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# Borrowing in Context : The Importance and Artistic Implications of Chaucer's Use of Sources in the Merchant's Tale

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BORROWING IN CONTEXT: THE IMPORTANCE AND ARTISTIC IMPLICATIONS OF  
CHAUCER'S USE OF SOURCES IN *THE MERCHANT'S TALE*.

A Thesis submitted to  
the Graduate College of  
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of  
The requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Department of English

by

Austin Taylor McIntire

Approved by

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Marshall University  
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## ABSTRACT:

Borrowing in Context: The Importance and Artistic Implications of Chaucer's Use of Sources in  
*The Merchant's Tale*

Austin Taylor McIntire

In this thesis, I consider the implications of Chaucer not only as a man of his age but also as a poet who made deliberate decisions to borrow, imitate, and adapt the work of others, specifically in the context of *The Merchant's Tale*. Chapter I of this thesis establishes the significance of the medieval understanding of *auctor* and *auctoritas* during the medieval literary period and, furthermore, examines Chaucer's artistic output both during his career as a court poet and following his removal to Kent in an attempt to reach a clearer understanding of Chaucer's use of source material when composing *The Canterbury Tales*. Chapter II of this thesis traces the shifting presentation of *The Merchant's Tale* in source and analogue study and establishes the strong likelihood of Chaucer's knowledge of and familiarity with the *Decameron*. A closing discussion of Chaucer's use of Deschamp's *Le Miroir de Mariage* and Boccaccio's *Decameron* II, 10 and VII, 9 in *The Merchant's Tale* leads to important conclusions regarding the importance of these sources in Chaucer and broader conclusions regarding Chaucer's artistic aspirations as a poet.

## Introduction:

Since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the study of the known sources and analogues of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* has existed as an active subfield of Chaucerian criticism. Preceded by discussions of individual tales and comprehensive anthologies, the first comprehensive scholarly volume dedicated to potential sources and analogues was W. F. Bryan and Germaine Dempster's *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (1941). This seminal work was followed by Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson's *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux* (1971), a volume dedicated solely to the sources and analogues of Chaucer's fabliaux; Robert P. Miller's *Chaucer: Sources and Background* (1977), an anthology of works Chaucer likely knew, organized by subject; and numerous journal articles focused on *The Tales*' literary relatives.

More than half a century later, continued work and participation in this particular field of study culminated in a monumental update some thirty odd years in the making (Brewer vii). In 2002 and 2005, updated volumes of Bryan and Dempster's work under the editorship of Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel appeared as *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, Volumes I and II. This substantial revision offers readers comprehensive and updated overviews of the extant sources and analogues alongside English translations of all included material—a resource not available to readers in the past. Moreover, these volumes represent a new willingness and eagerness among scholars to consider previously largely unaddressed sources of inspiration. In the Foreword to Volume II of *Sources and Analogues*, Derek Brewer reflects on this renewed level of interest in Chaucer's literary borrowing:

Since then [when the process of updating Bryan and Dempster's volume began] the value of studying sources and analogues in relation to a text –

quite beyond the simple identification of a real or possible source – has been ever more appreciated, while at the same time the bulk of the material has greatly increased. (vii)

Indeed, attitudes and views have changed since Benson wrote in the introduction to the 1987 Riverside edition of *The Canterbury Tales* that “There is no proof that Chaucer knew the *Decameron*” and that Chaucer received “only a suggestion” for the framework of the tales from Boccaccio (3).<sup>1</sup> Now more than ever, the decisive and detailed scholarship of authors such as Helen Cooper, Peter Beidler, and others has made clear the rich interplay of literary influence, adaptation, and borrowing that took place during the composition of *The Tales*. In short, there has never been a period with more resources available to those students and scholars hoping to explore the potential connections between *The Tales* and its predecessors and counterparts.

Given the amount of resources now available, it is surprising that little has been written regarding *how* Chaucer used the material available to him for his own artistic purposes. This gap in scholarship may result from the typical treatment of the potential sources and analogues connected to *The Tales*. In the past, the most important critical question was whether or not a “direct” or “exact” source existed. In medieval criticism, terms such as direct and exact are often used to describe a source which contains direct verbal parallels and strong similarities in plot, imagery, and theme in addition to other factors. In other words, an ideal exact or direct source contains numerous (usually verbal) parallels which reveal it as a springboard for later work. If, in the case of Chaucer’s *Tales*, an exact source could not be found, the connection between a tale and other partial sources suddenly seemed to fall by the wayside and the focus of critical

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<sup>1</sup> The *Decameron* is collection of 100 novellas (short tales) by Giovanni Boccaccio. Although Chaucer borrowed from Boccaccio more than any other poet, critics have, until recently, traditionally rejected the *Decameron* as a potential source for *The Tales*.

attention would fall on the degree to which Chaucer's version is superior to or differentiates itself from its closest antecedent. Returning to Benson's introduction in the *Riverside Chaucer*, we are told that the "resemblances between the *Tales* and the *Decameron* are obvious," but much more time is spent describing how Chaucer's work "differs greatly from Boccaccio's" (3). I do not wish to be unfair to Benson; there truly is no evidence which definitively proves that Chaucer knew the *Decameron*, and the *Tales* itself is indeed very different from Boccaccio's collection. However, one would be hard pressed to find such a dismissive statement in recent criticism on the *Tales*. Scholars are now much more willing to discuss not only the uniqueness of Chaucer's tale but also the significance of his wide-ranging indebtedness to his predecessors and fellow poets.

In this thesis, I aim to take a more liberal approach to the study of Chaucer's use of known sources in, specifically, *The Merchant's Tale*, and address those materials which have not traditionally been accepted by the critical community at large as possible sites of inspiration. In other words, following the advice of Chaucer critic N.S. Thompson, I will resist the urge to take "verbal parallel alone to be the 'rule' for determining a source," and will, instead, consider the artistic implications of Chaucer's use of critically established sources as well as the influence of more distant analogues such as Boccaccio's *Decameron* II, 10 and *Decameron* VII, 9 in *The Merchant's Tale*. (485). With this goal in mind, it is also my intention to address some literary concerns of particular relevance to students interested in Chaucer and those critics involved in the study of the potential sources and analogues of *The Canterbury Tales*.

The first of these concerns pertains to the critical treatment of borrowing and imitation by authors during the medieval period. Too often, it seems, critics make the



assumption that the rationale behind and prevalence of borrowing among medieval authors is self-evident. In discussing the originality of the tales, Derek Pearsall writes, “The tales themselves, however, are almost always from known sources or have well-established analogues, as one would expect with a medieval author” (241). While I am sure Pearsall as well as most critics who have immersed themselves within the world of medieval literature do carry with them this expectation, for the budding scholar, the idea that authors from a historical period stretching over hundreds of years were expected to work from well-known sources can be quite shocking. At other times, instead of assumptions, we find explanations for borrowing that, while applying well in most contexts, apply awkwardly in others.

Miller, discussing Chaucer’s use of material from *Le Miroir de Mariage*, an allegorical tale about marriage, makes the claim that Chaucer expected his audience to recognize such works and that he saw himself and other writers as “part of a tradition of ‘authority’ reaching back through their immediate literary predecessors to the great ‘clerks’ of classical antiquity, and indeed, to the six days of Creation” (3). The particular work Miller cites, the *Miroir*, makes its direct appearance in *The Merchant’s Tale*, but the context in which the source appears—within an oratory on marriage that praises the institution but also deliberately contradicts itself in glaring fashion—muddles whatever authority the *Miroir* holds. If anything, Chaucer satirizes the tradition of authority by borrowing from a text well known among medieval readers to support his ultimately inane discourse. Furthermore, while it is clear that at times Chaucer clearly draws on the authority of his literary predecessors, are we to assume that when Chaucer takes the plot from a popular tale involving sex in a pear tree and a cuckolded husband he believes he is

standing on the shoulders of literary giants? Distinctly medieval notions of authority played an important role in the realm of poetry during Chaucer's lifetime, but Miller's theory applies awkwardly to Chaucer's fabliaux which, except for the Shipman's tale, are from well-known sources or have well-established analogues. Chaucer borrowed, adapted and imitated in his work, but it is by no means always clear why he chose to work with specific sources, especially in genres not typically associated with Miller's tradition of authority. Of course, such issues will always remain uncertain, but I believe that worthwhile conclusions can be reached by making some educated assumptions about why Chaucer used certain sources in individual tales.

As part of my discussion of *The Merchant's Tale*, I plan to largely sidestep the debate regarding the degree to which we can safely state which sources Chaucer worked with—much excellent scholarship has already been written on the topic—and will instead consider the implications of Chaucer not only as a man of his age but also as a poet who made deliberate decisions to borrow, imitate, and adapt the work of others. To clarify this position it may be helpful to consider at least two, admittedly simplistic, portraits of Chaucer. One is a writer whose work was primarily the product of the literary environment in which he composed *The Tales*. In this portrait, the instances of borrowing and imitation in *The Tales* are the results of Chaucer living during a period in which working from sources was the status quo and such decisions were made without serious artistic consideration. The other is a writer who specifically and deliberately borrowed bits and (sometimes very large) pieces from the materials he had at hand—or tucked away in his memory—with a specific artistic purpose, and would have done so regardless of what century he lived in.

The actual man is likely somewhere in between, but I believe that evidence exists which supports the latter view and that this is also a fruitful area for future scholarship. If we view instances of borrowing in Chaucer as deliberate attempts to achieve certain artistic effects or create distinctive and complex texts by drawing from a wide variety of sources, what do we find? In the cases of direct borrowing where Chaucer directly quotes famous figures or authorities (such as Theophrastus in *The Merchant's Tale*) his purpose is more clear, but what about the impact of sources from which only minor details are taken (e.g. the similarities between the old husbands in both Boccaccio's *Ameto* and *The Merchant's Tale*)? Is it not a possibility that Chaucer not only borrowed details from the *Ameto* but also made important decisions regarding characterization, plot, and theme based on his experience with Boccaccio's tale? Answering these questions leads to fresh insights relevant to existing critical discussion and new understandings of Chaucer's craftsmanship. I might be stepping too far out on a limb, considering that there is little or no evidence of whether Chaucer definitively knew certain materials and, that being true, whether he had access to a physical text or often relied on his memory, as Helen Cooper suggests in her argument for Chaucer's familiarity with the *Decameron* (9). My short experience in this field and this time period has, however, led me to believe that if one is not willing to make assumptions based on the evidence at hand then she or he will not be able to say much at all. I suggest it is very appropriate, given the amount of supporting evidence, to discuss literary possibilities based on the assumption that Chaucer had access to, whether at hand or by memory, all or the majority of the sources and analogues which exhibit strong parallels with *The Merchant's Tale*.

The chapters of my thesis will largely be arranged according to the concerns addressed in the above paragraphs. Chapter I consists of a description of the literary environment in which Chaucer worked and a discussion of the effects of Chaucer's medieval audience and his sense of himself as a poet, the ultimate goal being the establishment of the significance and meaning underlying Chaucer's use of sources in *The Merchant's Tale*. Chapter II includes a survey of the critical treatment of the sources and analogues of this same tale as well as an introduction to the material upon which Chaucer's tale is based. The remainder of the chapter covers the pitfalls of not acknowledging the importance of sources and analogues in critical discussion and offers theories regarding the artistic implications of Chaucer's use of source material in *The Merchant's Tale*. And finally, I will attempt to discern what Chaucer's use of sources in *The Merchant's Tale* can tell us about his artistic goals as a poet.

## Chapter I: Borrowing in Context

Among Chaucerians, it is common knowledge that only three of the 25 tales in *The Canterbury Tales*—the more or less original *Cook's Tale*, *Squire's Tale*, and *Sir Thopas*—have neither known sources or well-established analogues. That Chaucer borrowed his plots is a foregone conclusion. However, as noted in the introduction, attempting to discuss the significance and purpose of borrowing specifically within the *Tales* completely removed from the historical context in which Chaucer worked would likely be unproductive. Before focusing on the significance of borrowing in *The Merchant's Tale*, I will attempt to describe the environment in which working from well-established analogues was the norm. This chapter will proceed from a more general discussion of the medieval literary world to a more focused consideration of how Chaucer's artistic station in this world affected his craft. More specifically, I will address how the medieval literary environment and Chaucer's shifting sense of himself as a poet—closely tied to his fluctuating audience—influenced Chaucer's poetic aspirations and ultimately enabled and encouraged him to work within the genres of poetry that would ultimately bring us the fabliaux of *The Tales*. I believe this survey will enable readers to both better understand the conditions under which Chaucer worked and the significance of his accomplishment in creating *The Tales*.

### *The Medieval Literary Environment*

The world of *The Tales* and the medieval world itself are far removed from the present day. The result of this distance is eloquently described by Lillian M. Bisson in her preface to *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World*: “Sometimes in reading Chaucer's

*Canterbury Tales* and other medieval texts we experience a comfortingly familiar glimpse into our own origins; at others we sense a disturbing otherness as invisible barriers undercut our attempts at gaining insight” (vi). One of these barriers is the literary terminology of medieval period, and consequently, a workable understanding of this vocabulary is vital to reaching a greater understanding of the world in which Chaucer wrote. In *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, A.J. Minnis offers a comprehensive explanation of two terms significant to any discussion of medieval texts, *auctor* and *auctoritas*.

One might naturally affiliate *auctor* with the more modern *author*. In a literal sense, this is still somewhat accurate, but it is the context of the word which differs wildly from its present day equivalent. To a medieval scholar, an *auctor* is not just a writer; he (or rarely she) is an authority, someone “not merely to be read but also to be respected and believed”; furthermore, the writings of an *auctor* possessed *auctoritas*, a term with “strong connotations of veracity and sagacity” (Minnis 10). This was not, however, a term lightly applied. The most valued texts were attributed (sometimes falsely as we will see) to well-known *auctores*. If the authorship of a work was unclear, the value of that text was greatly diminished. A particularly striking (and amusing) example of this mindset in action is presented by Minnis who describes the plight of a man named Walter Map, the real twelfth century author of the *Dissuasio Valerii ad Rufinum*. I say *real* author only because the quality and popularity of his text led his contemporaries to doubt his authorship. Concerning this dispute Map wrote, “My only fault is that I am alive . . . I have no intention, however, of correcting this fault by my

death” (qtd. Minnis 12). Scholars’ reluctance to accept the possibility of *auctors* in their midst led to a circular form of thinking described by Minnis.

The work of an *auctor* was a book worth reading; a book worth reading had to be the work of an *auctor*. No ‘modern’ writer could decently be called an *auctor* in a period in which men saw themselves as dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants, i.e. the ‘ancients’. (12)

In contrast with modern conceptions of textual value, medieval scholars and writers held the *auctor* of a work as a factor of equal or greater importance than the written word itself when assessing the value of a text. One may argue that Chaucer was too far removed from the 12<sup>th</sup> century for these examples to be relevant, but the text of the *Tales* shows that the concepts of *auctors* and *auctoritas* were still alive during Chaucer’s lifetime.

References to *auctors*, both stated and implied, appear throughout *The Tales*. In the beast fable *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, Chauntecleer, a learned “cok,” justifies his concern regarding a prophetic dream to his wife by relying on men of “auctorite” and, furthermore, impresses the reader by recalling the words “of the gretteste auctor that men rede” (VII 2984-5). As Miller notes, this is not a habit unique to Chauntecleer: “In his bookish appeal to the library, Chauntecleer subjects his own present experience to certain established criteria, and in doing so he reflects a typical medieval habit of thought” (3). An equally memorable reference to “auctoritee” occurs in the first line of the Wife of Bath’s lengthy Prologue, in which she concedes that her views on marriage are not supported by the establishment:

Experience, though noon auctoritee  
Were in this world, is right ynogh for me  
To speke of wo that is in marriage. (III 1-3)

The medieval audience would have recognized the Wife’s audacity in citing her own personal experience in lieu of respected texts. These same references to learned

authorities—although not specifically identified as *auctors*—also abound in *The Merchant's Tale*. During the opening section of the tale, in which the narrator both praises and subtly attacks the institution of marriage, the narrator quotes Theophrastus as one of the “clerks” who claims that a man is much better off entrusting his life and well-being to a servant instead of, by marriage, to a wife. Furthermore, Chaucer cites such writers as Seneca, Ovid, and others in the fashion of mock high apostrophe throughout *The Merchant's Tale*.<sup>2</sup> Finally, Chaucer emphasizes the haste of Justinus’ mocking retort to January by noting that “he wolde noon auctoritee allegge” (IV 1658). These examples are important in that they illustrate the continued relevance and importance of *auctors* and *auctoritas* during Chaucer’s lifetime; however, they do not make clear the extent to which an author’s artistic expression was influenced by considerations of *auctoritas*. In *Authorship*, Minnis discusses two works written by Chaucer’s contemporary John Gower which clearly illustrate many of the unique pressures of the medieval literary environment.

Gower’s *Vox clamantis* (*The Voice of One Crying Out*) demonstrates the self-posturing and the expected humility—whether sincere or feigned—so common among medieval authors. In this poem, Gower presents himself as the beneficiary of the “guardian angel who watches over everyone [and] sometimes helps a man to understand the future by a special gift of insight” (Minnis 170). During the medieval period such a claim placed Gower in a rather precarious position, especially as a poet of some stature who was involved, like Chaucer, in the court of Richard II. Medieval scholars and Gower’s well-read audience understood that the Scriptural *auctors* were the recipients of

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<sup>2</sup> Apostrophe is a rhetorical term describing a figure of speech by which a speaker or writer suddenly stops in his discourse and turns to address pointedly some person or thing, either present or absent. In this case, the apostrophes serve a comedic role.



the greatest degree of *auctoritas*, having been inspired by the ultimate *auctor* himself, God. This suggestion of divine inspiration, paired with the fact *Vox clamantis* was composed in the form of a biblical vision, endowed Gower with a degree of *auctoritas* far beyond his station that could not be left unaddressed. In the epilogue of the *Vox Clamantis* the poet argues in favor of his lack of authority and responsibility for his text:

I have brought together these verses, which a spirit uttered in me while I was asleep: that night was burdensome. But I have not written as an authority these verses in a book; rather, I am passing on what I heard for you to read. A swelling of my own head did not cause me to write these things, but the voice of the people put them in my ear. (vii 1443-8 qtd. in Minnis 185)

Such protests of responsibility, very common in poetry and other modes of writing, followed critical decorum and preemptively shielded authors from the potentially transgressive aspects of their own work. What should be made clear from this example is that both the source material with which a medieval poet chose to work and his aspirations as an artist, i.e. how much *auctoritas* could he reasonably claim, played a crucial role in determining what forms of expression were and were not appropriate. If we look at Gower's other work, we find an author working under different and less grave expectations.

A prophet no longer, in *Confessio amantis* (*The Lover's Confession*), Gower plays the role of the sage philosopher who dispenses wisdom on love within the frame of a confession made by an aging lover to the chaplain of Venus. Now free from associations with the Scriptural *auctores*, Gower does not have to so vehemently disavow himself of responsibility for his words. Minnis concisely summarizes the differing expectations of both authorial roles:

If, in the *Vox clamantis*, Gower had to evade the possible charge of spiritual arrogance, in the *Confessio amantis* he had to evade the possible charge of levity in his choice of main subject, namely love. (187)

In treating love, Gower was following in the footsteps of the pagan writer Ovid, who, by scholarly acknowledgement of the merit of his work and the reinterpretation of his writings on love as works of moral instruction, had become a respected *auctor*. Gower could not reasonably contrast himself with the biblical authorities, but, as Minnis clearly shows, he could subtly imply that his work, like Ovid's, could also serve a didactic purpose and attain the same degree of limited authority afforded to Ovid by his contemporaries. Gower morally justifies his topic by taking pains to "praise chaste married love and . . . condemn vicious love" (qtd. in Minnis 189). Such careful posturing by Gower preemptively defended the writer from a perceived lack of seriousness and established the desired degree of authority that could not be afforded to him given the subject matter of *Vox clamantis*. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not address the notable influence of *auctoritas* within *The Tales* itself.

When Chaucer began to write what would come to form the majority of *The Tales* he was at the height of his career and fame as a poet. As a poet of certain stature, Chaucer, like Gower, could not reasonably treat subjects of questionable worth without morally justifying his work or disavowing responsibility. Certainly, the obscene content of the fabliaux (*The Miller's, Reeve's, Merchant's and Shipman's Tales*) could not be left unaddressed. The method by which Chaucer relieves himself of authorial responsibility in *The Tales* mirrors Gower's claims of divine inspiration in that both men give ultimate credit to a party outside of the author's control (we can assume audiences were not fooled). The similarities, however, do not extend beyond this point. Gower shares the

message of divine spirits; Chaucer, on the other hand, recounts the stories of “cherls” such as the Miller. In *Vox clamantis*, the value of the work is guaranteed by “the unquestionable worth of the work in leading men to salvation” (Minnis 186). In the fabliaux, the lack of value is expected and is, indeed, part of the allure of the genre. The narrative structure of *The Tales* enabled Chaucer to more responsibly experiment with such lurid tales.

All of the stories in the *Tales* are told within the frame narrative of a group of diverse men and women going on a pilgrimage to Canterbury. To help make the trip more enjoyable, the owner of the Inn where the pilgrimage begins, the “Hoste” of the group, suggests that each person should tell a tale—two on the way to Canterbury, two on the way back—and, furthermore, proposes that whoever tells the best tale “Shal have a soper at our aller cost” (I 799). All of the tales are retold from the perspective of Chaucer, Chaucer the pilgrim, that is. While Chaucer seems to have borrowed the idea of a story-collection framed by a journey from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, the poet’s master-stroke was inserting himself, a rather naïve and artistically inept version of himself, into the frame narrative. In *The General Prologue*, in which the narrator produces a portrait of each member of the pilgrimage, the narrator justifies to the reader why he must honestly report the tales of the varied pilgrims. He reminds the prospective audience that

Whoso shal telle a tale after a man,  
 He moot [must] reherce as ny [closely] as ever he kan  
 Everich a word, if it be in his charge,  
 Al speke he never so rudeliche [roughly] and large [broad],  
 Or elles he moot [may] telle his tale untrewe,  
 Or feyne thing, or find wordes newe.  
 He may nat spare, although he were his brother;  
 He moot [must] as wel seye o [one] word as another. (I 731-8)

The narrator closes his preemptive defense by asking his audience to forgive him for having “nat set folk in hir degree,” i.e. arrange the pilgrims according to their social rank; his wit, he reminds us, is “short” (I 744-6). Here, the narrator clearly communicates that no matter the depravity of the pilgrims’ tales he will honestly recite their words and seems to insinuate that, given his ignorance of social decorum, he is too stupid to do otherwise. At other points, the narrator reinforces his lack of culpability by reminding readers that some of the pilgrims belong to a sordid lot. In the prologue to *The Miller’s Tale* the narrator appropriately attributes the base fabliau to the churlish (and presently drunken) Miller and reemphasizes that he must “reherce / Hir [Their] tales all, be they bettre or werse” (I 3173-4). Rather simple but honest—and quick to claim innocence—Chaucer the pilgrim is the perfect narrator for *The Tales*.

The ultimate result of these displays of careful narrative maneuvering is distance between Chaucer and his text. This is made possible by, first, inserting a fictionalized version of the poet who is nothing more than a mere reporter and, second, holding accountable the individual pilgrims, when necessary, for the sometimes immoral content of their tales. The structure of *The Tales* separates Chaucer from the impact of his words to such a degree that one might assume the poet is satirizing the concept. This theory is reinforced by even the pilgrims’ tendency to disavow themselves of responsibility for the content of their tales. We find a prominent example of yet another link in the chain of hapless storytellers in *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. In this tale, the Nun’s Priest appears to spend quite a few lines railing against women in the vein of the antifeminist tradition, but he is quick to remind audiences that “Thise been the cokkes wordes, and nat myne” (VII 3265). Chaucer likely knew his medieval audience would find the idea of a

collection of *Tales* in which seemingly no one is responsible for their own words rather humorous. But, as with Gower, this perceived lack of responsibility also served a practical purpose; it allowed the poet to craft the kinds of stories which had not appeared in his earlier work.

The above clearly illustrates the degree to which issues of authority and responsibility played a pivotal role in poetic expression during the medieval period. Although jarring in a modern context, for Chaucer and other medieval writers, the decision to claim full responsibility was not a decision taken lightly. Too much of the wrong type of attention—still true today—could be very damaging to a writer’s career. The source material with which a poet chose to work also played a role in determining the degree of *auctoritas* an author could reasonably claim. Before attempting to discern the rationale behind Chaucer’s use of sources in the case of *The Merchant’s Tale*, we must first touch upon a few key events in Chaucer’s life that proved to be central to his sense of himself as a poet and his artistic aspirations.

#### *Chaucer’s Sense of Himself as a Poet*

In order to develop a clearer understanding of Chaucer’s conception of himself as a poet and his beliefs on the worth of poetry itself, it is necessary to understand the context and meaning of two distinct concepts used to describe poetic expression during the medieval period, “making” and “poetry.” Bisson describes the act of making as “socially contextualized and focused on technical skill” while producing poetry implied having “a serious moral purpose and an affinity with divine creativity” (24). Chaucer typically referred to himself as “makynge,” and reserved the term poet, which carried with

it a “special authority and a moral stance as well as an excellence that transcends social exigencies,” for writers from classical antiquity and the Italian poets Dante and Petrarch (Bisson 24). During his poetic career, Chaucer vacillated between both roles, and while a number of known and unknown influences undoubtedly affected his poetic aspirations, two factors appeared to play a crucial role in his sense of himself as a poet and, subsequently, his literary output: Chaucer’s audience and his understanding of the possibilities and purpose of poetry.

For Chaucer and other medieval writers the issue of audience was of great importance because, in stark contrast with the modern relationship between writer and reader, there was no general reading public. Although by 1300 literacy had advanced to the point where “everyone knew someone who could read,” poets such as Chaucer often composed with a very specific audience in mind (Orme 240). Moreover, the poetry composed was expected to be suited to a particular audience (an idea not alien to introductory composition courses). Chaucer’s literary career began in the courts “where writing [and orally performing] verse for oral delivery to divert a social elite was an expected skill for a promising courtier” (Bisson 24). Paul Strohm suggests that the poet’s most “plausible” courtly audience likely consisted of “gentlepersons in service” and “a few London intellectuals” (50). In this context, Chaucer would likely be expected to deal in both stories of romantic love as well as edificatory works such as his “Lack of Steadfastness,” a poem of “clear-cut advice to princes” (Strohm 51). One may reasonably assume that, for Chaucer, such work fell within the realm of “making” and during the 1360s and 70s he was—while not to the degree of Gower—a poet of the court. If we assume at this point that Chaucer embraced to some degree his role as a diversion

of the social elite and a maker, it is difficult to reconcile this poet with the man who eventually would give us *Troilus and Criseyde* and later the fabliaux of *The Canterbury Tales*.

It was Chaucer's journeys abroad to Italy in the years 1372 and 1378 that would introduce him to a tradition of poetry and an artistic culture that would have a profound effect on his work. It should not be surprising that Chaucer's travels to Italy were a transformative experience; England and Italy were by no means on equal footing among European nations. Pearsall colorfully describes the great disparity between the two countries:

Italy was the heart of Europe, physical witness to the grandeurs of imperial Rome and the origins of the Christian church, home of numerous kingdoms, dukedoms and principalities, several of them individually richer than England . . . England, from an Italian point of view, was as remote and poor and backward as it had been during the days of the Roman Empire, and Chaucer must have felt it to be so. (103)

From Chaucer's point of view, England's treatment of poets would have likely seemed backwards as well. In England, service in court was what a poet aspired to. In Italy, the poet was in the service of "neither court nor church" and held a "role in the community . . . in which he spoke as a philosopher and as a representative of the wisdom of the past" (Pearsall 103-104). And while at this point Chaucer had surely heard of the famous Italian poets such as Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, it wasn't until his travels that he was presented with the opportunity to meaningfully experience their work. When Chaucer returned to England the influence of specific Italian texts immediately began to appear in his work. One text he brought back to England after his second trip to Italy, a copy of Boccaccio's *Teseida*, was used in *Anelida and Arcite*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Knight's Tale* (Pearsall 118).

In all of these works, Chaucer looked to Italian poets, especially Boccaccio, for inspiration, but *Troilus and Criseyde*, composed roughly over a five year span from 1381 to 1386, is unique in that it was composed at the height of his career and public fame as a poet. We know by the nature of the source material that Chaucer worked with, Boccaccio's *Filostrato* (1338), that Chaucer had every intention of producing a poem unlike his past efforts. The *Filostrato*, which itself was based upon a previous retelling of the same event, drastically transforms the classical love story of Troilus and Criseyde set during the Trojan War. If Chaucer had once believed that he was a maker, his decision to re-imagine one of the works of his favorite poet reveals *Troilus* as one of his more prominent attempts at high poetry. His aspirations are made clear by the command he gives his "bok" in the closing lines of the poem:

And kis the steppes, where as thow seest pace  
Virgile, Ovide, Omer, Lucan, and Stace. (V 1791-2)

Chaucer knows, given the epic nature of his poem, that he cannot reasonably attribute his poem to its much nearer source of inspiration, Boccaccio and the other Italian poets. The highest reaches of poetic expression had to at least figuratively stem from the work of the ancient *auctors*. Two other well-known cases of writers sometimes stretching the truth to link their works with a superior past can be found in the treatment of the King Arthur Legend.

Recognizing that medieval readers expected their storytellers to draw on the works of *auctors*, both Geoffrey of Monmouth (d. 1155) and Thomas Malory (d. 1471) took pains to remind readers that their work had its basis in some existing text. In fact, Geoffrey goes so far as to claim he is translating a book that does not exist in order to lend gravitas to his invention of the King Arthur legend. Referring to himself in the third



person, Geoffrey tells his “most noble consul” that he will “be silent” regarding Mordred’s treachery. However, he will nonetheless

. . . briefly relate what *he found in the British book above mentioned*, and heard from that most learned historian, Walter, archdeacon of Oxford, concerning the wars which this renowned king, upon his return to Britain after this victory, waged against his nephew. (11.1, emphasis added)

Likewise, Malory repeatedly cites the Vulgate Cycle – which actually exists – calling it the French Book; variations of the phrase “for as the French book saith” occur throughout his massive work (*Le Morte Darthur*). Such sources, whether imagined or real, were necessary for imbuing works with a sense of history and authority that made them worth a reader’s time.

During the composition and following the completion of *Troilus*, perhaps more than at any other point in his career, Chaucer felt himself a part of the “tradition of authority” that reached backwards to the literary giants. However, while Chaucer’s sense of himself as a poet had undergone a significant transformation following his encounter with the Italian poets, his audience still largely remained a courtly Westminster-London group composed of gentlepersons and a growing circle of both literary acquaintances such as John Clanvowe, John Gower, Thomas Usk, and others (Strohm 63). Although Chaucer’s work after his journeys to Italy had grander ambitions, *Troilus* was still very much a work adapted to the needs of a specialized audience. Chaucer speaks of love in *Troilus* but it is no coincidence that modern readers do not encounter the comparatively crude humor of the fabliaux. A change in location and the dispersal of his established London audience during the late 1380s would encourage Chaucer to turn away from the pursuit of high poetry which had culminated in *Troilus*.

In 1386, Chaucer left London and withdrew to Kent. During his absence from the literary environment in which he rose to fame, he would begin to compose *The Canterbury Tales*. Removed from his courtly audience, Chaucer now worked under a very different set of expectations. Namely, he wrote without the expectation of eventually orally performing his poetry in front of a refined audience. This enabled him to work in genres that would have otherwise been entirely inappropriate at other points in his career. And of the many modes of poetry that appear in *The Tales*, the fabliaux stand as the most distant from Chaucer's previous work and the work of his English contemporaries. I believe that Pearsall is not overstating the issue when he describes the shocking nature of Chaucer's most famous fabliaux, *The Miller's Tale*: "To see such a poem anew in the context of late-fourteenth-century English literary culture is to recognize a miracle" (239). However, the loss of his courtly audience does not mean Chaucer was writing without an audience in mind.

The correspondence, in the form of short poetry, between Chaucer and his diminished band of literary acquaintances and friends offers clues as to the poet's audience in the later stages of his life. These verse letters, although amicable in nature, were not light reading and required of their readers "a nimble response to changing tone, an ability to hear opposed voices and to sustain mixed attitudes, and a readiness to follow complex textual biography"—especially, the textual biography of Chaucer (Strohm 72). The most prominent example of anticipated audience awareness of Chaucer's work, *The Tales* in this case, appears in "Lenvoy De Chaucer A Bukton." In this poem treating marriage, Chaucer asks his "maister Bukton" to read the "Wyf of Bathe" for more insight

into the matter (“Bukton” 654).<sup>3</sup> This advice is offered in jest (or not) but it tells us something of the relationship between Chaucer and his close readers. In other words, Bukton is representative of an audience of “lettered London men, to be appropriately scandalized and delighted by the Wife of Bath and the fabliaux” (Pearsall 232). Chaucer was clearly writing, to some degree, for a close circle of friends with a breadth of knowledge attuned to his style of writing and for whom the fabliaux were appropriate.

It is also worth emphasizing that at this point in his career, as made clear by the correspondences and the circulation of *The Tales*, Chaucer was writing primarily for an audience of readers. The complex and self-referential structure of the frame narrative would likely be ill-suited to oral delivery, and further evidence of a reading audience is provided by the pilgrim narrator of *The Tales*. Returning again to the prologue of *The Miller’s Tale*, we find the narrator offering the following advice to those who wish to not hear the crude words of the Miller and the Reeve:

Turne over the leef, and chese another tale;  
 Fro he shal finde ynowe, grete and smale,  
 Of storial [historical] thing that toucheth gentillesse,  
 And eek [also] moralitee and holiness.  
 Blameth nat me if that ye chese amis. (I 1377-81)

In this instance, the narrator’s suggestion to “Turne over the leef” is both figurative and literal. Indeed, these lines acknowledge the power of choice only possessed by an audience of contemporary and future readers interacting with a physical text. We can also see something of Chaucer’s apparent decision to draw back from the height of his poetic aspirations in *Troilus* in this statement. Writing as a “poet” in the mold of the Italian masters, Chaucer could not have appropriately composed such a motley collection of

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<sup>3</sup> *The Tales* were not finished by the time of Chaucer’s death, but individual tales did circulate among the writer’s literary circle.

tales that touched upon morality and ribaldry. Indeed, Chaucer's favorite poet Boccaccio received a reminder to mind the needs of his audience from his poetic predecessor Petrarch regarding his own assortment of tales, the *Decameron*, which, at times, inclined toward obscenity (Strohm 48). The general makeup of *The Tales* shows us that to some degree Chaucer was taking advantage of the new artistic freedoms afforded to him by a change in scenery and a diminished audience.

But did these same freedoms influence Chaucer's use of source material? In the case of *Troilus* and other work written after Chaucer's journeys to *Italy*, it seems clear that Chaucer's choice of source material was partially driven by his desire to write work befitting a "poet" not a "maker." The often very simplistic tales believed to have served as the source of Chaucer's own fabliaux, to state the obvious, possessed no *auctoritas*. If not respectable, however, they were recognizable. The short poems sent to Bukton and others show us that Chaucer, if we assume that he wrote with such readers in mind, anticipated an urbane and knowledgeable audience. Such an audience would also likely be familiar with the most basic of the fabliaux which were short enough to be casually performed or easily circulated via manuscript. I believe, as Pearsall presumes, that the lettered London men were likely delighted by the ribaldry of the fabliaux, but I would add that they were delighted all the more by the opportunity to revisit a familiar tale that had been radically transformed by Chaucer's hand.

Borrowing and imitation were ubiquitous during the medieval period, but that does not render all instances of the practice indistinguishable or remove the author from the process. Chaucer's decision to use specific sources in certain tales may have more to do with his artistic desires and considerations of audience than his being a product of his

environment. Future scholarship which questions the assumptions regarding the literary practice of borrowing will bring further insight into the relationship between medieval writers and their source material. W.A. Davenport puts forward a similar idea when he notes that “the medieval poet is seldom inventing a story, but looking for a way of restating it to us interestingly and profitably” (8). Here, Davenport is referring to the function of the prologues in accomplishing this task, but I believe the same thing happens within the tales themselves, such as in *The Merchant’s Tale* where we see Chaucer combine traditionally separate genres and themes to create something both old and new. This idea will be treated in more detail in the following chapter.

**Chapter 2: Borrowing in *The Merchant's Tale***

In this chapter, I survey the major scholarship on the sources and analogues of *The Merchant's Tale* and lay the foundation for a more detailed discussion of the use of sources in Chaucer's tale. First, however, the reader will benefit from a brief summary of the tale itself.

For his tale, the Merchant offers the story of January, a lecherous man of sixty years who decides he must take a wife, even at his advanced age, because “wedlok is so esy and so clene / That in this world it is paradys” (IV 1264-5). His friends Placebo and Justinus (their Latin names evoke “I shall please” and “the just one” respectively) offer conflicting counsel, but January, whose mind is already set, rejects Justinus' advice to not marry at an advanced age. January finds the woman he wants to marry, May, and the two are quickly wed during an elaborate marriage ceremony. It is during this same ceremony that January's servant Damyan, struck by Venus' brand, becomes obsessed with May. Despite January's belief in his ability to fulfill his husbandly duties, the narrator makes it clear that May does not care for January's “pleying” (IV 1854). Damyan, still entranced by May, eventually makes his feelings known by a secret letter to which May responds favorably. After some time passes, January becomes blind and suddenly very jealous, keeping a “hand on hire alway” (IV 2091). Utterly forlorn, May and Damyan eventually devise a plan to meet in January's private garden. While walking in the garden, May climbs into a pear tree in which Damyan is waiting and the two consummate their love. Witness to this deception, the god Pluto decides to intervene and restore January's sight, but his wife Proserpina makes sure that May is able to counter January's accusations of infidelity. The tale ends with January convinced (by May) that sex in the pear tree was

only an optical illusion caused by regaining his eyesight and that his wife was simply wrestling with a man in a tree only because she believed that it would cure him of his blindness.

*The Merchant's Tale in Source and Analogue Study:*

*The Merchant's Tale* serves as an ideal choice for investigating the artistic implications of Chaucer's use of varied sources due to the debate surrounding the tale's "failure of decorum" and the tale's mixing of "genre, styles, voices, tones, of pagan and Christian elements, and narrative elements" which has led critics to question its status as a fabliau, among other issues (Tavormina 885). I will survey the discussion of *The Merchant's Tale* and potential sources and analogues in *Sources and Analogues of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (ed. Bryan and Dempster), *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux* (ed. Benson and Andersson) and Benson's *Riverside Chaucer* before focusing on what is the most recent and relevant scholarship on the subject, N.S. Thompson's introductory note to *The Merchant's Tale*, accompanied by new translations of likely sources and analogues, in the second volume of *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*. My purpose in starting with Bryan and Dempster's collection (first published 70 years ago) before moving onward to more contemporary works is two-fold: I plan to both note important advancements in the field of source and analogue study and discuss how past research obstacles (e.g. the lack of English translations of foreign works) may have affected scholarly criticism of *The Merchant's Tale*.

At the time of its publication (1941) *Sources and Analogues* was a substantial accomplishment. Prior to Bryan and Dempster's edition, the most comparable text, the

Chaucer Society's *Original and Analogues* (already over 50 years old at this point), covered the sources and analogues of only thirteen of the tales. Suddenly, Chaucerians had at their disposal a text which treated all twenty-four of the tales in addition to the general framework and some of the more substantial prologues. The purpose of the volume is made clear in the preface:

To present in so far as possible the sources of the *Canterbury Tales* as Chaucer knew these sources or, where the direct sources are not now known, to present the closest known analogues in the form in which Chaucer presumably may have been acquainted with them. (Bryan vii)

In the case of *The Merchant's Tale*, the sources and analogues are divided into three somewhat overlapping portions: the opening of the tale to January's marriage, the account of the relations of an old husband and a young wife, and the story of the blind husband and the fruit tree (Dempster 333). Some of the more important sources, covered in more detail later in this thesis, include Deschamps' *Le Miroir De Mariage*, Albertano of Brescia's *Liber consolationis et consilii*, and *Il Novellino*; notably, there is no mention of any material from Boccaccio's *Decameron*.<sup>4</sup>

Given that none of these sources are English texts, the editors and contributors made efforts to, where needed, provide readers with footnotes and brief marginal summaries to ensure the volume's value as a tool for study. Unfortunately for the modern reader the introductory notes are indeed brief. In *The Merchant's Tale* section a scant few paragraphs stand between the prospective reader and the original, untranslated text. However, of most concern are the translations in the margins which Benson and Andersson note are "no help to the beginning student and often of limited help even to

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<sup>4</sup> The other texts in this section are analogues clearly not linked to Chaucer's tale.



the scholar” (ix). Left unmentioned by Benson is exactly how limited these marginal translations can be. An example makes this abundantly clear.

Unless the prospective reader understands Italian, he or she will encounter a very different text in Bryan and Dempster’s edition. When compared to Judith Serafini-Sauli’s 1985 translation of Boccaccio’s *Ameto*—more accurately referred to as *La commedia delle ninfe fiorentine*—and N.S. Thompson’s translation of this same text in *Sources and Analogues* (2005), the marginal translations are revealed as woefully lacking in narrative detail. In the older *Sources and Analogues*, what must be approximately lines 59-63<sup>5</sup> of the *Comedia* are translated by Dempster as follows:

In bed he takes me in his arms and weighs unpleasantly upon my neck,  
kisses me, moves his trembling hand to every part of my body (340).

By comparison, Serafini-Sauli’s treatment of the same lines is decidedly more detailed:

. . . lying in the soft bed he gathered me in his arms, and with unpleasant weight he pressed my white neck. And when with his fetid mouth, he had not kissed, but driveled over mine many times, he touched my eager fruits with trembling hands, and from there he moved to each part of my ill-fated body . . . (90)

Finally, N.S. Thompson’s 2005 translation offers an even more detailed translation of the original text:

As we lie in the soft bed, he takes me in his arms and weighs unpleasantly on my pure white neck. And after not so much as kissing me many times with his stinking mouth as slobbering over mine, he touches my pretty breasts with his trembling hands, and then goes over every part of my unfortunate body . . . (504)

Whether the strikingly minimalist translation in the earlier volume is due to a 1940s sense of propriety or a lack of page space (likely a combination of both), Dempster’s marginal

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<sup>5</sup> The Italian text of the *Ameto* included in *Sources and Analogues* (2005) is used for all references. No line numbers are provided in Bryan and Dempster’s edition and there is no clear indication, other than physical proximity, as to what lines the marginal translations refer.

translation of the *Comedia* contains little of the detail actually present in the tale. This comparison is important because it underscores the fact that a complete English translation of the *Comedia* did not appear until Serafini-Sauli's translation of the text in 1985, and not in a source and analogue anthology until 2005! Undoubtedly, Bryan and Dempster's *Sources and Analogues* has served, and will likely continue to serve, as a valuable resource for Chaucerians but, significantly, only for the past few years has the aspiring Chaucer scholar had access to much more navigable translations of, specifically, the potential sources and analogues of *The Merchant's Tale*.

It was not until the publication of Benson and Andersson's *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux* that readers had access to complete English translations of some of the sources and analogues of the fabliaux. And although many of the texts appeared in Bryan and Dempster's volume, there are some notable additions. In the section devoted to *The Merchant's Tale*, many texts are included "not because they are analogues to Chaucer's specific tales but because they illustrate the general nature of his chosen genre, the fabliau" (Benson and Andersson x). Likewise, in this section the reader finds works that appear before Chaucer's time (the late twelfth century) and well after his death (the fifteenth century) in languages Chaucer rarely worked with, such as German and Anglo-Norman. Tales from the *Decameron* are still missing from the various sections but, unlike in the earlier *Sources and Analogues*, Boccaccio's collection is not completely ignored. In the preface to *Literary Context*, Benson and Andersson note that "analogues" from the *Decameron*, readily available in many translations and editions, have been excluded (x). The acknowledgement of the *Decameron* demonstrates the growing importance of this collection to studies of Chaucer. Given that we know, however, that

Benson will later argue that there is no evidence that Chaucer knew the *Decameron*, it is not surprising that all the materials from Boccaccio's text are clearly designated as analogues.

In the following years, Miller's *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds* would appear with the same goal of presenting, often by way of translation, sources and analogues in a more accessible format. Miller avoids, perhaps wisely, attempting to ascertain which sources or analogues are connected to individual tales and, instead, draws materials from "works Chaucer is known to have used, as well as from works representing significant medieval attitudes toward matters with which he, like many other authors of his day, concerned himself" (vii). This leads us to the latest edition of the *Riverside Chaucer* (1987) which, although not dedicated to the study of sources and analogues, still serves as the authoritative Chaucerian text. The majority of the discussion regarding sources and analogues takes place in the Explanatory Notes, but in the introduction to *The Tales* proper Benson often notes the sources of individual tales.

In his introduction to *The Merchant's Tale*, Benson makes an observation which, due to the growing acceptance among scholars of *The Canterbury Tales*' relationship with the *Decameron*, is beginning to show its age. Benson notes that though the pear tree episode is common in fabliaux, no exact source for Chaucer's version has been identified and that he may have drawn on an orally transmitted version. It is these types of statements, similar in vein to Benson's claim that there is no definitive evidence that Chaucer knew the *Decameron* (a technically accurate, but still misleading statement), that are becoming more and more rare in Chaucerian criticism. This is primarily due to the expansion of scholarship on the topic but also possibly due to a more prevalent

willingness to accept the indebtedness of *The Tales* to some degree to the *Decameron*. Nevertheless, while it remains true that no exact source for *The Merchant's Tale* has been found, this should not discourage us from considering the importance or influence of other sources potentially available to Chaucer; there is now enough evidence that we can now support *known* material as sources of borrowing and inspiration. A survey of critical evidence will help make the strength of this position clear.

The connection between *The Merchant's Tale* and certain material—namely, *Le Miroir De Mariage* and Albertano of Brescia's *Liber consolationis et consilii*—has been established since the publication of *Sources and Analogues* (1941) and the presence of direct verbal parallels makes Chaucer's use of these sources almost certain. In other words, any scholar basing arguments upon the poet's knowledge of these texts would have the support of a vast body of scholarship. However, Chaucer's familiarity with and/or possession of the *Decameron* has long been a controversial topic. Furthermore, two stories from Boccaccio's collection, *Decameron* II, 10 and *Decameron* VII, 9, have not traditionally been viewed as sources of *The Merchant's Tale*. The arguments against Chaucer's knowledge of the *Decameron* have generally rested on a number of similar claims. Peter Beidler's summary of these arguments, though lengthy, addresses almost all of the major concerns of both parties:

[Negative arguments] Chaucer could have come across a copy of the *Decameron* in England; he never mentions the *Decameron* in any of his writings; he has not borrowed any of his tales directly from the one hundred tales of Boccaccio. [Counter arguments] Chaucer might well have heard of the *Decameron*, since it was written by the man from whom he borrowed more than he borrowed from any other writer, and he might well have availed himself of a copy on one of his diplomatic journeys to Italy; Chaucer fails to mention many of his sources for the *Knight's Tale*, or Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, his source for *Troilus and Criseyde*, and so we

should not attach any particular significance to his failure to mention Boccaccio's *Decameron*. . . (266)

The counter arguments offered by Beidler have become stronger and more widely accepted over time. The chance that Chaucer did not hear about or seek out the monumental work of his favorite poet, which had been completed almost 20 years before Chaucer first arrived in Italy, has rightfully been established by critics as small. Likewise, scholarship pertaining to the relationship between *auctoritas* and poetic expression during the medieval period—and the distinction between “making” and “poetry”—has helped modern readers understand why Chaucer would be reticent to honestly reference his true sources. In light of these developments, it is still difficult to argue for an individual tale serving as a near or direct source for one of Chaucer's tales. However, the most striking parallel between both collections is not any specific instances of direct borrowing by Chaucer but the similarity of the narrative frames.

As noted in the previous chapter, the pilgrimage frame of *The Tales* is probably the most innovative aspect of the work, and critics have generally rejected the *Decameron* as a model for the frame on the grounds that a collection of stories told by a “homogenous group” of aristocrats travelling from villa to villa sharing tales at each stop is too dissimilar from the rather chaotic storytelling which takes place amongst a group of pilgrims belonging to a “wide range of social levels, ages, and occupations” (L. Benson 4). However, few sources for the frame have been identified and those that have been suggested as potential models have not held up well under critical scrutiny. In the “Literary Framework of The Tales” chapter in *Sources and Analogues* (1941), R.A. Pratt and Karl Young offer the *Novelle* of Giovannie Sercambi, “an imitator of the *Decameron*,” based primarily on the common arguments noted above and the evidence

that Sercambi's tales are told by a single fictional narrator, like Chaucer the pilgrim, accompanying a group on a journey through Italy (20). The reasoning behind this choice is countered rather devastatingly by Helen Cooper:

They [Pratt and Young] therefore proposed as Chaucer's model [a text] which Chaucer likewise does not mention, from which he borrows no stories directly, and which was barely known in Italy (there is only one surviving manuscript), let alone England . . . (2)

The *Novelle* eventually disappeared from the critical conversation when research revealed that the work was composed sometime shortly after Chaucer's death in the early 1400s (Cooper 2). These turns of events have left no work other than the *Decameron* as the most plausible source of inspiration. In the first volume of the updated *Sources and Analogues*, Cooper offers five strong parallels between Chaucer's and Boccaccio's collections which, in her words, leave "deliberate imitation, not coincidence" as the only reasonable explanation (8). It is not necessary to cover this evidence in detail, but I will touch on one point made by Cooper and others about the lack of direct sources found in *The Tales*.

Many critics have considered the role of what has been referred to by some scholars as "memorial borrowing" (McGrady 12). Proponents of the theory suggest that Chaucer encountered Boccaccio's text while in Italy (or heard about the collection from an Italian Merchant) but, because of the cost of the volume or various other reasons, was unable to procure a copy for himself (Cooper 8). Consequently, during his work on *The Tales*, Chaucer had to rely on his memories of Boccaccio's collection to supplement those sources that were available to him in England. This theory effectively accounts for the small number of direct verbal parallels between the texts and the absence of direct sources in the *Decameron*, but it also has its weaknesses, namely, the passage of time

between Chaucer's recorded travels in Italy (1372 and 1378) and the commencement of work on *The Tales* proper (approximately 1387). Given this expanse of time, Donald McGrady aptly notes that "the types of details echoed by Chaucer from the *Decameron* are not at all likely to have remained in his recollection over a period of one or two decades" (13). Indeed, in light of the number of close similarities in terms of narrative structure and imagery catalogued in both Beidler's and McGrady's respective work on the connections between *The Merchant's Tale* and *The Miller's Tale*, it is hard to imagine that Chaucer could translate—literally—such minute details in parallel fashion without at least a partial copy of the *Decameron* at hand. Continuing this line of thought, I believe the lack of direct or near sources, as is the case with *The Merchant's Tale*, suggests something about Chaucer's use of sources within *The Tales* and elsewhere. Although the poet's French contemporary Eustache Deschamps praised him as "grant translateur," Chaucer rarely worked as a strict translator (qtd. Davenport 6). Even with a physical copy of Boccaccio's *Filostrato* (the source of *Troilus*) at hand, he still cut large sections of the original story, reinterpreted characters, and amplified the story with his characteristic use of apostrophe. His treatment of source material demonstrates that he was not interested in simply rehearsing other writers' work. The lack of direct parallels between the *Decameron* II, 10 and *Decameron* VII, 9 and *The Merchant's Tale* may be an indication not of "memorial borrowing" but of Chaucer's desire to craft a tale that differentiated itself from other close analogues. Before discussing this idea in detail, a brief discussion of the most recent criticism found in *Sources and Analogues* II and a survey of the sources and analogues believed to be available to Chaucer while composing *The Merchant's Tale* will be necessary.

Robert M. Correale and Mary Hamel's *Sources and Analogues of The Canterbury Tales* represents the culmination of a trend in Chaucerian scholarship. As noted above, for many years critics have made arguments regarding the clear connection between *The Tales* and Boccaccio's *Decameron*, but it was not until the publication of Volume I of the updated *Sources and Analogues* (2002) that tales from the *Decameron* were included in an authoritative anthology of the sources and analogues of *The Tales*. The presence of the *Decameron* is significant enough that Correale makes a note of its inclusion in the preface:

Helen Cooper's assertion that Boccaccio's *Decameron* is the one text "that can stake a primary claim to being Chaucer's model for the Tales" represents a major shift of opinion among a number of scholars who are now willing to credit the influence of this work on *The Canterbury Tales*. . . (vii)

Where before the emphasis often fell on the differences between *The Tales* and the *Decameron*, and the subsequent artistic distance between the texts, now, many scholars seem more interested in and open to the possibility of Chaucer being inspired by or borrowing from the *Decameron*. The second volume of *Sources and Analogues*, for example, includes two tales from the *Decameron* as potential analogues of Chaucer's tale as well as other previously established material. The author of the chapter dedicated to *The Merchant's Tale*, N.S. Thompson, arranges these sources according to three different categories based on the evidence of borrowing: advice on marriage, description of aged husband and young wife, and narratives of the pear tree. These categories roughly align with the three sections scholars have identified in *The Merchant's Tale*: January's deliberation on marriage (IV 1245-1688), January's wedding to the understanding reached by May and Damyan (IV 1689-2020), and the deception story (IV 2021-2418).



How the categories relate to the three distinct sections noted above is, for the most part, self-evident. The materials included within the “advice on marriage” category inform January’s deliberation on marriage. The materials included in the “description of aged husband and young wife” primarily appear in the second section and, finally, many of the strongest connections between the “narratives of the pear tree” material and *The Merchant’s Tale* appear during the deception.

However, as is almost always the case with categorization, labels can sometimes be limiting and in this case, the categories utilized by Thompson may encourage readers to overlook the possibility of sources influencing action beyond the sphere of their group, e.g. material labeled as “description of aged husband and young wife” influencing the events of the deception proper. In the following pages, I will organize the overview of sources according to Thompson’s categories, but during the discussion of borrowing within *The Merchant’s Tale*, I will specifically note potential connections that do not adhere to the established boundaries.<sup>6</sup>

(1) Advice on Marriage:

The didactic materials which inform the first section of *The Merchant’s Tale* remind us that Chaucer drew not only upon popular stories, but also works of edification. This is to be expected, as Bisson summarizes the general expectations of literature in the Middle Ages: “Besides being entertaining the late medieval composer of literary texts also was expected to produce morally edifying works that would educate the audience” (25). One such work was *Le Miroir de Mariage*, a long poem on marriage written in French by Chaucer’s contemporary Eustache Deschamps. Another is Albertano of

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<sup>6</sup> All citations from sources and analogues are from the section of *The Merchant’s Tale* in *Sources and Analogues* (2005)

Brescia's thirteenth century Latin work *Liber consolationis et consilii*. While both of these texts include details found in Chaucer's tale—Albertano's work serves as the source for Chaucer's *Melibee*—scholars generally agree that Deschamps' poem is the direct source of or the inspiration for the opening marriage deliberations—commonly referred to as the “marriage encomium” (1267-1392)—as well as the larger discussion of the pros and cons of marriage that takes place between January's brethren (1263-1579) (Tavormina 885; Thompson 482).<sup>7</sup>

In Deschamps' allegorical, almost instructional poem, Free Will, who is of marriageable age, receives advice from his False Friends—Desire, Folly, Servitude, and Deceit—who argue for marriage, and from Repository of Learning, “a bookish and clerical figure,” who argues against it (Thompson 481).<sup>8</sup> In support of their argument, the False Friends reference a list of virtuous biblical women including Rebecca, Judith, Abigail, and Esther. These same women are mentioned in the marriage *encomium*.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast with the far reaching influence of the *Miroir*, lines 1296-1306 have long been known as an example of direct borrowing from St. Jerome's “Letter against Jovinian,” an antifeminist text well-known among medievalists. In this letter, St. Jerome “defends the superiority of virginity to wedlock” and also includes a quotation for an otherwise lost book known as the “Book on Marriage” which Jerome attributes to Theophrastus (Thompson 482). Only Theophrastus is directly referenced in *The Merchant's Tale* (he appears alongside Jerome in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*) and, as yet another example of the significance attributed to writings of *auctors*, Thompson notes

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<sup>7</sup> Encomium, a rhetorical term, is an oratory in praise of person or thing. The term awkwardly applies to the opening portion of the tale given that the praise of marriage is not universal.

<sup>8</sup> I will generally use the English equivalent, as supplied by Thompson, of the original French.

<sup>9</sup> This same listing of women is also found in Albertano's *Liber consolationis et consilii*.

that Jerome's letter "was extremely popular as a source of quotation, especially the passage attributed to Theophrastus" (482). The final clear case of borrowing occurs during the marriage ceremony of January and May. The priest's counsel—"be lyk Sarrah and Rebekke/ In wisdom and in trouthe or marriage"—is found in the Marriage Service of the *Sarum Manual* (IV 1704-5). Other sources such as Jehan Le Fèvre's *Les Lamentations de Matheolus* and the *Roman de la Rose* that exhibit less evidence of a direct connection to the marriage debate will not be discussed here but should still be, wisely noted by Thompson, "counted as general influences on Chaucer's tale" (482).

(2) Description of an aged husband and young wife:

Starting in this section, we begin to see the influence of sources that, in terms of certain aspects of the plot and narrative structure, are analogous to *The Merchant's Tale*. The first of these tales is Boccaccio's *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, an allegory in which seven nymphs relate their histories of love out of wedlock. One of these nymphs, Agape, recounts her repulsive sexual experiences with her much older husband who—to put it lightly—has issues performing (this is the same source which received a rather conservative translation in the 1941 volume of *Sources and Analogues*). The most apparent ties between the tales involve parallels in concrete imagery, namely the description of the husband's physical features and the description of the sex itself. Thompson also includes Boccaccio's *Decameron* II, 10, the tale of Riccardo, his young wife, and the pirate Paganino from whom the wife receives long desired pleasure, as a source for further developing the character of January, specifically because it contains an old man willfully searching for a younger wife, the use of restorative potions to regain strength, and frequent declarations of love.

### (3) The Pear Tree Story

In this section, Thompson includes the sources which have been described as forming the “fabliau nucleus” of *The Merchant’s Tale*, adultery in the pear tree (Benson and Andersson 203). One of the tales likely available to Chaucer was something like a tale included in an Italian collection known as *Il novellino*, in which God and St. Peter, not Pluto and Proserpina, witness the deception in the pear tree. At Peter’s behest, God agrees to restore the husband’s sight but tells Peter that the woman will surely find an excuse. Subsequently, it is the excuse itself and not the sexual act that is used to vilify women. In the second potential source, a Latin fable, the classical gods Jupiter and Venus intervene to save the blind husband but are otherwise silent. Finally, Thompson lists *Decameron* VII, 9, Boccaccio’s own version of the pear tree story, not as a near source but as a model for how to “create a more richly elaborated narrative than any other similar story that had previously appeared” (485). This modeling theory is supported by the significant number of notable differences between *Decameron* VII, 9 and *The Merchant’s Tale*. In Boccaccio’s version the husband is not blind and the young wife, Lidia, is required by her lover Pirro to accomplish a number of tasks that prove her love to him. In this version, the sexual act between the young lovers, performed on the ground while the husband is in the tree, is explained away as an effect of a magical tree which causes visual illusions.

#### *The Artistic Implications of Borrowing in The Merchant’s Tale*

Before discussing Chaucer’s use and the importance of source material in *The Merchant’s Tale* in detail, it may be helpful to retrace the winding steps that have taken

us to this point. Chapter I established the significance of the medieval understanding of *auctor* and *auctoritas* during the medieval literary period and, subsequently, traced Chaucer's poetic flirtations with the tradition of authority while a court poet and noted the literary freedoms which came with the loss of this position. The opening section of this chapter traced the shifting presentation of *The Merchant's Tale* in source and analogue study and established the strong likelihood of Chaucer's knowledge of and familiarity with the *Decameron*. Furthermore, it made clear the transformation of source and analogue study from a branch of criticism often inaccessible to students and scholars to a still growing (and more valued) field of study with new and easily obtainable resources available to initiate and expert alike. This increase in material, significantly, is largely due to a general acceptance of a poet more indebted to his contemporaries and predecessors than previously believed. I like to think that as a change of literary scenery both enabled and encouraged to Chaucer to write in new ways, a shift in critical opinion has enabled critics to read his work in innovative ways. In the following pages, I will address the hitherto often-overlooked importance of borrowing in the field of Chaucer studies and demonstrate how criticism of *The Merchant's Tale* benefits from a willingness to consider the role and importance of Chaucer's sources. Finally, a discussion of the artistic implications of borrowing and inspiration in Chaucer's tale, and what these may tell us about Chaucer's aspirations as poet, will close the chapter.

As noted in the introduction, the majority of the writing concerned with the sources and analogues of individual tales has attempted to determine the correct amount of critical weight that critics can put behind statements designating certain material as a near or direct source of Chaucer's tales. When the focus of critical attention is elsewhere

(i.e. a purely textual analysis or a specific theoretical approach), the sources which are known to be sources or analogues of *The Merchant's Tale* are rarely mentioned. Given the prevalence of borrowing during the medieval period and within *The Tales* itself, it seems advantageous to at least consider the role of known sources when critically discussing *The Tales*. That a number of both new and old arguments suffer from the failure to address the roles and importance of Chaucer's sources stresses this point.

One example of potential oversight occurs within E. Talbot Donaldson's contribution to the longstanding debate surrounding the tone of *The Merchant's Tale*. In support of his position that the tale is a "grim thing," he proposes that Chaucer "took some trouble" to stimulate readers' sympathy by depicting the events of the wedding night through the eyes of May rather than January (Donaldson 43). Attempts to measure the degree of authorial intention at this moment become decidedly more complex when one considers the potential role of the *Comedia* in Chaucer's tale.

Indeed, the strongest series of parallels between *The Merchant's Tale* and Boccaccio's tale appears during the depiction of the sexual act. The men are described by both May and Agape as having slack skin that shakes about their necks and each a rough beard that, in the *Comedia*, is "as sharp as the quill of a porcupine" and, in *The Merchant's Tale*, is "Lyk to the skyn of houndfyssh, sharp as brere [a briar]" (Thompson 504; IV 1825). Notably, Boccaccio's tale is the only version, among the analogues known to have been composed before *The Tales*, which describes the sexual act from the female point of view. The strong parallels in imagery and narrative structure make a strong case for the indebtedness of this part of *The Merchant's Tale* to Boccaccio's text. And while one might assume that Chaucer's potential decision to model his tale after the

*Comedia* somehow robs the event of its artistic purpose, I believe that Donaldson's observation may very well be accurate and that a comparison of the treatment of both Agape and May could actually strengthen his point. Both versions of the wedding night are repulsive, but in Boccaccio's tale we never see the "ugly" side of Agape and her husband is even more reprehensible than January. After encountering Boccaccio's rather flat characters, Chaucer may have been inspired to craft a more complex tale in which no party is blameless. Even today, during a more liberal period of source and analogue study, articles continue to appear which are limited by their exclusively textual focus.

In Alcuin Blamires' 2010 article "May in January's Tree; Genealogical Configuration in the *Merchant's Tale*," we find another much more recent example. Blamires questions why Chaucer would have chosen January's pear tree as a site for sexual coupling and suggests that we should consider the possibility of a genealogical pear tree that "reflects the genealogical space that Damyan and May appropriate when they climb into it" (107). Following a brief survey of "family tree symbolism" in medieval literature and Chaucer's works, he firmly states that "nowhere does the metaphor of the genealogical tree, its fruit, and the motif of heredity more insistently haunt Chaucer's writing than in the *Merchant's Tale*" (Blamires 107). Blamires does not, however, address the influence of known sources and analogues relevant to this portion of the tale, and the potential genealogical symbolism of the pear tree becomes suspect when one takes into account that in every critically established source relevant to this portion of the tale the infamous tree is specifically identified as a *pear tree*; in fact, Thompson goes so far as to group these tales under the heading of "Narratives of the Pear Tree" (479). Much is made of the fruit bearing tree in Blamires' argument; he suggests

the fruit may be “Damyan himself, or Damyan’s phallus” but his argument does not address the possibility that the pear tree was simply a detail adopted from previous tales (114). Perhaps more importantly, the author misses a crucial opportunity to possibly bolster his theory by discussing the potential role of pear trees in tales that may have inspired Chaucer to write *The Merchant’s Tale*.

It seems clear that many critical discussions could benefit from the decision to look outside the *Tales* when attempting to determine the underlying or “deeper” meaning of Chaucerian texts. At the same time, I am not suggesting that every discussion of *The Tales* need be accompanied by a laundry list of pertinent sources or analogues. It is perhaps “safer” to not do so. We know with as much critical certainty as possible that the tales themselves (acknowledging editorial tinkering) were written by Chaucer, but when it comes to considering the artistic implications of sources which cannot be accurately deemed immediate or direct sources, assumptions must be made. One must assume that, first, Chaucer encountered the text at some point during his life and that, second, he had a physical copy of the text at hand or available by memory during the composition of *The Tales*. Each of these assumptions places distance between the reader and the “original” text and, as some critics would likely argue, leads to potentially unreliable or irrelevant conclusions concerning *The Tales*. In the case of *The Merchant’s Tale*, I believe the convincing evidence provided by Beidler, Cooper, and others has now rendered the decision to *not* consider the importance of known sources and analogues a much greater liability than in the past. There are other points of scholarly contention in *The Merchant’s Tale* that could benefit from a critical reappraisal mindful of the established sources, but I



will leave that pursuit to others. The more pressing concern in this thesis is the artistic implications of Chaucer's use of sources in this tale.

As noted in the previous section, a number of sources play an important role in the opening section of *The Merchant's Tale*, especially Deschamps' *Miroir*. Critics have long agreed that the *Miroir* served as a model or direct source for the long discussion of the pros and cons of marriage (IV 1263-1579), but this particular section of the text has been dominated by efforts to determine exactly who is speaking during the marriage encomium, often in hopes of solving the longstanding debate regarding the tone of *The Merchant's Tale*.<sup>10</sup> Seemingly no critics have discussed the relationship between Chaucer's tale and the "advice on marriage" sources beyond noting the parallels between the two texts. By considering the artistic relationship between Chaucer's and Deschamps' work—what was taken and for what purpose—Chaucer's artistic intentions in this section become clear.

When considering the relationship between the two texts it is important to remember that the *Miroir* is an allegorical work which does not deal in subtleties, although it can be humorous at times.<sup>11</sup> The allegorical nature of the text is typified by the moralizing tone of the *acteur*—or narrator—of the work. As a litmus test of sorts for determining the worth of friends, the narrator shares the following distinction:

- |      |  |
|------|--|
| 33-5 | If the true friend is aware of it when you act badly, he will make sure to tell you in order to protect you . . .  |
| 42-6 | But, upon my soul, the false friend blandishes, flatters and deceives you, and trims with the wind, and will approve your foolishness to please you . . . (Thompson 488) |

<sup>10</sup> See Benson and Finlayson in Works Cited.

<sup>11</sup> See note 29 in Cherniss' "The Clerk's Tale and Envoy, The Wife of Bath's Purgatory, and the Merchant's Tale." *The Chaucer Review* 6.4 (1972): 235-254.

Already we see the outline of Justinus and Placebo respectively, but Chaucer—perhaps also an early proponent of the dictum to show and not tell—has no use for such blatant lecturing. What we do find specifically in the brief introduction of January (IV 1245-1266) and Chaucer’s encomium on marriage (IV 1267-1392) are reflections of the False Friends’ arguments persuading Free Will to marry at a young age. In *The Merchant’s Tale*, the narrator asks, “Who is so trewe, and eek so ententyf / To kepe hym, syk and hool, as is his make?” (IV 1288-9). Answering his own question he declares, “She [a wife] nys nat wery hym to love and serve, / Though that he lye bedrede til he sterve . . .” (IV 1290-1). This parallels the reasoning of the False Friends who make similar claims:

- 217-28            She is so gentle of speech, she serves her husband, kissing and embracing him and, when he is troubled, she works to calm his temper. If he is suffering, she looks after him and watches over him tenderly.
- 252-6            Tobit lost his eyesight but his wife helped him and was humble, gentle, and kind, and set herself the task of looking after him until God restored his vision . . . (Thompson 488-90)

The majority of the opening section strikes this same tone. In addition to the above, the False Friends touch on many of the same topics appearing in the encomium such as the husband and wife as one flesh and the frugality of wives. Chaucer, however, amplifies the narrator’s praise of marriage beyond that of even the False Friends, who express their fair share of naivety. The narrator uses an overabundance of euphoric language to describe the institution of marriage and the life of a wedded man. These are the terms used by the narrator as they appear within the opening section of the tale (I have also included duplicates): “blisful, esy, clene, glorious, joye, solas, blisful, joy, blisse, blisse, blisful, precious, murye, virtuous, lusty, vertuous, and hony-sweete” (IV 1259-1396). In

terms of the tale's narrative, Chaucer's purpose in elevating the praise of marriage to the level of farce seems clear. The narrator's exaggerated praise of marriage strengthens the effect of January's spectacular downfall, which any medieval reader familiar with the fabliau genre is already expecting.

However, this praise is interrupted by intrusions that have contributed to the critical view of the encomium as "one of the most problematic passages" in *The Tales* (D. Benson 48). Speaking of the patience and perseverance of a wife the narrator abruptly states that "A wyf wol laste, and in thyn hous endure, / Wel lenger than thee list, paraventure" (IV 1317-8). Later, comparing the plight of the married and unmarried, he says, "They [husband and wife] been so knyghter may noon harm bityde, / And namely upon the wyves syde" (IV 1390-1). Beyond these brief asides the reader finds nothing overtly negative regarding marriage until Justinus attempts to persuade January not to marry. It seems clear that Chaucer used the *Miroir* as a model for the deliberation that takes place between January, Placebo, and Justinus, but I would also suggest that Chaucer was inspired by the arguments of the False Friends in Deschamps' texts to create an encomium on marriage which, in its effusive praise of the institution, is as bereft of value as Placebo's marriage advice. Furthermore, in this scenario, the asides are not a narrative "breach" as some critics have suggested but Chaucer's acknowledgements of his patently ridiculous encomium (D. Benson 55).

Finally, in an example of a source reaching beyond the boundaries of Thompson's categories, the story of Tobit, a biblical figure from the Apocrypha (quoted above), exhibits some striking contrasts with *The Merchant's Tale*. Only two of the pear tree analogues known to be available to Chaucer, the *Novellino* and the Latin fable, contain

blind husbands. In the *Novellino* the man becomes blind by the second sentence of the admittedly short tale and in the fable version the story begins with the man already suffering from blindness. In neither of these tales does enough narrative time pass that “humble” or “gentle” caretaking could take place and, moreover, the characters are undeveloped to the point that a reader is hard-pressed to care what happens to them. Although May cannot be blamed for lack of sympathy for January’s blindness given her physical ordeals and her husband’s paranoid jealousy, she is the antithesis of Tobit’s wife (which is part of her charm). Instead of nurturing him to health, she takes advantage of his blindness by instructing Damyan via “fynger signes” and later climbing into the tree in which her lover is waiting (IV 2209). Tobit’s wife, however, is not mentioned in *The Merchant’s Tale* and these parallels may only be accidental. Furthermore, it would be unwise to rest any arguments upon such theories. Still, simply considering these possibilities enriches readers’ understanding of the literature which likely formed part of Chaucer’s mental library. We stand on much sturdier ground when discussing the potential role of the *Decameron* in Chaucer’s tale.

While a number of scholars have produced articles focused on the parallels between *The Merchant’s Tale* and *Decameron* II, 10 and *Decameron* VII, 9, as with the *Miroir*, the discussion has not moved far beyond attempts to determine how confidently critics can designate these tales as sources of Chaucer’s work. However, unlike the *Miroir*, there is less evidence of direct borrowing in the form of verbal parallels. Instead we find, as Beidler has demonstrated, many distinct similarities in terms of narrative action and the development of the central characters. January, for example, shares many of the same qualities and at times also conducts himself like his counterparts in

Boccaccio's tale. January, like Riccardo from *Decameron* II, 10, decides he wants a young wife and finds one that meets his expectations, becomes extremely jealous of his wife, and takes restoratives to regain strength. Paralleling Nicostratos in *Decameron* VII, 9, January is also blind to his inability to satisfy his wife, trusts his unfaithful servant, and is ultimately convinced by his wife that the sexual act between the two young lovers was an optical illusion. That the majority of these resemblances have no parallel in the more basic deception analogues (the *Novellino* and the Latin fable) supports Thompson's theory that Boccaccio's version of the pear tree story "could have provided a model for how to create a more richly elaborated narrative" (*Sources and Analogues* II 485). The convergences between the husbands are fairly clear but, if in this case Chaucer did borrow from details from Boccaccio's tales to enrich his cuckold, it seems equally important to consider what he left behind.

A number of significant differences between the portrayals of the older men in each tale suggest that it was Chaucer's goal to, in January, craft a more reprehensible but also complex version of the cuckolded husband so common in fabliaux. One notable divergence is the sexual abilities of the three men. In *Decameron* II, 10, Riccardo is almost totally impotent. Thompson's translation colorfully makes this point: ". . . on the first night he only managed to touch her once to consummate the marriage, and then he almost had to throw in the towel" (Thompson 508). While we do not find such a detailed observation in *Decameron* VII, 9, Nicostratos' wife Lydia gives readers a glimpse into her marital predicament when she confesses to her servant Lusca that "my husband's age is too great, with the result that in that thing in which young women take most delight I have little satisfaction" (Thompson 522). The effect of the husband's lack of sexual

proress is a sense of harmlessness. We feel sorry for the young wives' plight, but their feeble husbands pose no threat beyond that of a boring sex life.

In stark contrast, January, despite his age, is insatiable. In the opening lines Chaucer describes him as a man that "folwed ay [always] his bodily delight" and little seems to have changed given that one of his motivations for marrying is to be able to continue having sex without risking the damnation of his soul (IV 1249). It is also made clear by Chaucer that May does not "preyseth . . . his pleying worth a bene" but things take a decidedly darker turn after May returns to bed after reading Damyan's letter (IV 1854):

Adoun by olde Januarie she lay,  
That sleep till that the coughe hath hym awaked.  
Anon he preyde hire strepen hire al naked;  
He wolde of hire, he seyde, han some plesaunce  
. . .  
How that he wroghte, I dar nat to yow telle,  
Or wheither hire thoughte it paradys or helle. (IV 1956-64)

It seems likely that Chaucer borrowed the idea of the sexually unsatisfied wife from Boccaccio given that the age of the husband or his ability to sexually perform is not mentioned in the other, simpler analogues. However, Chaucer engenders in readers a much greater degree of sympathy for May by developing January as sexually demanding and threatening or, at the very least, repugnant. This is typical of Chaucer's instances of borrowing in this tale and others; he rarely borrows something without molding the material according to the often unique artistic effect he wishes to achieve. In the case of January, it appears it was not Chaucer's intention to craft a character that is beyond compassion.

Riccardo and January are both depicted as dotards and jealous men who do not like to have their wives out of their sight, but January's speech to May shortly before the deception takes place demonstrates a degree of introspection and humility that is absent in Boccaccio's tale. Riccardo's lack of awareness is showcased in the closing lines of Boccaccio's tale. Upon realizing that his wife is going to remain with the pirate Paganino and that she does "intend his pestle to go into my mortar," Messer Riccardo showers his wife with compliments, "my sweet soul . . . my dear hope . . . my good sweet lady," but what he fails to do is answer any of the charges leveled against him by his wife, namely, that he should have "had enough understanding to see that I was young . . . and therefore have realized what a young woman needs besides clothes and food" (Thompson 522). January, like Riccardo, is also at fault for not recognizing that he should not marry at an advanced age as well as coveting his wife. Shortly before Damyan and May ascend the pear tree, January declares his love in an address that has its roots in *The Song of Songs* from the book of Solomon. He adds to this speech his own personal addendum which, at the very least, illustrates January's cognizance of his flaws:

And though that I be jalous, wyte me noght.  
 Ye been so depe enprented in my thoght  
 That, whan that I considere youre beautee  
 And therwithal the unlikly [unsuitable] elde [age] of me,  
 I may nat, certes though I sholde dye,  
 Forbere to been out of youre compaignye  
 For verray love; this is withouten doute. (IV 2177-83)

In another characteristic touch, Chaucer has (potentially) taken a rather flat character in Riccardo and, by endowing him with a degree of self-awareness uncommon in the fabliaux, made him more human. This simultaneously serves the narrative purpose of demonstrating to readers that January is not, like even the worst of us, completely

corrupt. I believe that Chaucer's use of sources as illustrated in the previous examples not only helps readers form a better understanding of Chaucer's intentions within the confines of the tale but also offers the audience clues as to his more general artistic goals as a poet.

While attempting to ascertain an author's artistic desires may be a pursuit generally frowned on by critics, in the case of *The Merchant's Tale*, I believe some strong conclusions can be drawn from such considerations. While scholars discussing *The Tales* always make a point of noting the advanced artistry of Chaucer's works compared to sources and analogues from which he draws, it seems that few have followed this observation to its natural conclusion. Chaucer was aware and confident of his ability to advance the art of the narrative beyond his predecessors. He borrowed not only because it was expected and an important part of medieval poetry, but because he believed he could transform the stories with which his readers were familiar into something new, something that they had not seen before.

Certain instances of borrowing were surely encouraged by the desire to cite material a well-read medieval audience would have recognized, such as Deschamps' *Miroir* in *The Merchant's Tale*, but this does not mean Chaucer envisioned his work as part of the tradition of authority. This stands in stark contrast to the contention that Chaucer worked under an "anxiety of originality" (Prendergast 2). I agree that the lack of seemingly original tales seems to indicate that Chaucer did not highly value originality in the "sphere of story invention," but such statements gloss over the significant evidence, such as found in *The Merchant's Tale*, that suggests Chaucer did, while still relying on well-known types, care about narrative originality to a significant degree (Pearsall 241).



Furthermore, the apparent cynicism in *The Tales*, most glaringly illustrated by the exploitive and immoral Pardoner who preys on sinners, may not be the product of a pessimistic writer fixated on the hypocrisy of his world but a poet with the artistic desire to create characters that are honest to the human experience. A character like January who, unlike his predecessors, is not a harmless idiot, is not a moral vacuum, and possesses a degree of intelligence and humility. *The Merchant's Tale* at its core is still a fabliau, but Chaucer elevates the complexity and potential of the genre by developing characters who exist in more than two dimensions; and he does this with bits and pieces borrowed from the work of others. I am confident that future research in this area will reveal how the borrowed bits and pieces from other sources play a crucial role in developing both the narrative sophistication and the subtle (but highly memorable) originality of Chaucer's *Tales* and other works.

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