fabliau* which subverts the Romance genre, and it is in the subversion that we find a structural irony. It is also by virtue of the *fabliau* genre that we see the essential vulgarity of the tale teller.