



THE MERCHANT'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

The first line of *The Merchant's Prologue* is an echo of the last line of Chaucer's epilogue to *The Clerk's Tale*, which concludes the Clerk's final comments: 'And let him care, and wepe and wringe and waille'. Although the manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales* is fragmentary, scholars agree that *The Clerk's Tale* was intended immediately to precede *The Merchant's Prologue and Tale*. The Clerk tells a tale which also concerns the marriage of a knight, Walter, who lived in Lombardy. He is persuaded by his people that he should marry and he chooses a virtuous but extremely poor bride, Griselda. Before they marry he makes her promise to obey him in thought, word and deed. He tests her promise beyond all reason. The Clerk tells the other pilgrims that his story is not about mortal women but is an image of the ideal relationship between Christ and his church. For more information about *The Clerk's Tale*, see page 108.

- Sometimes it is more effective to leave the reader to imagine the precise details of your story as the Merchant does here. Discuss with a partner what you think the Merchant's wife might have done to upset him so much in such a short time. Compare your ideas with those of another pair. (You may wish to revise your thoughts when you have read the whole tale.)

2 **even and a-morwe** night and day

other mo many more

7–8 **For thogh . . . him overmacche**

even if she was married to the devil she would defeat him

9–10 **What sholde . . . shrewe at al** Why

should I tell you of her cruelty in detail? She is a complete shrew

12 **Grisildis** [the unnaturally patient wife of *The Clerk's Tale*]

13 **passing** extreme

14 **also moot I thee** as I hope to prosper

15 **I wolde . . . in the snare** I would never again enter the trap [marriage]

17 **Assaye whoso wole** try it who will

18 **Seint Thomas of Inde** Doubting Thomas [One of Christ's disciples

who would not believe in the resurrection of Christ until he had put his hands in the wounds. He is supposed to have performed his ministry in India.]

19–20 **As for the moore . . . so bifalle!**

For the majority of men, I don't say all, God forbid it should be true

21 **goode sire Hoost** Good sir Host

[the Host of the Tabard Inn in Southwark who was accompanying the pilgrims to Canterbury]

22 **Thise monthes . . . pardee** no longer than two months, by God

24–25 **rive Unto the herte** split him to the heart

31–32 **but of . . . may namoore** but of my own pain, for my suffering heart, I cannot speak more

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In his prologue the Merchant tells his audience about his own adversity in his short married life. He has suffered so much that he feels unable to go into any detail. The Host encourages him to tell a story about marriage since he is so experienced. The Merchant agrees but refuses to speak any more about his own life.

'Weping and wailing, care and oother sorwe
 I knowe ynogh, on even and a-morwe,
 Quod the Marchant, 'and so doon other mo
 That wedded been. I trowe that it be so,
 For wel I woot it fareth so with me. 5
 I have a wyf, the worste that may be;
 For thogh the feend to hire ycoupled were,
 She wolde him overmacche, I dar wel swere.
 What sholde I yow reherce in special
 Hir hye malice? She is a shrewe at al. 10
 Ther is a long and large difference
 Bitwix Grisildis grete pacience
 And of my wyf the passing crueltee.
 Were I unbounden, also moot I thee,
 I wolde nevere eft comen in the snare. 15
 We wedded men liven in sorwe and care.
 Assaye whoso wole, and he shal finde
 That I seye sooth, by Seint Thomas of Inde,
 As for the moore part, I sey nat alle.
 God shilde that it sholde so bifalle! 20
 A, goode sire Hoost, I have ywedded bee
 These monthes two, and moore nat, pardee;
 And yet, I trowe, he that al his live
 Wyflee hath been, thogh that men wolde him rive
 Unto the herte, ne koude in no manere 25
 Tellen so muchel sorwe as I now heere
 Koude tellen of my wyves cursednesse!
 'Now,' quod oure Hoost, 'Marchaunt, so God yow blesse,
 Sin ye so muchel knowen of that art
 Ful hertely I pray yow telle us part.' 30
 'Gladly,' quod he, 'but of myn owene soore,
 For soory herte, I telle may namoore.'



THE MERCHANT'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

Paradise (or the Garden of Eden) is an image that runs through *The Merchant's Tale*. It is a reference to Genesis 3, where God creates the Garden of Eden for Adam and Eve, and where they live in perfect happiness until Eve is tempted by the serpent to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree – the Tree of Knowledge (of good and evil). In punishment, God ejects Adam and Eve from the garden. In literature, any reference to paradise or to the Garden of Eden carries with it the implicit threat of the serpent and a consequent fall from grace.

- The Merchant calls the knight 'worthy' or honourable. As you read on, consider whether this knight is truly an honourable man. The Merchant also leaves the reader to decide whether the knight decides to marry out of holiness or the foolishness of extreme old age. What do you think?
- Read aloud lines 33–50, first to get the general meaning and then to understand the tone and rhythm. Work out how to do it after reading the section on Chaucer's language on page 8.
- What is the effect of the narrator's statement 'I kan nat seye' in line 42?
- In line 58 the Merchant calls a wife 'the fruit of his tresor'. As you read on, bear this conflict of images in mind.



◀ Medieval merchants.

- 33 **Whilom** once
- 36 **a wyfleeles man** a single (wifeless) man
- 37 **folwed ay . . . his appetit** he always obeyed his sexual desire for women
- 38 **seculeer** not in holy orders [and therefore not vowed to chastity]
- 41 **Were it for hoolinesse or for dotage** because of piety or senility
- 42 **I kan nat seye** I cannot tell
corage desire
- 49–50 **boond, bond** the bond of marriage [but it also reminds us of the Merchant's own desire to be 'unbounden': l. 14]
- 51 **worth a bene** [Not being worth 'a bean' suggests the worthlessness of any other state than matrimony,]
- 52 **clene** wholesome
- 53 **paradis** paradise – the Garden of Eden
- 57 **hoor** white-haired
- 58 **fruit of his tresor** literally: fruit of his treasure [The Merchant combines two images: that of life, 'fruit', and money, 'treasure'.]
- 59 **feir** beautiful
- 60 **On which . . . heir** on whom he might father an heir

THE MERCHANT'S PROLOGUE AND TALE



The Merchant sets his tale in Pavia, a city in Lombardy, famous at the time for bankers and brothels. It concerns an elderly wealthy knight, who, having been single all his life, decides to marry. Though he has never hesitated to satisfy his sexual appetite, he now considers matrimony the perfect state and he also wants an heir.

Whilom ther was dwellinge in Lumbardye
 A worthy knight, that born was of Pavie,
 In which he lived in greet prosperitee; 35
 And sixty yeer a wyfles man was hee,
 And folwed ay his bodily delit
 On wommen, ther as was his appetit,
 As doon thise fooles that been seculeer.
 And whan that he was passed sixty yeer, 40
 Were it for hoolinesse or for dotage,
 I kan nat seye, but swich a greet corage
 Hadde this knight to been a wedded man
 That day and night he dooth al that he kan
 T'esprien where he mighte wedded be, 45
 Preyinge oure Lord to graunten him that he
 Mighte ones knowe of thilke blisful lyf
 That is bitwixe an housbonde and his wyf,
 And for to live under that hooly boond
 With which that first God man and womman bond. 50
 'Noon oother lyf,' seyde he, 'is worth a bene;
 For wedlok is so esy and so clene,
 That in this world it is a paradis.'
 Thus seyde this olde knight, that was so wis.
 And certainly, as sooth as God is king, 55
 To take a wif it is a glorious thing,
 And namely whan a man is oold and hoor;
 Thanne is a wyf the fruit of his tresor.
 Thanne sholde he take a yong wif and a feir,
 On which he mighte engendren him an heir, 60
 And lede his lyf in joye and in solas,
 Where as thise bacheloris singe 'allas,'
 Whan that they finden any adversitee
 In love, which nis but childissh vanitee.



THE MERCHANT'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

- What are your initial thoughts about the Merchant's defence of marriage? Make some detailed notes about his ideas about the benefits of having a wife, and add to them as your ideas develop in later pages.
- Consider what the Merchant might be suggesting in lines 86–92 about the relationship between master and manservant. You might like to come back to this point when you have finished the tale.

67–8	On brotel . . . sikernesse they build on sandy and unstable ground when they expect to find security	79	nis nat wery will never weary of [note the double negative for emphasis]
69–70	They live . . . noon arreest they live like birds or beasts, in freedom and under no restraint	80	bedrede bedridden sterve dies
71–3	Ther as . . . ybounde whereas in the bonds of matrimony the married man lives a happy and ordered life [However, a yoke can also bind unwilling partners.]	83	What force . . . lye? what does it matter if Theophrastus wants to lie? [Theophrastus (c. 372–287 BC) was the author of the satiric <i>Golden Book of Marriage</i> .]
75	buxom obedient	84	housbondrye household economy
76–7	eeke so ententif . . . make? also so attentive to care for him in sickness and in health as a wife? [In the traditional Christian marriage service the wife promises to care for her husband in sickness and in health, whether he is rich or poor.]	85	dispence expenditure
		86	dooth moore diligence works harder
		87	good goods, property
		90	verray freendes true friends trewre knave faithful servant
		91–2	she that waiteth ay After thy good she who has been waiting for ages to inherit your property
78	For wele . . . forsake she will not forsake him for happiness or sorrow	94	cokewold cuckold [a man whose wife is unfaithful, usually presented in literature and art as a figure of fun]

THE MERCHANT'S PROLOGUE AND TALE



The Merchant speaks of the potential joys and comforts of marriage. He rejects the writings of experts such as Theophrastus who warn that wives can bring distress, that servants or friends can care more for a man and his property, and that a wife can be unfaithful.

And trewely it sit wel to be so,	65
That bachelers have often peyne and wo;	
On brotel ground they builde, and brotelnesse	
They find, whan they wene sikernesse.	
They live but as a brid or as a beest,	
In libertee, and under noon arreest;	70
Ther as a wedded man in his estaat	
Liveth a lyf blisful and ordinaat,	
Under this yok of mariage ybounde.	
Wel may his herte in joy and blisse habounde,	
For who kan be so buxom as a wyf?	75
Who is so trewe, and eek so entenif	
To kepe him, sik and hool, as is his make?	
For wele or wo she wole him nat forsake;	
She nis nat wery him to love and serve,	
Thogh that he lye bedrede, til he sterve.	80
And yet somme clerkes seyn it nis nat so,	
Of whiche he Theofraste is oon of tho.	
What force thogh Theofraste liste lye?	
'Ne take no wyf,' quod he, 'for housbondrye,	
As for to spare in houshold thy dispence.	85
A trewe servant dooth moore diligence	
Thy good to kepe, than thyn owene wyf,	
For she wol claime half part al hir lyf.	
And if that thou be sik, so God me save,	
Thy verray freendes, or a trewe knave,	90
Wol kepe thee bet than she that waiteth ay	
After thy good and hath doon many a day.	
And if thou take a wyf unto thyn hoold,	
Ful lightly mystow been a cokewold.'	



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In lines 99–103 the Merchant equates God's gift of a wife with material goods. The detailed list shows how important property is to him. He is deluding himself if he assumes that the acquisition of a wife can be regarded in the same way as the purchase of a field or a table. What, or who, is missing from his calculations?

Although the Merchant sees the creation of Eve, helpmate and companion to Adam, as evidence of God's goodness, consider the outcome of this story from Genesis and the implications it might have for the knight's marriage. Chaucer's audience would be well aware that Eve tempted Adam into sin and caused the downfall of mankind.

- Bearing in mind that the Merchant is talking about the Garden of Eden when he talks about God's creation of Eve, how do you feel that his audience might react to the exaggerated language in lines 119–24? Read these lines aloud and think about the effect Chaucer is creating with word order and the rhyme.

95	sentence opinion	108	shent damned or ruined
96	ther God his bones corse God curse his bones	110	I speke . . . estaat I speak of those not in holy orders
97	But take . . . herke me but take no heed of all this illusion, defy Theophrastus and listen to me	112	ywroght made
100–3	Alle . . . upon a wal all other kinds of gift, certainly, such as land, income, pasture or common land, or furnishings, are all gifts from Fortune, and will pass like a shadow on a wall [This detailed list of property is revealing as it shows where the Merchant's values lie.]	113	hie high
104–6	But drede . . . paraventure but doubt not, if I speak plainly, a wife will last and remain in your house even longer than you wish, perhaps	118	heerby may ye preve thus you may prove
107	sacrement [Marriage is one of the major sacraments of the Church.]	120	His paradis . . . disport his earthly paradise and his pleasure
		121–2	So buxom . . . in unitee because she is so obedient and virtuous they are bound to live in harmony [You might like to consider the irony of this as you read on.]
		123–4	O flesh . . . distresse they are one flesh – and one flesh, I believe, has one heart in happiness and in sorrow

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The Merchant continues to speak of the benefits of having a wife. He justifies the desire to marry by referring to a wife as God's gift to a man.

This sentence, and an hundred things worse,	95
Writeth this man, ther God his bones corse!	
But take no kep of al swich vanitee;	
Deffie Theofraste, and herke me.	
A wyf is Goddes yifte verrailly;	
Alle othere manere yiftes hardily,	100
As londes, rentes, pasture, or commune,	
Or moebles, alle been yiftes of Fortune,	
That passen as a shadwe upon a wal.	
But drede nat, if pleyedly speke I shal,	
A wif wol laste, and in thyn hous endure,	105
Wel lenger than thee list, paraventure.	
Mariage is a ful greet sacrament.	
He which that hath no wyf, I holde him shent;	
He liveth helples and al desolat, –	
I speke of folk in seculer estaat.	110
And herke why, I sey nat this for noght,	
That womman is for mannes helpe ywroght.	
The hie God, whan he hadde Adam maked,	
And saugh him al allone, bely-naked;	
God of his grete goodnesse seyde than,	115
‘Lat us now make an helpe unto this man	
Lyk to himself’; and thanne He made him Eve.	
Heere may ye se, and heerby may ye preve,	
That wyf is mannes helpe and his confort;	
His paradys terrestre, and his disport.	120
So buxom and so vertuuous is she,	
They moste nedes live in unitee.	
O flessch they ben, and o flessch, as I gesse,	
Hath but oon herte, in wele and in distresse.	



THE MERCHANT'S PROLOGUE AND TALE

- Do you think that the Merchant is really talking about a wife when he speaks of this obedient companion? Make a list of the things that you consider important about a partner in marriage. Would some men still secretly like a wife who was entirely subservient, who did everything that her husband wanted and never contradicted him?
- Improvise two scenes, one an episode in the life of the 'perfect wife' (and fortunate husband) followed by a more realistic presentation.
- Write a private diary entry by the 'perfect wife' giving her side of the story.
- From the point of view of a woman looking for a 'perfect husband', write an account of what you would be looking for.



- 125 **A wyf ... benedicite** a wife, bless us, Saint Mary! [an exclamation]
- 128 **tweye** two
- 130 **swinke** work
- 131 **never a deel** absolutely nothing
- 132 **Al that ... weel** everything that pleases her husband, pleases her
- 133 **ones** once
- 135–6 **O blisful ... vertuous** O wedlock, you are so merry and so moral [This is a rhetorical device called an apostrophe where the narrator addresses an object. The tone is that of a sermon.]
- 138–40 **every ... wyf** every self-respecting man should thank God on his knees for sending him a wife
- 143 **sikernesse** security
- 145 **So that he werke after his wyves reed** if he follows his wife's advice
- 147–9 **They been ... rede** they are so faithful and full of wisdom that if you want to be wise, always follow a woman's advice

◀ 'O blisful ordre of wedlok precious'.

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The Merchant continues to extol the conveniences of marriage from a man's point of view. He says a wife will be always helpful and obedient.

A wyf, a, Seinte Marie, <i>benedicite</i> ,	125
How mighte a man han any adversitee	
That hath a wyf? Certes, I kan nat seye.	
The blisse which that is bitwixe hem tweye	
Ther may no tonge telle, or herte thinke.	
If he be povre, she helpeth him to swinke;	130
She kepeth his good, and wasteth never a deel;	
Al that hire housbonde lust, hire liketh weel;	
She seith nat ones 'nay', whan he seith 'ye.'	
'Do this,' seith he; 'Al redy, sire,' seith she.	
O blisful ordre of wedlok precious,	135
Thou art so murye, and eek so vertuous,	
And so commended and appreved eek	
That every man that halt him worth a leek,	
Upon his bare knees oughte al his lyf	
Thanken his God that him hath sent a wyf,	140
Or elles preye to God him for to sende	
A wyf, to laste unto his lives ende.	
For thanne his lyf is set in sikernesse;	
He may nat be deceyved, as I gesse,	
So that he werke after his wyves reed.	145
Thanne may he boldely beren up his heed,	
They been so trewe, and therwithal so wise;	
For which, if thou wolt werken as the wise,	
Do alwey so as wommen wol thee rede.	