

## The Merchant's praise of love

### I

Toshinori HIRA

#### Abuse of courtly love words

Too depressed in spirits to speak more of his private trouble and sorrow for his wife's shrewdness Chaucer's Merchant in compliance with the Host's request tells of January's distress over the shrewdness of his wife May which corresponds, perhaps to the narrator's affliction. The noble knight January, longing for a court lover,<sup>1</sup> behaves in a lover-like manner though he shows much concern about a May-and-November marriage. When he lies in bed he portrays in his mind a young fair lady whom he desires to get for his wife (IV(E)1580<sup>2</sup>: *Many fair shap and many a fair visage / Ther passeth thurgh his herte nyght by nyght, / 1595: He atte laste apoynted hym on oon, / 1599: And whan that he was in his bed ybrought, / He purtreied in his herte and in his thought / Hir fresshe beautee and hir age tendre, / Hir myddel smal, hire armes longe and sklendre, / Hir wise governaunce (sensible conduct<sup>3</sup>), hir gentillesse, / Hir*

---

1 The courtliness in the *Merchant's Tale* is not dealt with by W.G. Dodd, *Courtly Love in Chaucer and Gower*, Harvard, 1959.

2 The quotations are from *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd.ed., Massachusetts, 1957.

3 Translated by D. Wright, *The Canterbury Tales*, London, 1965.

wommanly berynge (bearing), and hire sadnesse (sedate ways)). In the *Romaunt of the Rose* the god of Love instructs the lover to picture in imagination the delight of caressing his lady (2565: . . . *shall thee come a remembraunce / Of hir shap and hir semblaunce, / Whereto non other may be pere. / And wite thou wel, withoute were* (doubt), */ That thee shal seme, somtyme that nyght, / That thou hast hir, that is so bright, / Naked bitwene thyne armes there, / All sothfastnesse as though it were*). Andreas Capellanus tells us in his *Rules of Love* (xxiv), 'Every act of a lover ends in the thought of his beloved.'<sup>4</sup> The unimpeachable qualities, mental and physical, of the maiden whom January *gan inwith his thoght devyse of, and chees . . . of his owene auctoritee* (1586-1587, 1597) are all such as are ascribed to the ideal court lady of romance. In the *Book of the Duchess* a parallel to exaggerated lady features with which January's young pretty maiden is represented is found (952: *Ryght faire shuldres and body long / She had, and armes, every lyth* (limb) */ Fatyssh, flesshy, not gret therwith; / Ryght white handes, and nayles rede, / Rounde brestes; and of good brede / Hyr hippes were, a streight flat bak. / 1006: Therto she hadde the moste grace, / To have stedefast perseveraunce* (constancy), */ And esy, atempre governaunce, / That ever I knew or wyste yit, / So pure suffraunt* (wholly long-suffering) *was hir wyt*). Because of her rank the 'lady' is not so an object of respect much as that of love. The would-be lover January never regards the maiden of his choice (which *hym thoughte . . . myghte nat ben amended*) as an object of respect. He chose a

---

<sup>4</sup> Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love*, tr. John J. Parry, New York, 1959, p. 185.

wife for her beauty. Indeed, he *is ravysshed in a traunce / At every tyme he looked on hir face; / But in his herte he gan hire to manace*<sup>5</sup> / *That he that nyght in armes wolde hire streyne / Harder than evere Parys did Eleyne* (1750-1754).

The object of Sir Thopas's love is so much idealized; his lady is pedestalled for an elf-queen (VII(B<sup>2</sup>)788: *An elf-queene shal my lemman be*). Ironic is his use of the word *lemman* for his lady (*an elf-queene*); this word<sup>6</sup> is applied to a sweetheart<sup>7</sup> as in the reference to Alison of the *Miller's Tale* as Nicholas's leman (I(A)3277: . . . *if ich have my wille, / For deerne (secret) love of thee, lemman, I spille* (perish)). January, having a secret intention of amusing himself alone with his wife in his proud garden<sup>8</sup>, addresses her in sarcasm by the appellation 'my lady free.' The impudent May receives the appellation used by an inferior in speaking to a woman of rank<sup>9</sup> as in this

5 Interpreted as 'inwardly anticipating' by Wright. The equivalent modern English 'menace' is given by *A Chaucer Glossary*, ed. N. Davis, D. Gray, P. Ingham and A. Wallace-Hadrill, Oxford, 1979. Passages corresponding to lines 1752-1761 are not in the *Complete Poetical Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, tr. John S. P. Tatlock and P. MacKaye, New York, 1961.

6 The word 'leman' is not in *Slang and Its Analogues, Past and Present*, ed. J. S. Farmer and W. E. Henley, 7 vols., Tokyo, 1961.

7 Langland's use of the word 'lemman' for a theological purpose is pointed out by Ralph W. V. Elliott, *Chaucer's English*, London, 1974, p. 232.

8 The allegorical meaning of January's garden is expounded by Thomas D. Cooke, *The Old French and Chaucerian Fabliaux*, Missouri, 1978, pp. 187-188.

9 See *The Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, 1933, s.v. "lady," 6a.

lady's own words to her husband (*lord so deere*) (IV(E)2195: *I prey to God that nevere dawe the day / That I ne sterve* (die), *as foule as womman may, / If evere I do unto my kyn that shame, / Or elles I empeyre* (impair) *so my name, / That I be fals . . .*). Unlike January's narrator the Franklin who *with good wyl as he kan* tells, as he says, a Breton lay is at great pains to adapt himself to the courtly tradition. This he does by presenting a conventional account of the courting of Dorigen by Arveragus who is as much obedient to her as most lovers, or the wooing of Dorigen who married to Arveragus by his squire Aurelius which is in keeping with the courtly love conventions in speaking to her as his 'righte lady,' and his 'sovereyn lady.' The fictitious Chaucer, in the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, uses the appellation of *my lady sovereyne* in speaking of the daisy, the lady of his adoration, perhaps identified as Queen Anne<sup>10</sup> (BF 94: *Be ye my gide and lady sovereyne!*). Yet we find in the *Miller's Tale* the word of address *lady* ironically applied to Alison, a daisy, a peach fit to share a bed with a prince or to marry a yeoman. Nicholas addresses her: *Now, deere lady, if thy wille be / I praye yow that ye wole rewe* (have pity) *on me* (3361-3362). May is spoken to by her husband: *Rys up, my wyf, my love, my lady free! / The turtles voys is herd, my dowve* (dove) *sweete* (2138-2139). Along with the term *my lady free* peculiar to courtly love comes the term of endearing address. January uses such words as *my love*,

---

<sup>10</sup> See D. D. Griffith, 'An Interpretation of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*,' *Chaucer: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. E. Wagenknecht, New York, 1959, pp. 396f.; B. L. Jefferson, 'Queen Anne and Queen Alcestis,' *ibid.*, pp. 405f.

*my dowve sweete.* May can be as much gentle woman as another woman whom her husband January with vernal freshness loves (IV(E)1995: *This gentil May, fulfilled of pitee, / Right of hire hand a lettre made she, / In which she graunteth hym hire verray grace, / Ther lakketh noght, oonly but day and place, / Wher that she myghte unto his lust suffise; / For it shal be right as he wole devyse*). Indeed, she receives, out of pity, a burning love her ardent lover Damian conceives for her.

But pity comes from a gentle heart as when Queen Alcestis, wife of Cupid of the *Legend*, appeases by kindness her husband's anger at the offence against his law in relation to Chaucer's heretical *Romaunt* and his Criseyde unfaithful in her love for Troilus. The god says: '*. . . pite renneth sonne in gentil herte; / That maistow seen, she kytheth* (shews<sup>11</sup>) *what she ys* (503-504).' Queen Alcestis can be identified with Queen Anne at Richmond, whom Chaucer honours with the daisy cult.<sup>12</sup> The fictitious Chaucer refers to 'this goode Alceste' as 'The dayesye . . . myn owene hertes reste.' The pity of the lady is exaggeratedly represented in the figure of Flaunchise of the *Romaunt of the Rose* (1220: *Ful debonaire* (courteous) *of herte was she. / She durst never seyn ne do / But that that hir longed to; / And if a man were in distresse, / And for hir love in hevynesse, / Hir herte wolde have full gret pite, / She was so amiable and free*). This virtue highly valued in the court lady by her lover which is given to Alcestis, the Queen of the classical love deity is properly attributed to the Virgin Mary. In *An ABC* the Mother of God

<sup>11</sup> *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. W. W. Skeat, 7 vols., Oxford, 1950, VI, p. 142.

<sup>12</sup> See B. L. Jefferson, *op. cit.*, pp. 410f.

is praised (133: *Mooder, of whom oure merci gan to springe, / Beth ye my juge and eek my soules leche* (healer); / *For evere in you is pitee haboundinge* (abounding) / *To ech that wole of pitee you biseeche*). Mercy, too, comes from Her. She is the well of mercy, as which She is regarded by the Prioress (VII(B<sup>2</sup>) 656: *This welle of mercy, Cristes mooder sweete, / I loved alwey, as after* (after as<sup>13</sup>) *my konnyng*). The word *mercy* serves almost as the equivalent for the word *pity*. Both words are interchangeably used in the *Tale of Melibee* (VII(B<sup>2</sup>)1770: . . . *she* (i.e. Prudence). . . *tolde hym* (Melibeus) *how she foond his adversaries ful repentant, / knowelechyng ful lowely hir synnes and trespas, and how they were redy to suffren* (undergo) *all peyne, / requiryng and preiynge hym of mercy and pitee*). Here Melibeus's adversaries ask Melibeus for mercy on their sins. An ABC has God's Mother's mercy, which She shows on those who beg Her for it. We read: *Dowte is ther noon, thou queen of misericorde* (mercy), / *That thou n'art cause* (source) *of grace and merci heere; / God vouched sauf thurgh thee with us to accorde* (25-27). / *The rightful God nolde of no mercy heere; / But thurgh thee han we grace, as we desire* (31-32). The graces of May which her lover Damian is worried to win is on a human level; they do not reach undoubtedly a high level when regarded from the moral standpoint of God or the god of Love. Damian's love for his beloved is that he has everything he wants: he forms a liaison with her. May felt pity for him and grants him her grace. She gives him the key of the small wicket gate of January's garden, through which she

---

13 Cf. VII(B<sup>2</sup>)2365.

permits him to go into the garden<sup>14</sup> where *thynges whiche that were nat doon abedde, / He in the gardyn parfourned hem and spedde* (accomplished) (2051-2052). She responds to what he wants. We are told of her desire for him in the words like 'mercy' and 'grace' which are applied to the generosity and favour of court ladies or the Blessed Mary. To Damian the 'mercy' which he begs of May to take on him means her response to his 'Venus fyr' or his 'desyre.' She lets him into the garden (IV(E)2152: *This Damyan . . . hath opened the wyket, / And in he stirte* (darted), *and that in swich manere / That no wight myghte it se neither yheere*). Similarly her misconduct with him is what her 'grace' means. She makes a sign that he should climb up the pear tree for the purpose of wrestling with her (IV(E)2211: *. . . up he wente. / For verrailly he knew al hire entente, / And every signe that she koude make, / 2215: For in a lettre she hadde toold hym al / Of this matere, how he werchen* (act) *shal*). In the *Miller's Tale* the word 'mercy' is applied to Nicholas, who flirts with Alison his leman. He entreats her for mercy (I(A)3288: *This Nicholas gan mercy for to crye, / And spak so faire, and profred him* (pressed his suit) *so faste, / That she hir love hym graunted atte laste*). Irony or sarcasm makes the Merchant as well as the Miller<sup>15</sup> describe May's response to her lover's courtship or her lover's court to

---

<sup>14</sup> January's garden is compared to the *horlus conclusus* of the Song of Solomon. See Thomas D. Cooke, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-188.

<sup>15</sup> For details about the Miller's 'cherles termes' see especially Ralph W. V. Elliott, *op. cit.*, pp. 209f. See also E. T. Donaldson, 'Idiom of Popular Poetry in the Miller's Tale,' *Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, ed. J. J. Anderson, London, 1977, pp. 143-160.

her by using such words as 'grace,' 'pity,' and 'mercy.' The word 'grace' is used with a sexual connotation which may commonly be hardly present in the context of unrequited love.<sup>16</sup> Says of his lady Emily Arcite in the *Knight's Tale*: *Only the sighte of hire whom that I serve, / Though that I never hir grace may deserve, / Wolde her suffised right ynough for me* (1231-1233). At the same time, the same knight is depicted as a lover who expounds his human views on womanhood<sup>17</sup> (I(A) 1156: . . . *Thou* (i.e. Palamon) *woost nat yet now / Whether she be a womman or goddesse! / Thyn is affeccioun of hoolynesse, / And myn is love, as to a creature*). *grace* carries the meaning of Saint Mary's favour; the Second Nun expresses Her benignant regard in extolling Her as *so fair and ful of grace* (67) and *welle of mercy* (37). Coming from Saint Mary<sup>18</sup> this word, if used by the critical narrator, should have no connotation of the religion of Love<sup>19</sup> as well as the Christian religion<sup>20</sup> even in the context of such 'a noble storie' that all the Canterbury pilgrims say the story is 'worthy for to drawn to memorie.' The Second Nun's *grace* can acquire the secular con-

<sup>16</sup> Love is defined as suffering and imagination in Andreas Capellanus, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29; it may also be reduced to the devotion of the lover to his lady, which is found in the passages from the troubadour lyrics, compiled by Bernard O'Donoghue in his *Courtly Love Tradition*, Manchester, 1982, pp. 112-119.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. I. Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-116.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *OED*, s. v. "grace," 15a. *grace* is similar to *mercy*.

<sup>19</sup> See W. Frost, 'An Interpretation of Chaucer's Knight's Tale' in *Chaucer*, ed. J. J. Anderson, pp. 128-130.

<sup>20</sup> Adaptations of the characteristic features of Christian worship to those of Venus-worship are found in Andreas, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-156.



notation of the courtly Venus's love,<sup>21</sup> which may be made ironical in the context of the lascivious Venus's love. The word 'grace' used by Arcite means Emily's favour his cousin Palamon wishes to win<sup>22</sup> with the implications of her favour which he himself courts. Arcite says to Palamon: . . . *it is nat likly al thy lyf / To stonden in hir grace; namoore shal I* (1172-1173). Palamon's *grace*, when viewed from the standpoint of Arcite who regards his lady as *a womman*, not as a *goddesse*, becomes ironical as the graces of Criseyde of *Troilus and Criseyde*<sup>23</sup> won by the courtly Troilus is involved in irony<sup>24</sup> when she bestows

---

21 The worship of the love deity bears a certain similarity to the Christian religion. An example of the praise of Venus or the god of Love which corresponds to that of the Mother of God or God is seen in *Troilus* (III 1261: *Benigne Love, thow holy bond of thynges, / Whoso wol grace, and list the nought honouren, / Lo, his desir wol fle withouten wynges. / For noldestow of bownte hem socouren / That serven best and most alwey labouren, / Yet were al lost, that dar I wel seyn certes, / But if thi grace passed oure desertes*). Therefore the words taken from Christian worship are applied to the context of courtly love. The charity the god of Love had toward Troilus brings to the god the praise from him. Troilus praises the god in terms of the praise of God. An ABC sung in praise of the Mother of God runs: *Whoso thee loveth, he shal not love in veyn; / That shal he fynde, as he the lyf shal lete* (71-72). Those who love and serve God believe in the blessing of Him. Ironical is Troilus's use of the appreciative words for the Mother of God.

22 The word 'grace' used by Palamon for Emily's favour which he courts is not found in *A Concordance to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. John S. P. Tatlock and Arthur G. Kennedy, Tokyo, 1963.

23 The quotations are from *The Book of Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. R. K. Root, Princeton, 1954.

24 Cf. C. Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition*, Berkeley, 1957, pp. 153-161.

grace on Diomede, Troilus's rival in love (IV 8: *From Troilus she gan hire brighte face / Away to writhe (turn) and tok of hym non heede, / But caste hym clene out of his lady grace / And on hire whiel (wheel) she sette up Diomede*).

May is so sordid, so calculating as to make no scruple of committing adultery with her lover (2352-2353) while yet the fair words are fresh from her mouth (IV(E)2188: *I have . . . a soule for to kepe / As wel as ye (i.e. her husband) and also myn honour, / And of my wyfhod thilke tendre flour, / Which that I have assured (entrusted) in youre hond, / Whan that the preest to yow my body bond*). Little is known of her except that she lives 'hym bisyde'; nothing is told about what stock she comes from and what past career she has had. Nevertheless May's narrator puts the humorous, though presumably none the less true, words into her mouth: *I am a gentil womman and no wench* (2202). May has certain character traits in common with Criseyde. Criseyde presents alternatively the contradictory character traits of courtliness and sordidness. Chaucer tells of what she conceives her lover (IV 1674: *. . . gentil herte and manhod that ye hadde, / And that ye hadde, as me thoughte, in despit / Every thyng that souned into (tended to) badde, / As rude-nesse and poeplissh (vulgar) appetit, / And that youre resoun bridlede (restrained) youre delit; / This made, aboven every creature, / That I was youre, and shal while I may dure (live)*). She can not be understood only by a return of her lover's affection. Her character has another side. She is spoken in terms of women, though 'in comune,' as commented by the Knight in his *Tale*: *. . . she (i.e. Emily) agayn hym (i.e. Arcite) caste a freendlich ye / (For wommen, as to speken in comune, / Thei folwen alle the favour of Fortune) / And was al his chiere*

(countenance), *as in his herte* (2680-2683). Taking her own future into consideration with the Trojan destination Criseyde, who was in love with Troilus, determines on succumbing to Diomedes's love (V 1023: *Retornyng* (Revolving) *in hire soule up and down / The wordes of this sodeyn* (impetuous) *Diomede, / His grete estat, and perel of the town, / And that she was alone and hadde nede / Of frendes help; and thus bygan to brede / The cause whi, the sothe for to telle, / That she took fully purpos for to dwelle. / 1071: To Diomede algate I wol be trewe*).

May is a 'fresshe' (1820), 'tendre creature' (1757); these are all the characteristic features which show how January estimates her. He sees his 'fresshe May' (1822) as a 'confort' (2148) to him. He worries so that he may behave in a coltish manner toward her. He expresses his wife's sprightliness in the metaphor charged with sensual overtones although the word 'fresshe' is applied to the fairness of a lady as to that of Emily<sup>25</sup> (I(A) 1066: . . . *he* (i.e. Palamon) *al the noble citee seigh, / And eek the gardyn, ful of braunches grene, / Ther as this fresshe Emelye the shene / Was in hire walk, and romed up and down*). Responding to January's love of the tender veal this fresh May, who values him not a bean, refers to the bloom of her youth as the 'tendre flour' of her wifhood (2190). The Wife of Bath's prime of life, though passed its prime, is spoken in the same term used by May's narrator, specifically with sexual implications: *I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age / In the actes and in fruyt of mariage* (113-114). January's 'tendre creature' also

---

<sup>25</sup> Cf. S. S. Hussey, *Chaucer: An Introduction*, London, 1977, p. 131. Hussey argues Emily can be compared to May.

is the object of his squire Damian's 'desyr' (1876), to whom Damian's narrator applies the word 'fresshe,' probably more or less with the same overtones as those of the word used by his master<sup>26</sup> (IV(E)2100: *Ne myghte he speke a word to fresshe May, / As to his purpos, of no swich mateere / But if that Januarie most it heere*). Damian's courtship determines his lady to 'han hym as hir leste' (she wished). Despite of her determination to love him 'benyngnely' (2093) May's love for him is virtually to 'struggle with' (2374) him. Such is May's love, so she is the kind of women who, if loses her beloved's love, conceives love for someone else.<sup>27</sup> Of course she is liker the wife of the merchant of the *Shipman's Tale* than Emily Palamon loves and serves.<sup>28</sup> It seems likely therefore that she again is not so gentle as to attract a knight like Troilus.<sup>29</sup>

January praises the sanctity of the marriage bond<sup>30</sup> in terms of the absolute submission of his wife to him as well as his amatory gratification with her. He expresses her submission to him in the term of courtly love 'love and service,' almost inevitable in description of courtly lovers as in *Troilus* (I 810: *What*

<sup>26</sup> Muscatine points out the word 'fresshe' is fifteen times applied to May. Muscatine, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the *Parliament of Fowls*, 566-567. The probable writing date of Chaucer's *Parliament* is about the year 1382 when he was composing *Troilus and Criseyde*.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. the *Knight's Tale*, 1143.

<sup>29</sup> Chaucer regards a lady in the same light with a wench. See the *Manciple's Tale*, 211-220.

<sup>30</sup> D. H. Green, classes the Merchant's praise of marriage in the category of hyperbolic irony. See Green, *Irony in the Medieval Romance*, Cambridge, 1979, p. 195.

*many a man hath love ful deere ybought / Twenty wynter that his lady wiste, / That nevere yet his lady mouth he kiste. / 816 : . . . evere in oon be fressh and grene / To serve and love his deere hertes queene, / And thynk it is a guerdon (reward for him), hire to serve, / A thousand fold moore than he kan deserve). January's 'love and its service' is expected from May (IV(E)1290 : . . . wele or wo she wole hym nat forsake ; / She nys nat wery hym to love and serve). January transfers the application of the term from the courtly lover to the object of his adoration. January's practical view of love and its service is based on his amorous relations with his beloved, not on the lover's devotional relations with his lady. The lover's devotion to his lady reflects the submission of the feudal vassal to his lord. His lover-service is carried even to his worship of her. An example is furnished by the troubadour Bernart de Ventadorn (XLIV 49: Good lady, nothing do I ask of you but that you take me as your servant, for I will serve you as I would a good lord, whatever I have in the way of reward).<sup>31</sup> May is not respected as a sovereign lord of January. Nor does she appear as a lady worthy of Damian's respect. The wife of the 'noble' knight January does not occupy a position of exalted superiority in respect to her husband, her would-be lover, or his squire Damian.*

May, fickle and licentious, succumbs with ease to her own desire and gives a ready response to her lover's wooing. Therefore she never adopts the indifferent attitude which the lady takes to her lover as in *A Complaint to his Lady* (88 : . . . ye be oon the worthiest on-lyve / And I the most unlykly for to thryve ; / Yit, for al this, witeth ye right wele / That ye ne

---

31 Quoted from Bernard O'Donoghue, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

*shul me from your servyse dryve / That I nil ay, with alle my wittes fyve, / Serve yow trewly, what wo so that I fele. / For I am set on yow in swich manere, / That thogh ye never wil upon me rewe (have pity), / I moste yow love, and been ever as trewe / As any man can, or may, on-lyve [here]. / But the more that I love yow, goodly free, / The lasse fynde I that ye loven me).* Nor does she know of the affection the lover for a long time conceives for her.<sup>32</sup> In the *Knight's Tale* Emily did know no more of the love of Palamon and Arcite for her than a cuckoo or a hare. The Knight says: *She woot namoore of al this hoot fare (behaviour), / By God, than woot a cokkow or an hare (1809-1810).* May lacks in the quality of 'daunger' although frequent in the ladies of romance; her lover,<sup>33</sup> to say nothing of her husband, scarcely presents the symptoms of love-sick inseparable from his service. Speaking of the doctrine that the lover must grow pale and lean, for example, the god of Love in the *Romaunt* says: *Such comyng, and such goyng, / Such hevynesse, and such wakyng, / Makith lovers, withouten ony wene (doubt), / Under her clothes pale and lene. / For Love leveth (restrains) colour ne cleernesse (brightness); / Who loveth trewe hath no fatnesse. / Thou shalt wel by thysilf see / That thou must nedis assayed be (2681-2688).* January or Damian, to one degree or another, hardly understands what courtly love is. In the *Parliament of Fowls* the falcon refutes the duck who urges arguments against courtly love, by saying that *what love is, thou canst nat seen ne gesse (602).* The noble falcon takes love as the ennoblement of the lover.

---

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Andreas's Rule xiv; see Andreas, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>33</sup> The necessity of secrecy is observed.

(Received October 23, 1984)