

Chaucer creates humour by satirising values in religious and courtly love essay s...

[Life](#), [Love](#)



“ The Merchant’s Tale is only rarely seen as humorous; most often it is noted for its darkness, its “ unrelieved acidity”; it is said to offer a “ perversion” of the courtly code.”¹ I disagree with this statement made by J. S. P. Tatlock. Chaucer was successful at creating humour within his narratives, which is partly why his works were, and still are, so popular. Humour can be achieved through a variety of elements including plot, characterisation, language, timing and circumstance. Chaucer used of all these, but largely drew upon the satirical portrayals of both the courtly love genre and religion within The Merchant’s Tale.

The tale opens with The Merchant who is envious and astringent of all people that are of a higher class than he; therefore, in his narrative, he targets and satirizes the traditions of the knightly class, including the romantic conventions of courtly love often attributed to the upper classes.

Another of Chaucer’s tales is The Knight’s Tale which is about two knights and close friends, Arcite and Palamon, who are imprisoned by Theseus, duke of Athens.

Whilst in prison they fall in love with the beautiful sister of Hippolyta, Emily (Emelye). The sense of competition brought about by this love causes them to hate each other. They eventually get let out of prison and fight each other to win the girl.

Arcite wins the battle, but dies before he can claim Emily, so Palamon marries her. The story introduces many typical aspects of knighthood such as courtly love and ethical dilemmas.

The Merchant's Tale begins with a description of Januarie who is presented, satirically, as "A worthy knight". The Merchant however attempts to display to the audience that this knight is not worthy at all. He contrasts him to the knights in The Knight's Tale. Theseus was tough, forceful, confident and young but Januarie is portrayed as old and fading, "old and hoor." He is also shown as an exception to many knightly virtues, as he "folwed al his bodily delit..." "On women, thereas was his apeteite." This portrayal of him shows the audience that he is in fact obsessed with women and sex.

In the tale he attempts to gain himself a young wife, despite the warnings of his advisors. Chaucer uses the dialogue of the characters to explain to Januarie that a young wife will be difficult to keep happy at his age. He makes Januarie exclaim that "She shal nat passe twenty yeer, certain Thanne shoulde I lede my lif in avoutrye,/ And go straight to the devel whan I die". Chaucer portrays him as a character envious of youth, so much so that if he cannot have a young wife he will have no choice but to sin. In other words, he must have a young wife for his own moral safety. This is not the image of a strong and powerful knight like Theseus. Januarie fails in the area of courtly love and ends up having his courtship mocked by the Merchant. This not only creates humour in the audience's eyes as we see how dim-witted Januarie really is, but it also creates sympathy for the character as he cannot help how he is portrayed.

Another example of the use of satire is the whole incident with Damien, May and Januarie and the adultery issue. One could argue that May does not love Damien any more than she loves January. He could perhaps just be a

suitable alternative for May to love. When she receives a love-letter from Damien, she disposes of it in the toilet (privy) which could show this lack of love for him. Therefore, her motivation for adultery could be seen as an action of revenge, as January assaulted May by marrying her, and not out of affection for Damien. This is satire on the whole theme of courtly love.

This feeling of revenge on her part is further demonstrated in the cuckold scene. May deceives January in the garden and we, as the audience, cannot blame her for doing so. January built the garden so that he can have May sexually in the way he wants her. She feigns pregnancy and then steps onto January's back to have sex with Damien in the tree. She has been "stepped on" by January and now she gets to do the same to him. When January's sight is restored by the Gods, he rightfully accuses her of adultery. In response she acts impertinent and insulted: "' This thank have I for I have maad yow see/ Allas,' quod she, ' that evere I was so kinde!'" This creates humour as the audience knows that Chaucer is satirising the idea of courtly love and cannot believe that Januarie is so dense that he believes May's excuse.

Courtly love was a contradictory experience between erotic desire and spiritual achievement, " a love at once illicit and morally elevating, passionate and self-disciplined, humiliating and exalting, human and transcendent".² At first, Damian seems to possess these qualities and at the wedding of Januarie and May, his desire for adultery is made clear, " So sorre hath Venus hurt him with hire brond". The principles of courtly love are satirised through the characterisation of the characters. Januarie is

lecherous, May is greedy and Damian is lustful. These virtues add humour to the narrative, as none of them are worthy heroes. At the end of his wedding, Januarie rushes his guests to leave “ as best mighte, savinge his honour” so that he can be with his new wife May. The idea of an “ oold and hoor” knight rushing around excitedly and at the same time trying to be polite makes the audience laugh.

The genre of courtly love is further satirised through the imagery of May and Damian having sex in a pear tree, “ in he throng”, whilst the blind Januarie clings to the trunk underneath. A sense of dramatic irony is achieved here at Januarie’s expense, as he, at first, has no knowledge of what is happening whereas the audience, although shocked by the nature of this act, are not particularly surprised by its occurrence.

In a story about courtly love, there is usually a reason why the adulterous lover and their partner are not suited for one another. Usually, this reason is age. In the Merchant’s Tale, the “ fresshe” lady May, “ fulfild of alle beautee and pleasaunce”, is contrasted to the “ oold and hoore” Januarie. This contrast between them is so extreme that it satirises the courtly love situation beyond its required proportions. Chaucer further emphasises this ‘ physical diversity’ by repeating the word ‘ beautee’ three times. The repulsive phrase ‘ the slake skin aboute his nekke shaketh’ further shows how unsuited the couple are. The emphasis on this repulsiveness also creates amusement from the audience’s point of view.

Another aspect of courtly love is the 'Religion of Love' which basically means that the courtly lover must accomplish his lust in order to be cured. The Merchant shows his dislike of the idea and mocks May's decision to save Damian from dying of lust by granting him 'hire grace'. This has humorous undertones, as the audience all knows what is meant by this subtle language, the hint of adultery. In Chaucer's time, the main view was that if someone committed adultery, then they were breaking one of the Ten Commandments, i. e. you must not commit adultery. They believed that people who committed these sins must go to hell. Here, courtly love is satirised through the mocking of May's moral vice, as the narrator sarcastically declares 'Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte' and that any 'tyrant' that would not try to do so has a 'herte as hard as any stoon'.

Religion can also said to be satirised for comic effect in The Merchants Tale, as the 'auctorities' are frequently misused throughout the tale. For example Pluto uses the words of Solomon, 'Fulfilde of sapience and of worldly gloerie/...To every wight that wit and reson kan', to express how terrible women are. However Proserpine later reveals that Solomon was a fool as he had over 300 wives and 1000 concubines, and worshiped false idols, which is again breaking one of the Ten Commandments.

Januarie also uses religious figures incorrectly when he reasons that a wife is a supportive, obedient figure who will always further her husband's greatness and to do so he uses Rebekke, Judith, Abigail and Ester as examples. By doing this, Januarie weakens his argument as these women deceived their husbands in different ways.

This makes the audience laugh at Januarie's naivety and stupidity as we realise how much of a fool he is. "Januarie's bending of religious authority to his own selfish purposes leaves religion untouched but adds to our sense of his delusion and error." ³ It also satirises the way in which religion can be used to justify one's desires.

The use of 'Lo' implies that Januarie thinks he is communicating divine religious wisdom when actually he is abusing it. It also leads to structural irony as Januarie is demanding everyone to 'look' when he himself cannot even see the errors he is making. Such irony is carried through to the wedding blessing, when the Priest begs May to 'be lyk Sarra and Rebekke'. This ignorant request seems to show an element of fate, humorous in nature, on the rest of the tale, and satirizes the church for its own misuse of religion. No one present at the wedding seems to be fooled; everyone is laughing, but not necessarily for the right reasons, 'Ther is swich mirthe-that it may nat be written'. Even the goddess Venus sees the amusement in such a match: 'For Januarie was bicomme hir knight', who is far from being young, courageous and noble.

In conclusion, The Merchants Tale does satirise both the genre of courtly love and religion to an extent within the narrative, and this frequently creates humour. The conventions of courtly love are satirised through characterisation and exaggerated to such an extent by imagery and tone that the silliness of the events are emphasised and mocked. In particular the 'religion of love' falls prey to the narrator's sarcasm, which serves to enhance our comical appreciation of the witty narrative and its ridiculous

characters. Religion is not satirised as much, however the use of misquoting biblical authorities and figures, alongside the blessing of such an ill-fitting couple, does seem to ridicule the church. Although other elements of the narrative, such as the choice of language combined with rhythm and pace, also contribute towards creating humour, it is the over-all conclusion of all these factors which makes *The Merchant's Tale* a truly successful comedy.

References:

1 J. S. P. Tatlock, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," in *Chaucer Criticism: The Canterbury Tales*, ed. Richard Schoeck and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960). p. 175; Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, p. 231.

2 Francis X. Newman, ed. (1968). *The Meaning of Courtly Love*, vii.

3 Chaucer's ironic challenges to authority in *The Merchant's Tale*, John Thorne