

# Marriage: the presentation of januarie, placebo and justinus



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Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* in the late 14th Century, featuring several tales loosely linked together that revolve around typical medieval lifestyles with its many modern day parallels. Marriage was a popular theme for debate during this time, with particular concerns to reasons for and consequences of marriage. Chaucer presents a variation of views, initially through the Merchant's Prologue where the Merchant forcefully stresses his perspective that passionately opposes marriage. Chaucer structures the Prologue in the form of a confessional complaint which parallels Justinus' anecdotal account of his experience of marriage. The powerful opening of the Merchant's Prologue is intended by Chaucer to echo the prior epilogue of the Clerk's Tale that concludes with the comment "and let him care, and wepe and wringe and waille", followed by the Merchant's miserable descriptions of marriage having him "wepyng and waylyng". The repeated use of the word "wepe" emphasizes their mutual distaste for married life. As the tale progresses, the Merchant's bitter tone converts and becomes extremely more accepting of marriage in light of Januarie's upcoming decision to be "wedded hastily", which suggests his rash and unthoughtful consideration for the true value of marriage.

Chaucer makes evident Januarie's main reason for marriage being to live a spiritual, sanctified life that will enable him a place in heaven, but implicitly contrasts this throughout, for instance; the specifications Januarie makes for his wife are intended to fulfill his sexual desires. Januarie's glamorization of a younger wife implicitly presents the view that perfection and happiness in marriage is not possible with an elder woman, which links to ideas portrayed in the Clerk's Tale through Grisilda who is depicted as a young and beautiful

wife who remains subservient, somehow due to her youthfulness. The impression is made onto the reader that Januarie is self-delusional since he is old himself, and he may also come across as judgmental and offensive. It can be interpreted that his intentions are solely for himself. This contradicts the traditional religious conditions of marriage as being beneficial for both husband and wife. Marriage was deemed a unison, and a reflection, of the love of Christ for his people. However, many medieval readers would relate to Januarie's ambitions in marriage, considering the conventional attitudes to the nature of marriage were regarded as a mercantile transaction and the consolidation of title, so marriage was rarely undertaken for love. This significantly contrasts the views of a modern reader, who would be more inclined to disagree with Januarie's real purpose for marriage. It seems pointless, however, that Januarie enters into a debate with his brothers as it seems like he has already made his decision, and he absorbs himself in Placebo's flattery.

Placebo's sycophantic nature imposes his belief that Januarie need not acquire advice from anyone, and believes Januarie should ignore "the word of Salomon" who says it is best to act upon advice that one has sought. University philosophers in the Middle Ages favoured dialectic, yet Placebo's use of exegesis does not give forth a productive and informed argument - it seems to only allow for Januarie to collude in his fantasies further without even considering an alternative, in the way that Justinus does. Chaucer's depiction of Placebo lends the tale verisimilitude as Placebo is demonstrated as a typical pleasing courtier, therefore rather than debating against Januarie's unrealistic expectations of marriage for the purpose of Januarie's

own good, Placebo entertains his imaginations. It can be interpreted that Januarie does not want to be damned of his right to have a youthful, obedient wife who will satisfy his needs, since the wife, when married, had the same legal status as her husband's domestic animals. Conventional attitudes to the institution of marriage were very similar to Januarie's, which Chaucer implements purposefully to represent an actuality.

Justinus' view aids towards a nature of debate more than Placebo since his views are opposing, as he suggests that Januarie must "be pacient" since marriage is "no childes play / to take a wyf withouten avisement". He says choosing a wife involves that "men moost enquire". Making reference to the Christian vows, Justinus highlights the permanent nature of marriage - which Placebo fails to mention, which is ironic since he is so experienced in his courtly life. The sacrament of marriage involves the exchange of vows of care and fidelity, sanctifying the partnership in the eyes of God. Where those vows are kept, as they eventually are in *The Franklin's Tale*, the marriage may be said to be good, despite the inequality of the partners. The bitter narration in the *Merchant's Tale*, by the Merchant, however, draws no distinction between good and bad marriage and belittles the sacrament itself; initial images of married life in the Prologue, being a form of "cursedness", is juxtaposed with the Merchant's view in the Tale, describing Januarie's desire for "marriage hony-sweete".

In conclusion, Chaucer's use of personification allegory with Placebo and Justinus express the conflicting views of marriage, represented by the definition of their names - Placebo meaning "I shall please", symbolizing pretense, and Justinus, "the just one" symbolising justice and honesty.

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Chaucer implies that his brothers are types rather than individually realized characters in order to detach any emotion from the attempted debate displayed between the two. It can be interpreted that this emotional detachment is a reflection of Januarie's real sense of lack of emotion for his wife, also conveyed through the objectification of woman in his use of his wax imagery ("a yong thing may men gye/ right as men may warm wex with handes plye") and through use of his animal imagery (making a preference to "a pyk than a pickerel") This approach to marriage was common amongst contemporary audiences; the idea of an elder man marrying a girl as young as twelve was traditional and more accepted than those of the modern audience. However, enjoyment of sex, even between married couples, was deemed a mortal sin as the only purpose of sex was believed to be for procreation and to avoid lechery, so Januarie's early desire for marriage as an entrance to heaven may be prevented with Placebo's encouraging words and lack of debate against the reality of Januarie's future.