

Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1340-1400) - Canterbury Tales (ca. 1387)

General Prologue

THE MERCHANT

- 1 There was a Merchant with a forking beard
C'era un Mercante dalla barba forcuta,
- 2 And motley dress; high on his horse he sat,
e un vestito variopinto; eretto si teneva a cavallo,
- 3 Upon his head a Flemish beaver hat
un cappello di castoro alla fiamminga sul capo,
- 4 And on his feet daintily buckled boots.
e ai piedi gli stivali acconciamente e con bell'arte affibbiati;
- 5 He told of his opinions and pursuits
parlava con molta solennità delle sue attività e delle sue ragioni,
- 6 In solemn tones, he harped on his increase
non faceva che parlare dei suoi aumenti / della crescita dei suoi guadagni;
- 7 Of capital; there should be sea-police
invocava che fosse da ogni cosa guardato
- 8 (He thought) upon the Harwich-Holland ranges;
il mare tra Orwell e Middleburgh
- 9 He was expert at dabbling in exchanges.
e ben sapeva trafficare con il denaro al cambio;
- 10 This estimable Merchant so had set
il degno uomo s'ingegnava assai bene nel suo lavoro;
- 11 His wits to work, none knew he was in debt,
(che) nessuno sapeva di suoi debiti.
- 12 He was so stately in administration,
(tanto era) così dignitoso il suo comportamento nell'amministrare i beni
- 13 In loans and bargains and negotiation.
nei prestiti e affari e nelle trattative.
- 14 He was an excellent fellow all the same;
Insomma degno uomo era certo,
- 15 To tell the truth I do not know his name.
ma, a dire il vero, non so come fosse chiamato.

The Merchant page 57 Geoffrey Chaucer, Canterbury Tales

1. Make notes on:

physical appearance: *forked beard.*

clothes: *motley dress, Flemish beaver hat, daintily buckled boots.*

riding position: *high he sat.*

attitude: *told his opinions in solemn tones.*

skill: *expert at dabbling in exchanges, stately in administration.*

name: *not mentioned.*

2. Now consider Chaucer's **method of description** regarding this pilgrim, and decide which of the following **traits he focuses on.**

- appearance
- social status
- personality
- **profession**

3. Can you think of a reason why? *He is a representative of the new emerging middle class in English medieval society. Chaucer also wants to show how profession conditioned the individual's behaviour.*

2. How would you define the language used by Chaucer in the description? Choose from among the following.

- abstract
- idealised
- **concrete**
- realistic.

Justify your choice by quoting from the text. *The description of the clothes and the reference to geographical places is particularly realistic.*

3. List the **adjectives employed in the description** of the Merchant.

Forking, motley, high, daintily, solemn, expert, estimable, stately, excellent.

What aspects of his personality do they mirror? *They reflect an ambiguous, stiff, reserved personality, a man attracted to good deals and rather full of pretension.*

The Merchant's Tale - translation

Qui comincia il racconto del mercante.

C'era una volta in Lombardia un nobile cavaliere, il quale era nato a Pavia, dove viveva in grande ricchezza. Egli fino a sessant'anni era rimasto scapolo, e s'era dato sempre ai piaceri del corpo con le donne, seguendo i suoi bassi istinti, come fanno questi pazzi, che sono secolari. Ma passato il sessantesimo anno (se ciò fosse per santità, o perché egli era rimbambito, non saprei dire) il nostro cavaliere ebbe così grande smania di prender moglie, [...]

Ma vi avverto di una cosa, amici carissimi: io non voglio, in nessuna maniera, una moglie vecchia. Essa non dovrà aver passato, in modo assoluto, i venti anni, poiché, per il gusto mio, ci vuole pesce vecchio e carne giovane.

Io, grazie a Dio, oso vantarmi di sentire che le mie membra sono vigorose, e in grado di far tutto quello che all'uomo s' appartiene: insomma, ciò che posso fare, lo so da me. Sebbene abbia i capelli bianchi, io mi sento come un albero che è in fiore, prima che il frutto sia cresciuto...

Gennaio ogni volta che la guardava in viso, si sentiva rapire in estasi; e in cuor suo la minacciava di volerla stringere, quella notte, fra le braccia, più forte di quel che Paride, non avesse mai stretto Elena fra le sue. Ma poi sentiva una grande pietà, al pensiero che quella notte avrebbe dovuto farle del male. E fra sé diceva: « ahime! la mia tenera creatura! Voglia il cielo che tu possa sostenere tutta la foga de! mio cuore, che è così baldo e focoso: ho paura che tu non regga ai suoi impeti. Ma Dio non permetterà, che io metta in opera tutto il mio vigore!

Subito dopo anche Gennaio, impaziente, volle andare a letto, più non vuole indugiare. Per accrescere l'animo, bevve vin caldo, chiaretto e vernaccia, decotto di droghe, e una quantità di lattovari assai fini che quel monaco dannato di don Costantino ha descritto nel suo libro *De Coitu*; i quali tutti egli mandò giù senza alcuna ripugnanza. Poi disse ai suoi amici più intimi: « per l'amor di Dio, fate, con bel garbo, che la casa si vuoti al più presto possibile ». E costoro fecero a puntino il suo desiderio. Bevvero ancora, poi furono tirate subito le cortine, e la sposa fu portata a letto, muta come un sasso; e, allorché il prete ebbe benedetto il letto, tutti uscirono dalla camera. E Gennaio stretta fra le braccia la sua fresca e giovane Maggio, il suo paradiso, la moglie sua, la cullava, la baciava ripetutamente, pungendola coi duri peli della sua barba, ruvida come la pelle del pescecanne, e irta come rovi, poiché egli era, secondo il suo costume, tutto rasato di fresco.

[...]

Così egli lavorò fino allo spuntar dell'alba. Quindi prese una zuppa di vino di buon chiaretto, e poi si mise a sedere sul letto, e a cantare alto e chiaro, baciando sua moglie e facendo il matto; poiché era lascivo come un puledro, e pieno di chiacchiere come una gazza macchiata. E mentre cantava e gracchiava a quel modo, la flaccida pelle gli ciondolava attorno al collo. Ma Dio sa, che cosa pensasse in cuor suo Maggio, quando lo vide seduto sul letto, in camicia, col berretto da notte in capo, e quel collo così secco: tutti i suoi ruzzi non li stimò un fico.

Ora, chi fantasticava col pensiero se non la fresca e bella Maggio? Essa giaceva giù accanto al vecchio Gennaio, che se la dormiva, finche la tosse lo svegliò. Allora egli la pregò di volersi spogliare tutta nuda, poiché voleva prender sollazzo di lei, e le vesti gli davano impaccio; ed essa, di buona o mala voglia, obbedì. Ma per paura che le persone rispettabili abbiano a prendersela con me, non vi racconterò che cosa egli facesse, non oso dirvi, o se a lei paresse d'essere in paradiso o all'inferno. Lo lascio lì, a fare quello che facevano a loro posta, finché sono a vespro, e furono costretti ad alzarsi.

[...]

Ma il fatto è che la giovane e fresca Maggio, quel giorno rimase così impressionata per la pietà di Damiano ammalato, che non poteva levarsi dal cuore il pensiero di dargli qualche sollievo. E pensava. «Di colui la quale la cosa può non piacere, io non me ne preoccupo certamente, poiché sono qui pronta a

garantire che io lo amo più d'ogni altra creatura al mondo, quando anche non possedesse nulla di più della sua camicia. Vedete? la pietà entra subito in cuore gentile. E qui voi potete osservare, quale squisita liberalità è nelle donne, se si considerano da vicino.

- a) where the story is set: *In Pavia, Lombardy.*
- b) the protagonist's name and age: *A knight called January, aged over sixty.*
- c) whether he is married or not: *No, he is a bachelor.*
- d) what kind of life he leads and what need he suddenly feels:
He leads a prosperous, lascivious /la'siviəs/ life and wants to get married.

2. Now read up to line 27 and complete the sentences. .

- 1. Before going to **bed** January **drank liquor and wine with spices** in order to **increase desire and sexual performance**.
- 2. He also asked his friends to **leave the house quickly and silently**.
- 3. After the bride **had been taken to the bedroom**, the priest **blessed the bed**.

3. Read the text to the end and decide whether these statements are True or False. Correct the False ones.

- 1. **January tried to reassure May.** *True.*
- 2. **The man's skin was very soft because he had shaved.**
False: Although he had shaved, his skin was rough.
- 3. **He made love all night long.** *True.*
- 4. **January felt a bit upset and did not feel like eating.**
False: He felt very satisfied and happy, he sang and had a big breakfast.
- 5. **He had satiated /'sescietid/ his passion for May.**
False: He continued to watch her and desire her lustfully.
- 6. **May looked happy and satisfied.**
False: Chaucer lets us understand she is tired and disgusted.

4. State whether the Tale follows the pattern set by the General Prologue as regards:

- . rhyme: Rhyming couplets
- . line length: Mainly ten syllable lines
- . run-on-line: There are many examples (lines 1-2; 3-4; 5-6)

The Tale follows the pattern set by the General Prologue.

5. Analyse the structure of the Tale.

- 1. **Is it told personally or impersonally?** *Personally.*
- 2. **From whose point of view is the scene of the wedding night mainly described?**
From January's point of view.
- 3. **Find the lines where Chaucer's voice interferes with the narration.**
Lines 7, As do these foolish worldlings, never fear
- 10. **Whether for holiness, or from a surge / Of dotage, who can say**

4. **What do you think his aim is?** *To provide a moral commentary.*

6. Focus on the two characters of January and May.

- 1. **Consider their names. Can they be read in an allegorical way? What contrast do they introduce?**

They can be read symbolically, as an allegory of the contrast between age and youth.

2. As regards January, Chaucer adopts the poetry of detail. Where does he draw his images from?

The images refer to the animal world and food.

3. Find the similes referring to January. What do they emphasise?

*Line 31, The bristles of his beard were thick as stubble,
line 32, Much like a dog-fish skin, and sharp as briars,*

line 36. Sat up in bed as rigid as a post,

They underline January's old age and unattractiveness.

7. What is the theme of the Tale? *The theme of the Tale is marriage.*

How is it presented?

As sanctified lust, as a holy bond, as the legalised possession of the partner.

Chaucer provides a parody of marriage, a cynical view of this institution and an attack towards the Church which makes no distinction between a union based on love and an arrangement where sinister and selfish forces come into play.

8. Look for information about Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* (1350 and finished in 1353). I in your Italian literature book. Then draw up a comparison with *Canterbury Tales* (1387). Fill in the table below.

Meeting place of	CANTERBURY TALES Southwark, the Tabard Inn	DECAMERON Florence, church Santa Maria Novella, during the plague
Number of People	Twenty-nine people of different age and condition	Ten young people (seven women and three men)
Names	Name of profession	Proper names full of literary allusions
Destination Florence	Canterbury, Thomas Becket's shrine	A mansion on the hills surrounding
Reason for moving	A pilgrimage	To avoid the plague, to spend the day singing, dancing, telling tales.
Choice of theme of each tale	Made by the teller	Made by the king or queen of the day
Structure of the Work	A frame, twenty-four tales	A frame, one hundred and one tales
Genre	Poetry, narrative poem	Prose, "novella"

Summary:

In The Merchant's Tale, January, a wealthy, elderly knight, decides to marry. His reasons are clear enough: he wants a son to inherit his estates. 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, goes up into the tree where Damian is waiting for her. At this moment, while the couple is in amorous bliss, January's sight is miraculously restored. He looks up and sees the young couple having sex, and he bellows with rage. 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. She adds she was only 'struggling with a man' because she was told this would get January's sight back.

The tale ends rather unexpectedly: the fooled January and May continue to live happily. However, Chaucer does not end the tale entirely happily: a darker suggestion is there, as May tells Januarie that he may be mistaken on many more occasions, indicating that, perhaps, her infidelity will not stop there...