The Merchant’s Tale from The Canterbury Tales
(ca. 1387–1400)

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Introduction

The Merchant’s Tale revolves around non-normative bodies and minds. An aging knight, Januarie, perceives his impending mortality, marries a much younger woman, does himself with performance-enhancing spiced wine, and, shortly thereafter, finds himself blind. Meanwhile, a young squire of the household, Damian, takes to his bed in response to lovesickness and despair. The object of his desire, Januarie’s wife May, soon declares herself pregnant; in this putative condition she climbs a tree, engages in adulterous sex, alters her husband’s view of reality, and hops back down to the ground, all apparently within a few minutes’ time.

Disability studies serves as a useful focal point for considering these forms of “embodied variance” and perceiving survivorship strategies depicted in the poem. Even as the tale’s main characters disregard ethical, artistic, and religious values, they provide intriguing case studies in resiliency and flexibility.

Critical responses to the Merchant’s Tale often refer to what Derek Pearsall has succinctly called the tale’s “nastiness” (l. 165). A combination of factors create this impression, including the Merchant’s extended, negative descriptions of Januarie’s body and behavior, the decidedly unromantic sexual encounter between the young lovers, and the absence of any moral compass among the tale’s main characters. Moreover, the tale’s awkward combination of genres and echoes of other pilgrims’ tales make it difficult to connect with the Merchant himself or to revel in Chaucer’s literary artistry. In fact, the tale explicitly mocks this kind of aesthetic pleasure: as seen below, no sooner has Januarie evoked the Song of Songs in a (incongruously) lyrical invitation to May than the Merchant curtly derides the “olde, lewde wordes” of the speech (l. 757).

It is precisely this rejection of idealism, however, that establishes common ground between the Merchant’s Tale and disability studies. Many disability theorists have emphasized the potential for visions of human perfection to erase, dehumanize, or patronize individuals perceived as falling short of these standards. As Lennard Davis writes, Western culture has tended to privilege “a notion of wholeness, order, clean boundaries, as opposed to fragmentations, disordered bodies, [and] messy boundaries” (143). What we define as beautiful often relies upon strictly regulated modes of representation and choices of subject matter. Davis points out, for example, that sculptural depictions of nude bodies exclude “normal biological processes... there are no pregnant Venuses, there are no paintings of Venuses who are menstruating, micturating, defecating...there are no old Venuses” (l. 132). The Merchant’s Tale, by contrast, graphically depicts aging, copulation, and other “unmentionable” human experiences. Equally important, these moments emerge not as monstrous aberrations, but as part and parcel of everyday life. When May reads Damian’s note in the privy, the Mer-
CHANT describes the site as the place where “ye woot that every wight hath nede” (l. 557). Everyone’s body takes part in undignified processes, and everyone knows it. Crucially, this part of the tale highlights the possibilities inherent in the unseemly aspects of human experience. The privy provides May with a space to consider alternatives to her legally binding and repressive marriage.

We should acknowledge, of course, that May does not seem to engage in profound moral reflection as she reads Damian’s note. Minds and hearts in the Merchant’s Tale are no more reliable or transcendent than bodies. For example, the Merchant notes early on that “love is blind al day” (l. 206), an assertion that foreshadows Januarie’s physical loss of eyesight later in the tale. In most contexts, this saying associates visual impairment with powerful emotions that override social conventions or rational self-interest. It is difficult, however, to attribute any kind of emotional or spiritual authenticity to Januarie’s infatuation with May, or to May’s relationship with Damian. Instead of expressing inner truths, these characters’ decisions emerge via the interplay between internal urges and external stimuli. Far from a thunderbolt of desire, Januarie’s choice of May results from a gradual (“day to day”) activity of “heigh fantasye and curious businesse” that impresses itself upon his soul (ll. 185–87). Similarly, the Merchant makes clear that he does not know whether May’s feelings for Damian result from “destinee,” “aventure,” or some other cause (ll. 575–84), but he does explain that her heart has “taken swiche impression” of Damian that she resolves to take action (l. 586). In both instances, the protagonists’ choices reflect haphazard “impressions” rather than conscious thought or emotional connection. Their minds are as susceptible as the “warm wex” that is invoked by Januarie’s expectations of a pliable wife (l. 38) and used in May’s adulterous stratagem with the garden key (l. 725).

Cognitive vulnerability plays a crucial role in the tale’s final scene. Although May takes advantage of her husband’s blindness in order to consummate her relationship with Damian, it is Januarie’s suggestible mind that determines the tale’s eventual outcome. May’s deception exploits not just Januarie’s abrupt transition back into the sighted world, but also his anxiety about age-related cognitive impairment (“Ye maze, maze,” l. 995) and his strong desire to preserve his marriage and produce an heir. Without overstating May’s degree of liberty at the end of the tale, her actions should be connected to other Chaucerian speakers—male as well as female—in vulnerable situations who become extremely quick thinkers and adept fabricators. Drawing from her own experiences being misrepresented and manhandled within Januarie’s conjugal fantasies, May successfully manipulates her husband’s thought processes.

This is not to say that we should all ascend our own pyries—neither May nor any other character in the tale serves as a viable role model of ethical agency. But we would be equally mistaken to ignore May’s striking combination of elasticity and toughness; her ability to perceive the arbitrary meanings mapped onto bodies and minds; and her active reshaping of the story she has been forced to inhabit. Read through the lens of disability studies, the Merchant’s Tale’s value resides in its privileging of intervention over inspiration.

Bibliography


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[After lamenting the “sorwe” he has experienced in his own recent marriage, the Merchant introduces Januarie, a “worthy knyght” in Lombardy who has begun to contemplate wedlock after sixty years of bachelorhood. Having noted the praise of marriage found in many textual sources, the Merchant depicts a lengthy debate among Januarie and two friends about the institution’s costs and benefits. Januarie eventually chooses to marry and settles on a young bride named May—not by directly courting her, but by means of an odd combination of internal reflection (“heigh fantasie”) and legal maneuvering. The wedding includes all the usual formalities and festivities; but Damian, a young squire in Januarie’s household, is painfully overcome with desire for May. Unaware of this complication and fortified with wine and spices, Januarie prepares to consummate the union.]

426 The bryde was broght a-bedde as stille as stoon; And whan the bed was with the preest y-blessed, Out of the chambre hath every wight him dressed.° And Januarie hath faste in armes take His fresshe May, his paradys, his make.° He lulleth° hir, he kisseth hir ful ofte With thikke bristles of his berd unsofte, Lyk to the skin of houndfish, sharp as brere,° For he was shave al newe in his manere. He rubbeth hir aboute hir tendre face, And seyde thus, “allas! I moot° trespass To yow, my spouse, and yow gretly of- fende, Er° tyme come that I wil doun de- scende. But nathelees, considereth this,” quod he, 440 °This wol be doon at leyser° parfitly." It is no fors° how longe that we pleye; In trewe wedlok wedded be we tweye,° And blessed be the yok that we been inne," For in our actes we mowe° do no sinne. A man may do no sinne with his wyf, Ne hurte him-selven with his owene knyf; For we han leve to pleye us by the lawe." Thus laboureth he til that the day gan dawe," And than he taketh a sop in fyn clarr- ree," 450 And upright in his bed than° sitteth he, And after that he sang ful loude and clere, And kiste his wyf, and made wantoun chere." He was al coltish, ful of ragerye," And ful of largon° as a flekked pye," The slakke skin aboute his nekke sha keth, Whyl that he sang; so chaunteth he and craketh." But God wot° what that May thoughte in hir herte, Whan she him saugh up sittinge in his sherte,° In his night-cappe, and with his nekke lene; 460 She preyseth nat his pleying worth a bene. Than seide he thus, “my reste wol I take; Now day is come, I may no lenger wake.” And doun he leyde his heed, and sleep til pryme."
And afterward, whan that he saugh his tyme,
Up ryseth Ianuarie; but freshe May
Holdeth" hir chambre un-to the fourthe
day.
As usage is of wyves for the beste.
For every labour som-tyme moot han reste,
Or elles" longe may he nat endure;
This is to seyn, no lyves creature,
Be it of fish, or brid," or beest, or man.
Now wol I speke of woful Damian,
That languissheth for love, as ye shul here;
Therfore I speke to him in this manere:
I seye, “O sely° Damian, allas!
Answere to my demaunde, as in this cas,
How shaltow" to thy lady freske May
Telle thy wo? She wole alwey seye ‘nay’;
Eek° if thou speke, she wol thy wo biwreye;°
God be thyn help, I can no bettre seye.”
This syke° Damian in Venus fyr
So brenneth," that he dyeth for desyr;
For which he putte his lyf in aventure," No lenger mighte he in this wyse endure;
But privelie a penner" gan he borwe," And in a lettre wroote he al his sorwe,
In manere of a compleynt or a lay," Un-to his faire freske lady May.
And in a purs of silk, heng on hys sherre,
He hath it put, and leyde it at his herte.
The mone° that, at noon, was, thilke° day
That Ianuarie hath wedded freske May,
In two of Taur, was in-to Cancre gliden;°
So longe hath Maius in hir chambre biden," As custome is un-to thise nobles alle.
A bryde shal eten in the halle,
Til dayes foure or three dayes atte leste Y-passed been;" than lat hir go to feste.°
The fourthe day compleet fro noon to noon,
Whan that the heighe masse was y-doon,
In halle sit this Ianuarie, and May
As fresh as is the brighte someres day.
And so bifel, how that this gode man Remembred him upon this Damian,
And seyde, “Seinte Marie! how may this be,
That Damian entendeth" nat to me?
Is he ay° syk, or how may this bityde?”°
His squyeres, whiche that° stoden ther bisyde,
Excused him by-cause of his siknesse,
Which letted° him to doon his bissy-nesse;
Noon other cause mighte make him tarie.
“That me forthinketh,”° quod this Ianuarie,
“He is a gentil° squyer, by my trouthe!
If that he deyde, it were harm and routhe;°
He is as wys, discreet, and as secre° As any man I woot° of his degree;
And ther-to manly and eek° servisable," And for to been a thrifty° man right able.
But after mete," as sone as ever I may,
I wol my-self visyte him and eek May,
To doon him al the confort that I can."
And for that word him blessed every
man,
That, of his bountee and his gentillesse,
He wolde so conforten in siknesse
His squyer, for it was a gentil dede.
"Dame," quod this Ianuarie, "tak good
hede,
At-after mete ye, with your wommen
alle,
When ye han been in chambre out of
this halle,
That alle ye go see this Damian;
530
Doth him disport," he is a gentil man;
And telleth him that I wol him visyte,
Have I no-thing but rested me a lyte;"°
And spede yow faste,° for I wole abyde
Til that ye slepe faste by my syde."
And with that word he gan to him to
calle
A squyer, that was marchal° of his halle,
And tolde him certeyn thinges, what he
wolde.
This fresshe May hath streight hir wey
y-holde,°
With alle hir wommen, un-to Damian.
540
Doun by his beddes syde sit she than,
Confortinge him as goodly as she may.
This Damian, whan that his tyme he
say,°
In secree wise his purs, and eek his
bille,"°
In which that he y-writen hadde his
wille,"°
Hath put in-to hir hand, with-ouren
more,"°
Save that he syketh° wonder depe and
sore,
And softly to hir right thus seyde he:
"Mercy! and that ye nat discovere° me;
For I am deed,"° if that this thing be
kid."°
550
This purs hath she inwith° hir bosom
hid,
And wente hir wey; ye gete namore of
me.
But un-to Ianuarie y-comen is she,
That on his beddes syde sit ful softe.
He taketh hir, and kisseth hir ful ofte,
And leyde him doun to slepe, and that
anon.
She feyned hir as that she moste gon°
Ther-as° ye woot that every wight mot
nede.°
And when she of this bille hath taken
hede,
She rente° it al to cloutes° atte laste,
560
And in the privee° softly it caste.
Who studieth° now but faire fresshe
May?
Adoun by olde Ianuarie she lay,
That sleep, til that the coughe hath him
awaked;
Anon he preyde hir strepen hir al
naked;
He wolde of hir, he seyde, han som
pleaunce,
And seyde, hir clothes dide him encom-
braunce,
And she obeyeth, be hir lief or looth.°
But lest that precious° folk be with me
wrooth,°
How that he wroghte,° I dar nat to yow
telle;
570
Or whether hir thoughte it paradys or
helle;
But here I lete hem werken in hir wyse
Til evensong° rong, and that they moste
aryse.
[Having learned of Damian’s passion for her, May takes pity on Damian and lets him know by letter that, when the occasion allows, she will fulfill his desires. Damian immediately feels better and waits humbly upon Januarie. In the meantime, Januarie decides to augment his pleasures by creating a walled garden. It is so lovely that the married gods Pluto and Proserpina take their pleasure there, along with their retinue of fairies. Januarie keeps the key to the garden on his person at all times and regularly takes advantage of its privacy to have sex with May there. As the Merchant laments below, however, Fortune presents Januarie with an unexpected challenge.]

665 O sodeyn hap,° o thou fortune instable,
Lyk to the scorpioun so deceivable,
That flaterest with thyne heed when
thou wolt stinge;°
Thy tayl is deeth, thurgh thyne envenim-
inge.°
O brotil° Ioye! o swete venim queynte!°
670 O monstre, that so subtily canst peynte
Thy yiftes,° under hewe° of stedfast-
nesse,
That thou deceyvest bothe more and
lesse!
Why hastow° Ianuarie thus deceyved,
That haddest him for thy ful frend
receyved?
And now thou hast biraft° him bothe
hise yen,°
For sorwe of which desyreth he to
dyen.°
Allas! this noble Ianuarie free,
Amidde his lust and his prosperitee,
Is woxen° blind, and that al sodeynly.

680 He weperth and he wayleth pitously;
And ther-with-al° the fyre of Ialousye,°
Lest that his wyf sholde falle in som
folye,
So brente° his herre, that he wolde
fayn°
That som man bothe him and hir had
slayn.
For neither after his deeth, nor in his
lyf,
Ne wolde he that she were love ne wyf,°
But ever live as widwe in clothes blake,
Soul° as the turtle that lost hath hir
make.°
But atte laste, after a monthe or tweye,
690 His sorwe gan aswage,° sooth° to seye;
For whan he wiste° it may noon other
be,°
He paciently took his adversitee;
Save,”° out of doute, he may nat for-
goon°
That he nas Ialous evermore in oon;°
Which Ialousye it was so outrageous,
That neither in halle, nin” noon other
hous,
Ne in noon other place, never-the-mo,
He nolde suffre° hir for to ryde or go,
But-if that he had hand on hir alway;
For which ful ofte° wepeth fresshe May,
That loveth Damian so benignely,°
That she mot outher dyen sodeynly,°
Or elles she mot han° him as hir leste;°
She wayteth whan hir herte wolde
breste.°
Up-on that other syde Damian
Bicomen is° the sorwefulleste man
That ever was; for neither night ne day
Ne mighte he speke a word to fresshe
May,
As to his purpos, of no swich° matere,
710 But-if that Ianuarie moste it here,°
That hadde an hand up-on hir evermo.°
But nathelees, by wryting to and fro
And privee° signes, wiste he what she
mente;
And she knew eek the fyn° of his
entente.
O Ianuarie, what mighte it thee availle,°
Thou mightest see as fer° as shippes
saille?
For also° good is blind deceyved be,
As he deceyved when a man may se.
Lo, Argus,° which that hadde an hun-
dred yen,°
For al that ever he coude poure or
pryen,°
Yet was he blent;° and, God wot,° so
ben mo,°
That wenen° wisly that it be nat so.
Passe over is an ese, I sey na-more.
This fresshe May, that I spak of so yore,°
In warme wex hath emprented the
cliket,°
That Ianuarie bar° of the smale wiket,°
By which in-to his gardin ofte he wente.
And Damian, that knew al hir entente,
The cliket countrefeted prively;
730 Ther nis na-more to seye, but hastily
Som wonder by this cliket shal bityde,°
Which ye shul heren, if ye wole abyde.°

[The Merchant briefly meditates upon trick-
ery in love as found in Ovid and other sourc-
es.]

740 But now to purpos; et° that dayes eighte
Were passed, er the monthe of Iuil,°

That Ianuarie hath caught so great a wil,
Thurgh egging° of his wyf, him for to
pleye
In his gardin, and no wight° but they
tweye,
That in a morwe un-to this May seith
he:
“Rys up, my wyf, my love, my lady free;
The turtles vois° is herd, my douve°
wete;
The winter is goon, with alle his reynes
were;°
Com forth now, with thyn eyen
columbyn°
750 How fairer been° thy brestes than is
wyn!
The gardin is enclosed al aboute;
Com forth, my whyte spouse; out of
doute,
Thou hast me wounded in myn herte,
o wyf!
No spot of thee ne knew I al my lyf.
Com forth, and lat us taken our dis-
port,°
I chees° thee for my wyf and my
confort.”
Swiche olde lewed° wordes used he;
On° Damian a signe made she,
That he sholde go biforen° with his
cliket.°
760 This Damian thanne hath opened the
wiket,
And in he stirte,° and that in swich
manere,
That no wight mighte it see neither
y-here;
And stille he sit under a bush anoon.°
This Ianuarie, as blind as is a stoon,
With Maius in his hand, and no wight
mo,
In-to his fresshe gardin is ago,
And clapte° to the wiket sodeynly
“Now, wyf,” quod he, “heer nis but thou
and I,
That art the creature that I best love.

For, by that lord that sit in heven above,
Lever ich hadde dyen° on a knyf,
Than thee offende, trewe dere wyf!
For goddes sake, thenk how I thee
chees,
Noght for no covetyse, doutelees,
But only for the love I had to thee.
And though that I be old, and may nat
see,
Beth° to me trewe, and I shal telle yow
why.
Three thinges, certes," shul ye winne
ther-by;
First, love of Crist, and to your-self
honour,

And al myn heritage," toune and tour;°
I yeve it yow," make the chartres° as yow
leste;
This shal be doon to-morwe er sonne
reste.°
So wisly god my soule bringe in blisse,
I prey yow first, in covenant ye me
kisse.
And thogh that I be Ialous, wyte° me
noght.
Ye been so depe enprented in my
thoght,
That, whan that I considere your beau-
tee,
And ther-with-al the unlykly elde° of
me,
I may nat, certes, thogh I sholde dye,

Forbere to been out of your companye
For verray love; this is with-outen
doute.
Now kis me, wyf, and lat us rome
aboure.”
This fresshe May, whan she thise wordes
herde,
Benignely to Januarie answerde,
But first and forward she began to wepe,
“I have,” quod she, “a soule for to kepe
As wel as ye, and also myn honour,
And of my wyfhood thilke tendre flour,°
Which that I have assured in your hond,

Wherfore° I wolde answere in this
manere
By the leve of yow, my lord so dere:
I prey to god, that never dawe° the day
That I ne sterve," as foule as womman
may,
If ever I do un-to my kin that shame,
Or elles I empeyre° so my name,
That I be fals; and if I do that lakke,°
Do strepe me and put me in a sakke,
And in the nexte river do me drenche.°

I am a gentil womman and no wenche.°
Why speke ye thus? but men ben ever
untrewe,
And wommen have repreve of yow ay
newe.°
Ye han non other contenance," I leve,"
But speke to us of untrust and repreve.”
And with that word she saugh wher
Damian
Sat in the bush, and coughen she bigan,
And with hir finger signes made she,
That Damian sholde clime up-on a
tree,
That charged was with fruit, and up he wente;
820 For verraily° he knew all his entente,
And every signe that she coude make
Wel bet° than Ianuarie, his owene make.°
For in a lettre she had told him al
Of this matere, how he werchen shal.°
And thus I lette him sitte up-on the pyrie,°
And Ianuarie and May rominge myrie.

[The Merchant turns his attention to a far corner of the garden, where Pluto and Proserpyna are discussing the events unfolding among Januarie, May, and Damian. Pluto deplores the disrespect shown to “this olde, blynde, worthy knyght” and describes May as a case study in women’s untrustworthiness. He vows that Januarie will regain his sight and learn about Damian and May’s treachery. Proserpyna, for her part, defends women against Pluto’s accusations and asserts that she will provide May with a sufficient answer once Januarie learns the truth. She notes that she herself is a woman; if she does not speak out, she will “swelle til myn herte breke.” The couple mutually decides to stop arguing with one another.]

928 Now lat us turne agayn to Ianuarie,
That in the gardin with his faire May
930 Singeth, ful merier than the papeiay°
“Yow love I best, and shal, and other noon.”
So longe aboute the aleyes° is he goon,
Til he was come agaynes thilke pyrie,
Wher-as this Damian sitteth fill myrie
An heigh,° among the fresshe leves grene.

This fresshe May, that is so bright and shene,°
Gan for to syke,” and seyde, “allas, my syde!
Now sir,” quod she, “for aught that may bityde,”
I moste han of the peres that I see,
940 Or I mot° dye, so sore longeth me°
To eten of° the smale peres grene.
Help, for hir love that is of hevene quene!
I telle yow wel, a womman in my plyt°
May han to fruit° so greet an appetyt
That she may dyen, but° she of it have.”
“Allas!” quod he, “that I ne had heer a knave°
That coude climbe; allas! allas!” quod he,
“That I am blind.” “Ye, sir, no fors,”°
quod she:
“But wolde ye vouche-sauf,” for goddes sake,
950 The pyrie° inwith° your armes for to take,
(For wel I woot that ye mistruste me)
Thanne sholde I climbe wel y-nogh,”° quod she,
“So I my foot mighte sette upon your bak.”
“Certes,” quod he, “ther-on shal be no lak,”
Mighte I yow helpen with myn herte blood.”
He stoupeth doun, and on his bak she stood,
And caughte hir by a twiste,° and up she gooth.
Ladies, I prey yow that ye be nat wrooth;
960 And sodeynly anon this Damian
Gan pullen up the smok,° and in he
throng.°
And whan that Pluto saugh this grete
wrong,
To Januarie he gaf° agayn his sighte,
And made him see, as wel as ever he
mighte.
And whan that he hadde caught his
sighte agayn,
Ne was ther never man of thing so
fayn.°
But on his wyf his thoght was evermo;
Up to the tree he caste his eyen two,
And saugh that Damian his wyf had
dressed°
970
In swich manere, it may nat ben ex-
pressed
But if I wolde speke uncurteisly:
And up he yaf° a roring and a cry
As doth the moder whan the child shal
dye:
“Out! help! allas! harrow!” he gan to
crye,
“O stronge lady store,° what dostow?”°
And she answerde, “sir, what eyleth°
yow?
Have pacience, and reson in your
minde,
I have yow holpe° on bothe your eyen
blinde.
Up peril of my soule, I shal nat lye,
980
As me was taught, to hele with your
yen,"°
Was no-thing bet° to make yow to see
Than strugle with a man up-on a tree.
God woor, I dide it in ful good entente.°
“Strugle!” quod he, “ye, algate° in it
wente!
God yeve yow bothe on shames deeth
to dyen!
He swyved° thee, I saugh it with myne
yen,
And elles be I hanged by the halsh°

“Thanne is,” quod she, “my medicyne a
fals;
For certeinly, if that ye mighte see,
990
Ye wolde nat seyn thise wordes un-to
me
Ye han som glimsing° and no parfit°
sighte.”
“I see,” quod he, “as wel as ever I
mighte,
Thonked be God! with bothe myne eyen
two,
And by my trouthe, me thoughte he
dide thee so.”
“Ye maze,”° maze, gode sire,” quod she,
“This thank have I for I have maad yow
see;
Allas!”° quod she, “that ever I was so
kinde!”
“Now, dame,” quod he, “lat al passe out
of minde.
Com doun, my lief,"° and if I have mis-
sayd,"°
1000
God help me so, as I am yvel apayd."°
But, by my fader soule, I wende han
seyn,"°
How that this Damian had by thee
leyn,"°
And that thy smok had leyn up-on his
brest.”
“Ye, sire,”° quod she, “ye may wene as
yow lest;°
But, sire, a man that waketh out of his
sleep,
He may nat sodeynly wel taken keep
Up-on a thing, ne seen it parfitly
Right so a man, that longe hath blind
y-be,"°
Til that he be adawed° verraily;
1010 Ne may nat sodeynly so wel y-see,
First whan his sighte is newe come
ageyn,
As he that hath a day or two y-seyn.
Til that your sighte y-satled be° a whyle,
Ther may ful many a sighte yow bigyle.°
Beth war," I prey yow; for, by hevene
king,
Ful many a man weneth° to seen a
thing,
And it is al another than it semeth.
He that misconceyveth," he misdem-
eth."°
And with that word she leep doun fro
the tree.
1020 This Ianuarie, who is glad but he?
He kisseth hir, and clippeth° hir ful
ofte,
And on hir wombe he stroketh hir ful
softe,
And to his palays° hoom he hath hir
lad.°
Now, gode men, I pray yow to be glad.
Thus endeth heer my tale of Ianuarie;
God blesse us and his moder Seinte
Marie!
Endnotes

1 The text is taken from The Canterbury Tales, edited by Walter Skeat, The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer, 2nd edn. (Clarendon Press, 1900). This text is in the public domain, released on July 22, 2007. I have provided the footnotes and endnotes and silently changed some instances of capitalization and punctuation where it seemed to facilitate comprehension.


3 We might compare May, for example, to Chauntecleer the rooster in the Nun's Priest's Tale, who escapes the fox’s jaws by conjuring up a triumphant speech the fox might make. Although less directly threatened, Jankin the squire in the Summoner's Tale shows a quickness similar to May's when he devises the clever interpretation of the lord's mighty fart.

4 While Proserpina presumably helps her at this moment, May has already demonstrated through her plotting and use of multiple forms of communication that she is resourceful and clever in her own right.

5 Januarie and Damian also demonstrate this ability, albeit to a less striking extent: Januarie learns to live with his blindness (ll. 691–92), and Damian eventually picks up a penner in an attempt to do something about his lovesickness (l. 485).

6 For a seminal critique of the connection between disability and inspiration, see Stella Young, “I’m not your inspiration, thank you very much,” TEDxSydney (2014), http://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much).

7 In Greek mythology, Argus is a giant with a hundred eyes.

8 These lines evoke the biblical Song of Solomon (e.g., Song of Solomon 7:11).