

Summary & Analysis of The Merchant's Tale

Summary of Tale

Using his own experiences — after only two months of marriage, his intolerable wife causes him constant agony — the Merchant has a cynical and bitter view of marriage. He makes clear that his story will characterize wives of a different sort. In his tale, however, the Merchant offers such high praise of marriage and such praise for the role of the wife that his guests are confused as to whether he is sincere or being sarcastic.

In *The Merchant's Tale*, January, a wealthy, elderly knight, decides to marry. His reasons are clear enough: He wants to fulfill God's wish that man and woman marry, and he wants a son to inherit his estates. January calls many of his friends together to listen to his plans and to offer him advice. His close friend, Justinus, argues against marriage, pointing out the unfaithfulness of women. The knight's other friend, Placebo, argues that January should make up his own mind. Surveying the young maidens of the country, January chooses a beautiful virgin named May.

One of January's attendants is a handsome youth named Damian, who is immediately smitten with love the moment he sees May. His unrequited love is so powerful that he becomes physically ill. Because January is partial to this handsome youth, he sends his wife and other women to Damian's bedside to comfort him. Damian passes a note to May in which he professes his undying love for her. May responds with a note to Damian, acknowledging her reciprocal desire. Then January is suddenly stricken blind, and he insists that May remain by him at all times; she can go nowhere unless he is holding her hand. Nevertheless, May is able to give Damian a wax impression of a key to January's secret garden, and she later signals for Damian to climb a pear tree.

In an interlude, the god Pluto and his wife, Proserpina, discuss the situation involving January and May. Pluto admits that he will restore January's sight because women are so deceitful, but he wants to wait until just the right moment to do so. His wife, Proserpina, says men are so lecherous that she will provide May with a believable excuse when he does.

Later, May leads January to the pear tree and, pretending she has an insatiable lust for a pear, tells her husband to bend over and let her stand on his back. She "went up into the tree, and Damian / Pulled up her smock at once and in he thrust" ("Damian / Gan pullen up the smok, an in he throng"). At this moment, while the couple is in amorous bliss, January's sight is miraculously restored. He looks up and sees the young couple "swyving" (having sex), and he bellows with rage, "He swyved thee, I saugh it with myne yen" ("He screwed you, I saw it with my own eyes"). Thanks to Proserpina, however, May gives a credible excuse: January's sight is faulty — the same as awakening from a deep sleep when the eyes are not yet accustomed to the bright light and seeing strange things dimly. She then jumps down from the tree, and January clasps her in a fond embrace.

When the Merchant ends his tale, the Host says he wants to be preserved from women like May, but his wife does have a babbling, shrewish tongue and many more vices. He bitterly regrets that he is tied to her for life but hopes no one will mention it because women have ways of finding out.

Analysis

Even for those who have never read *The Merchant's Tale*, the concept is widely familiar. A marriage between a decrepit old man and a young maiden is commonly referred to as a January-May wedding, taken of course from this tale. While this tale is the most original of Chaucer's, the trick played at the end on the old dotard — often referred to as the "Pear-Tree episode" — was found in many popular tales of the time. In fact, the figure of the aged or feeble lover is frequent in literature of all ages. In this tale, as in others, the reader assumes that the older man will be cuckolded by a younger, handsomer, more virile man, especially because the older man has difficulty coping with his young wife in bed.

The Merchant's Tale is the second tale handling the cuckolding of an old husband by a young bride (the first was *The Miller's Tale*). The choice of names supports the Merchant's point-of-view: January (old with white hair like snow) marries May (young and beautiful like the May flowers) after rejecting the good advice of Justinus (the just or righteous man) and following the advice of Placebo (the flattering man).

The Merchant, with his cynical and bitter view of marriage, indirectly supports and expands the Clerk's point with a story of a foolish old husband and a deceitful young wife. The husband, who has been a "worthy knight" for 60 years and a libertine for most of his life, finally decides to set aside his liberty and marry, believing that marriage is God's wish ("In this world [marriage] is a paradise"). We realize his decision is less the result of holiness than his dotage and his desire for an heir (only in marriage can a man sire an heir to his lands and castles).

Character Analysis

We know the merchant is the fashionista of the group because he's wearing a cloak of "motley" (variegated, colorful pattern), a Flemish beaver hat, and has a forked beard, all of which were current fashions at this time period. The merchant's main motivation is "th'encrees of his wynnynng" (General Prologue 277), or making money, and the military protection of trade routes that allows him to do so – these subjects are all he talks about. Although he appears prosperous, we know that the Merchant is actually in debt. He manages to keep his head above water by borrowing more and more. In medieval England, to be in debt was a sign of weak morals. So when Chaucer tells us that the Merchant was a "worthy man withal," we can probably take that a bit ironically.

In the Merchant's Prologue, we learn that he is unhappily married to a shrewish woman who could win a fight against the devil. This state of affairs motivates him to tell a tale about a man who ignores his friend's advice against marriage and comes to regret it.

With the Merchant we have our first example of the "new" up-and-coming middle class. The Merchant's more cosmopolitan sensibilities – knowledge about the latest international fashions, for example – are probably meant to serve as a contrast to the concerns of those like the Knight, who hail from more traditional and entrenched social groups.