Chapter Seven

Chaucerian Commerce: Bourgeois Ideology and Poetic Exchange in the Merchant's *and* Shipman's Tales

"That's what they all want, isn't it, these people who live in corners inside themselves, in blinds and hidey-holes? A second and safer identity. Teach us how to live, they say, as someone else."

The *Tales* of Fragments I–III reveal an attitude toward history and the subject that is at once deeply ambivalent and characteristically Chaucerian. On the one hand is a persistent and penetrating interest in the specific historical conditions of life and a willingness not merely to represent but to accommodate dissonant voices and oppositional political forces. But on the other is a studied retreat from the sphere of history into a socially undetermined subjectivity, a realm of private value defined by its apartness from the public world of event. This is an ambivalence that we have come to recognize as a central characteristic of bourgeois liberalism. The very definition of life in terms of an opposition between society and the individual, history and the subject, is now understood to be typical of bourgeois ways of thinking, a model of life that seeks to preserve an arena free from social contamination. That Chaucer developed such a model is surely one of the reasons that he has become the only medieval poet whom modern readers recognize as a kindred spirit.

Does this also mean that Chaucer is a bourgeois writer in the sense that such a designation would have been understood in his own society? He was, after all, a product of the merchant patriciate, and his work in the customs immersed him in the world and ethos of commerce. There is also considerable evidence that Chaucer himself might

have thought of the *Canterbury Tales* as a bourgeois production. Critics have long noted that the account of English society that he offers in both the *General Prologue* and throughout the *Tales* gives unusually ample space to that middle range of society that could not easily be accommodated to either of the prevailing social models, neither the implicit binary division of society into "gentils" and "churls" nor the traditional ternary model prescribed by estates theory. And more recent criticism has further argued that the *Tales* are organized according to principles that seem to derive from a bourgeois locale. Paul Strohm has pointed out that "the social ethic of the pilgrimage" is that of the silent gildsmen: "fraternity, expressed through vital and egalitarian social interchange, is the order of the day."[1] Carl Lindahl has argued that the festive form of the *Tales* imitates "the mixed class revels" that were at the center of the ceremonial practices by which the urban governing classes sought to reaffirm the wholeness of the community.[2] The *quiting* principle by which the succession of *Tales* is articulated invokes, in R. A. Shoaf's words, "the sphere of economics, the marketplace, [as] the space where community, mutual and just exchange, is most visibly and strenuously tested."[3] Patricia Eberle has shown that the *Canterbury Tales* is saturated with commercial language, which not only carries implications about its audience but serves to locate the text within the world of *negotium*—the world of business, exchange, and commerce—rather than in the courtly world of *otium*.[4] Finally, while Chaucer's immediate circle was comprised of men who were, like himself, *gentil*, and whose professional and social lives centered on the court, many of his fifteenth-century readers, to judge from manuscript provenance, were "among the business and administrative classes, especially in London."[5]

1. Paul Strohm, "The Social and Literary Scene in England," in *The Cambridge Chaucer Companion*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 14. See also Strohm's "Form and Social Statement in *Confessio Amantis* and *The Canterbury Tales*," *SAC* 1 (1979): 17–40, and *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

2. "The Festive Form of the *Canterbury Tales*," *ELH* 52 (1985): 531–74. See also Charles Phythian-Adams, "Ceremony and the Citizen: The Communal Year at Coventry 1450–1550," in *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500–1700*, ed. Peter Clark and Paul Slack (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), 57–85.

3. R. A. Shoaf, *Dante, Chaucer, and the Currency of the Word* (Norman: Pilgrim Books, 1983), 167–68.

4. Patricia Eberle, "Commercial Language and the Commercial Outlook in the *General Prologue*," *ChR* 18 (1983–84): 161–74.

5. Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London: Unwin, 1985), 298. For Chaucer's circle, see Paul Strohm, "Chaucer's Audience," *L&H* 5 (1977): 26–41.

Most important, the *Tales* often promote values that, whatever their pedigree, are carefully detached from any specific social location. This is most tellingly the case with Chaucerian *gentillesse*, whose two primary spokespersons in the *Tales* are the Wife of Bath and the Franklin. Non*gentils* themselves, they tell tales derived from aristocratic models (an Arthurian romance, a Breton lai) but revised in order to counter the class-specific definition of *gentillesse* given by their immediate predecessors, the socially thrusting Man of Law and the snobbish Squire. What makes the Wife and the Franklin bourgeois is not that they promote specifically bourgeois values, whatever these might be, but that they place their tales in the service of an aristocratic value whose full force can be made available only when it is detached from its social origin. It is the effacement of social location that is the quintessentially bourgeois strategy. The Wife and the Franklin set aside their own social identities not in order to adopt other, better ones (both are quite candid about their non*gentil* status) but instead to promote values that, as formulated, transcend social determination. They assume that true values, and their true selves, are not socially determined at all—a claim that we have come to recognize as central to bourgeois ideology.

But was it so for Chaucer? Did the urban bourgeoisie of late-medieval England, and specifically the merchant patriciate from which Chaucer himself emerged, in fact maintain this conception of identity formation? It is to Chaucer's two tales of bourgeois commercialism, the *Merchant's* and the *Shipman's Tales*, that we must turn in order to frame an answer to this question. Criticism has generally assumed that these *Tales* represent Chaucer's rejection of the aggressive commercialism of the merchant class and a defense of the traditional organicism of medieval society. Thus the Merchant has been understood to be a secret usurer whose *Tale* overflows with acidic misogyny and a blasphemous disrespect for sacred images, while the *Shipman's Tale* is read as indicting a profit-and-loss mentality that turns all human values into commodities. But these readings seem to me both to simplify the textual evidence and to depend upon a set of assumptions about the economic and political shape of Chaucer's world that can no longer be maintained.

I

Literary medievalists have generally assumed that the commercial activity of the Middle Ages, and the urban culture it spawned, were oppositional forces within feudal society, that they contained the seeds of

the capitalist future.[6] On the one hand, runs this familiar account, was the natural economy of the feudal countryside, a world bound together by ties of mutual obligation and stabilized by traditional standards of status; on the other was the monetized market economy of the city, pervaded with a dehumanizing cash nexus that commodified natural value, freed the individual from feudal collectivity, and gave free rein to an ambitious social mobility. But the idea that the merchant class was the prime mover in the economy and society of preindustrial England, that it functioned as a nonfeudal formation from which emanated the forces that finally transformed feudalism into capitalism, is much less a historical fact than one of capitalism's own, most cherished myths. It derives from the "commercialization" model of economic history that assumes that capitalism is the natural condition of economic man, that the history of economic life records the gradual liberation of the forces of innovation and production from the fetters of religious and social inhibition.[7] On this account, the crucial distinction within medieval culture is that between the country and the city, and the agent of economic and social progress is the merchant. According to Carlo Cipolla, "In medieval Europe the town came to represent an abnormal growth, a peculiar body totally foreign to the surrounding environment"; in M. M. Postan's phrase, cities were "non-feudal islands in a feudal sea."[8] The countryside, bound by ties of obligation enforced by the unchallenged dominance of the landowning nobility, represented the social backwardness of feudalism's subsistence economy, while the cities—where *Stadtluft machts frei*—provided (to cite Cipolla again) "a new and dynamic world . . . where sclerotic traditional institutions and discriminations no longer counted, and where there would be ample reward for initiative, daring, and industriousness."[9] Similarly, it was the

6. This discussion recapitulates some of the material offered at fuller length in chapters 3 and 5.

7. For an analysis of the "commercialization" model, see Robert Brenner, "Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-industrial Europe" and "The Agrarian Roots of European Capitalism," in *The Brenner Debate*, ed. T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 38–40, and 241–42. Also relevant is John Merrington, "Town and Country in the Transition to Capitalism," in *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, ed. Rodney Hilton (London: Verso, 1978), 170–95.

8. Carlo Cipolla, "The Origins," in *The Fontana Economic History of Europe: The Middle Ages*, ed. Carlo Cipolla (London: Fontana Books, 1972), 18; M. M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), 239.

9. Carlo Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution: European Economy and Society, 1000–1700* (New York: Norton, 1980), 146; see also Robert S. Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950–1350* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

merchant who provided Europe with not simply the commercial activity that made possible a better life but with a culture that legitimized a range of attitudes upon which the future could be built: acquisitiveness and accumulation, to be sure, and calculative and calibratory attitudes toward space and time—but also a republican sense of "cooperation among equals" given expression in the horizontally organized guilds and confraternities that replaced the vertical repressiveness of feudal social relations.[10]

Another account is possible. To begin with, as we have seen, virtually all modern historians of medieval Europe agree that the notion that the medieval agricultural economy was a natural economy, innocent of either money or markets, is a figment of the Romantic imagination. On the contrary, from at least the eleventh century the medieval rural world was saturated not only with money but with sophisticated instruments of money management, including credit. The agrarian economy always directed a significant portion of its production to the market, and there existed since at least the twelfth century both a vigorous, monetized, and at times credit-based peasant land market, a market for agricultural wage labor, and small-scale but essential rural industry and commodity production. Conversely, the city, far from functioning as a productive and progressive element in the late-medieval English economy, served primarily as a site for the circulation of capital generated in the country, extracted by the landowning class, and spent by them in large part on luxury goods—including their most expensive luxury, warfare. The economically *dynamic* sector of the economy was not the city but the country, and the prime mover in the transition from feudalism to capitalism was not merchant capital but a rurally based independent commodity production financed by peasant producers able to retain more of their surplus value. Hence recent historians have concluded that, in Rodney Hilton's words, "the so-called commercial revolution in no way altered the feudal mode of production"; the city was not an anomalous formation but instead "an essential institution of medieval society, closely integrated with all strata of the rural population and constituting an essential element in the political structure of the feudal states."[11] Rather than themselves initiating a change in economic structure, cities were in fact the *result* of a growing seigneurial demand for luxury goods: seigneurial incomes in cash preceded rather

10. Cipolla, *Before the Industrial Revolution*, 148.

11. The first citation is from *Transition*, 23, the second from "Warriors and Peasants," *New Left Review* 83 (1974), 89. See also J. L. Bolton, *The Medieval English Economy, 1150–1500*, 2d ed. (London: Dent, 1980), 246–86.

than followed from the luxury trade and the growth of urbanization served to bring it into existence.

Second, the mental habits associated with capitalism—calculative and calibratory attitudes toward space, time, and labor, a concern with profit maximization, familiarity with financial transactions, and a general rationalization of economic life—were in no sense confined to the merchant class of the medieval city but were widespread throughout the late-medieval world.[12] Both the feudal nobility and the Church were at every level concerned with the acquisition and use of money. As an international institution the Church received virtually all of its revenues in the form of money and it routinely deployed vast amounts of cash—facts that were not lost upon its critics. And in the administration of their estates, monastic landowners took the lead in applying techniques of quantification and measurement, and strategies of management, that maximized profits and increased capital worth.[13] Similarly, the landholding nobility was more than a little familiar with commerce, the world of money, and the cash nexus. Landowners throughout the medieval period imposed a daunting array of money payments upon their tenants and showed, in the management of their estates, a shrewd alertness to the economic requirements of their changed circumstances.[14] Indeed, feudalism itself "was becoming," in the words of K. B. McFarlane, "for all practical purposes a complex network of marketable privileges and duties."[15]

12. In explaining the emergence of capitalism as the dominant form of economic organization in the West, Max Weber stressed above all its rational organization of free labor, a task that entailed the creation of both a pool of wage laborers (accomplished in England through the destruction of the peasant economy in the sixteenth century) and of a bourgeois class capable of such rational organization. This capacity to apply "exact calculation, which is the foundation of everything else," to the production of profit was initiated and sustained by merchants, who in this sense functioned as history's prime movers. For representative discussions, see Max Weber, *Selections in Translation*, ed. W. G Runciman, trans. Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 138–73, 290–314, 331–40.

13. For the role of monasticism in the development of the calculative pursuit of profit-maximization, see H. E. Hallam, "The Medieval Social Picture," in *Feudalism, Capitalism and Beyond*, ed. Eugene Kamenka and J. S. Neale (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1975), 29–49.

14. See Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1962 [1948]), 243–44, 256–63; Harry A. Miskimin, *The Economy of Early Renaissance Europe, 1300–1460* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975 [1969]), 32–47; and K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), 53.

15. K. B. McFarlane, *England in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Hambledon Press, 1981), 24.

Nor was the quintessentially noble activity of warfare in any sense free from the cash nexus. Since at least the twelfth century the feudal requirement of military service had been commuted into a cash payment, and soldiers of all ranks who participated in the Hundred Years War contracted for salary. Indeed, the best form of booty to be wished for was a noble prisoner who could then be ransomed for cash—about as pure an instance of the commodification of natural value as one can imagine. At the head of their ledgers merchants habitually wrote the motto, "In the name of God and of profit," a contradiction that commentators have seen as typifying the mercantile ethic.[16] And yet in his treatise on chivalry the preeminent French knight Geoffroi de Charny—who died at the battle of Poitiers defending his king's standard—said that the knight fought "de proffiter avecques l'onneur."[17] The nobleman was all too capable of operating in the commercial world, as many merchants discovered to their cost when the king and his barons used their political power to drain off merchant profit to finance their own chivalric adventures, especially the Hundred Years War.[18] Far from being undone by the unfamiliar *idea* of money, as elegant but fanciful literary accounts have suggested, it was the *fact* of money, or rather its absence, that distressed medieval aristocrats.[19] Most of their wealth was in land, whose value was severely undermined by the agricultural depression of the later Middle Ages; they developed extravagant tastes for luxury goods that they could not afford; and they insisted upon trying to recoup their losses by persistent recourse to the highly unreliable lottery of warfare.[20] Conversely, the peasantry, far from being sunk into rural idiocy by the unending round of toil, was in fact a highly stratified and politically self-aware class that took advantage of the many opportunities for self-improvement available in the changing

16. For a specific example of this motto, see Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963 [1957]), 9.

17. *Le Livre de chevalerie*, in *Oeuvres de Froissart*, ed. Kervyn de Lettenhove (Brussels: De Vaux, 1873), vol. 1, pt. 3, 468. For the profits of war, see above, chapter 3, 172 *n15*.

18. See R. E. Kaeuper, *War, Justice and Public Order: England and France in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 32–116.

19. For a powerful version of such an account, see R. Howard Bloch, *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 164–74.

20. For a general account, see Miskimin, *Economy of Early Renaissance Europe*, 14–72; Léopold Genicot in *The Cambridge Economic History*, ed. M. M. Postan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 1:703–24; Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 27–108.

world of late-medieval agriculture to develop into the most dynamic players in the economic game.[21]

Third, medieval cities, far from being "non-feudal islands in a feudal sea," replicated and even intensified the traditional feudal patterns of dominance and subordination that were actually breaking down in the rural world. Except for a brief, enigmatic period in the late 1370s and early 1380s, London, like other English cities, was run by a self-perpetuating oligarchy of leading merchants, while retailers and artisans—not to speak of journeyman wage laborers—were effectively excluded from political influence. In fact, probably less than a quarter of the adult males in London were enfranchised freemen, the rest being known as "foreigns."[22] Not surprisingly, then, the primary social value in late-medieval London was not freedom but public order. As Sylvia Thrupp has said,

> The central psychological prop of the economic and political inequalities that developed was in the individual's inescapable respect for authority. . . . The bourgeois context did nothing to free the individual from this kind of pressure but seems rather to have intensified it. . . . Among responsible citizens, . . . the necessity of public order was probably the dominating political idea.[23]

In order to submerge all signs of political or economic conflict beneath a sense of social wholeness, the ruling class of the medieval city both fostered rituals of corporate identity—such as the Corpus Christi processions—and maintained a highly visible and minutely graduated social hierarchy.[24] There were ranks both among and within the various fellowships, gilds, and councils that brought citizens together, distinctions that were carefully maintained by sumptuary legislation that translated otherwise indiscernible degrees of status into a manifest system of social hierarchy.[25] The effect was both to remind men of their place in the world and to distribute the signs of honor widely enough

21. See above, chapter 5, 247–53.

22. A. R. Myers, *London in the Age of Chaucer* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 144–45.

23. Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, 16, 75.

24. See Phythian-Adams, "Ceremony and the Citizen," 69.

25. On the stratification within and among the various communal organizations of the city, see Charles Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 125. Claire B. Sponsler, "Society's Image: Estates Literature in Fifteenth-Century England," *Semiotica* 63 (1987): 229–38, shows that sumptuary legislation was sponsored by merchants themselves.

throughout urban society so that no one would feel wholly excluded.[26] And the goal was to fix the social system in place by emphasizing the subordination of the individual to the social whole. In sum, the socially dislocated countryside of postplague England almost certainly offered more scope for personal as well as economic freedom than did the tightly regulated and economically squeezed city. And to judge from the events of 1381, it was not in the city but in the country and its market towns that radical political change was conceivable.[27]

Finally, far from possessing a clear sense of social identity, the merchant class of medieval London gives every evidence of having been a class in search of a legitimizing ideology. London merchants seem to have constructed their social identity largely from the materials of other, noncommercial cultural formations. On the one hand, they aped the accoutrements and practices of *aristocratic* life: they adopted aristocratic modes of address for themselves, their wives, and their servants; designed for themselves heraldic devices, sometimes based on their commercial trademarks; joined with members of the gentry for both business and recreational purposes; and worked to win for their children—and in some cases, for themselves—entrance into the ranks of the rural landowning class.[28] They bought country residences and attached gardens—the classic space of aristocratic leisure—to their communal halls and to their city residences for, as one source says, "consolation and pleasure"; the secular books they read, such as the romances of the Auchinleck manuscript, were derived from aristocratic models and often expressed unabashedly aristocratic values; and to judge from the structure of the *pui*, the same went for their festive occasions.[29] As Nigel Saul has said, "The merchant class contributed little

26. Myers, *London*, 116–17. These various organizations also provided new city dwellers—of whom there were always a great many—with the sense of community they had enjoyed in the country; see Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900–1300* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 73.

27. As Brenner says, "In truth, the historical record of urban support for the aspirations to freedom of the medieval European peasantry is not impressive" (*Brenner Debate*, 39). On the lack of enthusiasm for the rebellion in London, Thrupp comments: "The cult of secular equality implicit in the slogans of the peasants' revolt may have had its sympathizers in the city, but it found no prophets there" (*Merchant Class*, 26). For details, see Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free* (London: Methuen, 1973), 186–98.

28. For these statements, see Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, 16–18, 152, 144, 249–56, 120, 136, 247–63, 229–32.

29. On the *pui*, see John Hurt Fisher, *John Gower: Moral Philosopher and Friend of Chaucer* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), 78–86. On the bourgeois origins of the Auchinleck manuscript, A. I. Doyle, "English Books In and Out of Court from Edward III to Henry VII," in V. J. Scattergood and J. W. Sherborne, eds., *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Duckworth, 1983), 164–65.

that was uniquely their own; rather, they preferred to assume the manners and values of the rural nobility."[30]

Merchants also fashioned their social identity from the materials of *clerical* culture. Sylvia Thrupp estimates that by the mid-fifteenth century, a remarkable 40 percent of male Londoners could read Latin and at least 50 percent English. "Parents were," she says, "genuinely anxious for their sons to be initiated into that world of Latin learning over which the church presided"; in the early fourteenth century one alderman mandated in his will that his sons should stay at school "until they could compose reasonably good verses."[31] Nor was it only the commercially useless learning of the clergy that attracted merchants, whose orthodox piety is clearly reflected in their large holdings of books of religious instruction. In the mid-fifteenth century Bishop Reginald Pecock tells of how men and women would frequently consult him about the views of current preachers.[32] And there must have been many such preachers: not only were there the pulpits of the Cathedral and St. Paul's Cross from which religious views were regularly disseminated, but the city supported both a large number of religious houses and an astonishing 120 parish churches, "probably more . . . than any other town in Christendom."[33]

There is, of course, a great deal of late-medieval writing that literary historians have understood as either emanating from or being directed toward the "middle class"—by which is generally meant everybody between the dignitary, whether lay or ecclesiastical, and the peasant. Certainly this literature articulates values and interests that are not aristocratic: it attacks the war with France, the depredations of an undisciplined nobility, the wastefulness and self-interest of the king's advisors, and clerical and fraternal corruption, and it promotes a pragmatic piety that interests itself in sometimes quite specific theological questions.[34] But what it declines to promote is a legitimizing self-definition of either the middle class in general or of merchants in particular. For one thing, it refuses to align itself with a socially specific perspective. Instead, as Anne Middleton has shown, it speaks in a "common voice":

30. Nigel Saul, *Scenes from Provincial Life: Knightly Families in Sussex 1280–1400* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 187; and see Michael J. Bennett, *Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 132.

31. Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, 160.

32. Ibid., 181.

33. Myers, *London*, 75.

34. For a description of this writing, see Janet Coleman, *Medieval Readers and Writers, 1350–1400* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

> The voice of public poetry is neither courtly, nor spiritual, nor popular. . . . [It exemplifies] an ideal of communal responsibility founded not primarily in an estates conception of one's duties, but in an altruistic and outward-turning form of love that might be called "common love" to emphasize the symmetry and contrast with that singular passion which expresses itself in literature in the inward self-cultivation sometimes called "courtly love."[35]

This voice—and Gower and Langland are two of its primary speakers—defines itself against courtliness not because it represents another estate, but rather because it stands apart from and above *all* estates. It is a *vox populi;* and if it is, in fact, generated by the bourgeoisie, it seeks to efface the specificity of its social origins in the generality of its prescriptions and the universality of its tone. Second, what self-images merchants do sponsor are distinctly unflattering. In the later fifteenth century, Hugh Brice, a goldsmith, commissioned Caxton's translation of *The Mirror of the World* for presentation to Lord Hastings—a work that contained a vicious attack upon merchants.[36] Similarly, the books of courtesy that were produced in the fifteenth century for what is usually taken to be a mercantile audience sought to teach merchants how to shed the social identity endowed them by their vocation and adopt the manners, and with it the status, of the nobility.[37] Even in Elizabethan England, and even in books directed to a middle-class audience, merchants and craftsmen were represented according to a set of values derived not from their own class but rather from the aristocracy.[38]

The literature of middle-class England, in other words, may indeed express the interests of the middle class but it nonetheless declines to define much less to promote a specifically middle-class identity. If Boccaccio's *Decameron* is "a mercantile epic," and if Giovanni Sercambi's *Novelliero* is the "chronicle of merchants," there is nothing comparable in England—unless it is, a dubious proposition, the *Canterbury Tales.*[39] What is missing in England, and is found in abundance in Italy, is both

35. Anne Middleton, "The Idea of Public Poetry in the Reign of Richard II," *Speculum* 53 (1978), 95–96.

36. Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, 163; for Hugh Brice, see Sponsler, "Society's Image," 233.

37. Sponsler, "Society's Image," 233.

38. Laura Stephenson, *Praise and Paradox: Merchants and Craftsmen in Elizabethan Popular Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

39. For Boccaccio, see Vittore Branca, *Boccaccio: The Man and His Works*, trans. Richard Monges (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 276–307; for Sercambi, Christian Bec, *Les marchands écrivains à Florence, 1375–1434* (Paris: Mouton, 1967), 175–98.

the aggressive economic individualism that characterizes Italian commercialism and the antiaristocratic politics of republican Italy. There are good historical reasons for both of these gaps. For one thing, the accommodation of commercial to religious values had not developed as far in England as on the continent, as is attested by both a nervous mercantile piety and the scorn with which merchants were regarded by pious writers such as Langland.[40] And for another, English political structure neither allowed for urban independence nor permitted the merchant class nearly as much responsibility for the governance of the realm as occurred in parts of *trecento* Italy, specifically Florence.

It appears to be the case, then, that English mercantile culture was largely confected out of the materials of other cultural formations—primarily aristocratic but also clerical—and lacked a center of its own. It was a culture grounded in the historical realities of commercial life and driven by interests that were historically constituted, but it was unable to articulate much less justify this historical specificity. This produced, I suggest, an early instance of what would become the most ineradicable of bourgeois illusions: that the bourgeoisie is not a class driven by its own interests and constituted by historical and economic conditions but rather a group of free individuals with unlimited options—the idealized version of upward mobility. But in this, its earliest form, this illusion derives not (as in the nineteenth century) from the impenetrable strength of a bourgeois ideology that refuses to recognize itself. Instead it is a function of weakness, of the very absence of ideology.

II

The *Merchant's Tale*, as its critical history has shown, is a remarkably unstable, even volatile text. Part of its challenge derives from its syncretism, its dizzying conjunction of widely disparate literary materials;[41] part derives from its refusal to provide a coherent perspective

40. Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); see also John H. McGovern, "The Rise of New Economic Attitudes—Economic Humanism, Economic Nationalism—During the Later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, A.D. 1200–1550," *Traditio* 26 (1970): 217–53. Langland expresses his contempt for commercialism in virtually all its forms throughout *Piers Plowman:* in his account of the pardon, for example, merchants are placed "in þe margyne" but are pardoned *a poena et a culpa* only if they modify their business practices and spend all of their profits on charitable works (B, 7, 18–39). For the highly prejudicial representation of merchants in contemporary preaching, see G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961), 352–61.

41. Robert Kaske has called it "perhaps the most skillful and richly allusive" of the

on this *bricolage*.[42] All conventions—indeed, all forms of medieval discourse—seem to be subject to its critique. The *Tale*'s denouement apparently reveals its central concern: although he has witnessed a scene of appetite and betrayal, January is deluded by May's words into believing that she has actually performed an act of physical restoration and marital loyalty. It is this capacity of language to deceive and befuddle—"he that mysconceyveth, he mysdemeth" (2410) is May's final apothegm—that is the target of attack. Alfred David has commented on "the narrator's obsession throughout the tale with what he considers to be sham language," and the performance as a whole can be read as an assault upon the delusive rhetoric that allows men to avoid reality in order to indulge their "heigh fantasye and curious bisyness" (1577).[43]

This conclusion may, however, be both too general and too absolute. The various elements that the *Tale* deploys are not simply items derived at random from the discursive world of late-medieval England. On the contrary, they are class-specific discourses: the Merchant's primary targets are the two great cultural formations that dominated his world, the Church and the aristocracy. For one thing, mercantile admiration for Latin learning is clearly visible in the *Tale*. Not just Cato and Seneca, those ubiquitous sources of medieval proverbs, but also Ovid, Claudian, and Martianus Capella are explicitly introduced into the narrative, Statius is present in allusions to characters from the *Thebaid* (1716, 1720–21), and familiar mythological figures (Orpheus, Hymen, Venus, Bacchus, Paris and Helen, Priapus, and Argus) make unascribed appearances. Clerical learning is equally well represented by the *Tale*'s mastery of the homiletics and liturgy of marriage, the fine points of canon law, the traditional discourse of clerical misogyny, and sophisticated techniques of exegesis. When, for instance, January says that he knows "the cause why / Men sholde wedde" (1441–42), the Merchant

Canterbury Tales ("Chaucer's Marriage Group," in *Chaucer the Love Poet*, ed. Jerome Mitchell and William Provost [Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1973], 55), while for G. G. Sedgewick it is "a dense mosaic of references, allusions, quotations" ("The Structure of the *Merchant's Tale*," *UTQ* 17 [1947–48], 344).

42. E. T. Donaldson speaks for most readers when he complains that "our moral judgment . . . finds no safe place to settle" in the *Tale* (*Speaking of Chaucer* [London: Athlone Press, 1970], 35); according to Derek Pearsall, "there is no centre to the poem, no literary convention within which it has its place in relation to reality, no body of moral value to which it refers" (*Canterbury Tales*, 207).

43. Alfred David, *The Strumpet Muse: Art and Morals in Chaucer's Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 173. See also Mary C[arruthers] Schroeder, "Fantasy in the 'Merchant's Tale,' " *Criticism* 12 (1970): 167–79.

produces a succinct and accurate survey of the relevant canon law.[44] The *Tale* opens with a 135-line account of marriage (1258–1392) largely derived from contemporary sermons—the sort of sermon the priest then delivers (1704–5) when he performs the marriage service according to current liturgical practice ("as is usage" [1706]);[45] and it closes with a final scene of such biblical resonance, including January's recital of the "olde lewed wordes" (2149) of the *Song of Songs* and the densely symbolic "struggle" in the pear tree within the *hortus conclusus* of his garden, that it has been for many years an exegetical gold mine for scholars.[46]

The *Tale* is equally saturated with the materials and tropes of courtly writing. The protagonist of the *Tale* is, after all, not a merchant but "a worthy knight," and the Merchant never allows us to forget that the action takes place within a courtly context and that much of the behavior it represents—both marital and extramarital—is governed by courtly norms of value. The marriage is celebrated with a flourish of the kind of classical allusion (1715–41) typically used by courtly writing to confer large significance upon local affairs; May withdraws to her bedchamber for four days after her marriage as was a "custume" of "thise nobles alle" [1889]); and the betrayal is endowed with tragic import by a "heigh style" of epic apostrophe (1783–94, 1866–74) and Boethian metaphysics (1967, 2057) and then enacted in a garden that combines the timeless significance of Pluto and Prosperpina with the current aristocratic practices described in the *Romance of the Rose* (2032).

But if the Merchant has been endowed with a *Tale* fashioned from materials appropriate to the synthetic culture of his class, his own atti-

44. The accuracy of January's account has been ratified by Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 265. These lines derive from the same source as Chaucer used for the comparable passage in the *Parson's Tale;* see Lee Patterson, "The *Parson's Tale* and the Quitting of *The Canterbury Tales*," *Traditio* 34 (1978), 363–66.

45. See C. E. Shain, "Pulpit Rhetoric in Three *Canterbury Tales*," *MLN* 70 (1955): 235–45; J. D. Burnley, "The Morality of the *Merchant's Tale*," *YES* 6 (1976): 16–25; and Robert P. Miller, ed., *Chaucer: Sources and Backgrounds* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 373–90.

46. For a representative sample, see James Wimsatt, "Chaucer and the Canticle of Canticles," in Mitchell and Provost, *Chaucer the Love Poet*, 66–90; Alfred L. Kellogg, "Susannah and the *Merchant's Tale*," *Speculum* 35 (1960): 275–79; Douglas Wurtele, "Ironical Resonances in the *Merchant's Tale*," *ChR* 13 (1978–79): 66–79; Emerson Brown, "Biblical Women in the Merchant's Tale: Feminism, Antifeminism, and Beyond," *Viator* 5 (1974): 387–412; and Kenneth A. Bleeth, "The Image of Paradise in the *Merchant's Tale*," in *The Lerned and the Lewed*, Harvard English Studies, 5, ed. Larry D. Benson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 45–60.

tude remains puzzling. Criticism of the *Tale* has consistently registered most readers' sense of the Merchant as a bitter cynic, desecrating the ideals of church and court. The opening encomium to marriage derisively rehearses the paradisal theory promoted by clerics but known in practice by laymen to be quite different. The institutional role of the church is represented as being simply to make "al siker ynogh with hoolynesse" (1708), even though the relationship being solemnized is a grossly commercial transaction that mocks the church's own teaching about the consensual basis of marriage.[47] The *Song of Songs* is slanderously described as "swiche olde lewed wordes"(2149) while the Marian images embodied in the garden are presented in what one offended critic has termed a "repulsive parody" that shows the Merchant taking "perverse delight in desecrating what others deem holy."[48] Courtly values apparently fare no better. The exchange between Justinus and the "court-man" (1492) Placebo witnesses to the corruption of court politics; the marriage presided over by the laughing Venus—amused indeed that January should "bicome hir knyght" (1724)—is a caustic commentary on the aristocratic habit of using self-glorifying classical allusions to elevate shameful marital practices; and the affair between "gentil May, fulfilled of pitee" (1995) and the "gentil squier" (1907) Damyan is a degrading representation of the noble cult of *fine amor.*

Yet such a reading of the *Tale* as entirely negative, as a demolition of every form of cultural value, not only overlooks certain elements of the text but posits for the teller an impossible condition of total cultural alienation. In fact, the Merchant's attitude toward the disparate discourses from which his *Tale* is constituted harbors affirmation as well as negation. Clearly he is proud of his capacity to deploy his learned materials, as his careful annotation of many of his allusions suggests ("thou poete Marcian" [1732], "O noble Ovyde" [2125], "In Claudyan ye may the stories rede" [2232]). When January sneers at Justinus's "scoleterms" (1569), or misrepresents the elementary canonical teaching that marital sexuality can be sinful ("A man may do no synne with his wyf, / Ne hurte hymselven with his owene knyf" [1839–40]), the Merchant wants to show us the ignorance of a man who would choose a wife "of his owene auctoritee" (1597). To "deffie Theofraste and herke me" (1310) is a perilous course: however much he mocks his authorities, the Merchant also accords them respect. So too, his deployment of sacred images may be blasphemous, but the very exegetical critics who have

47. On this point, see David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1980), 154–55.

48. Wurtele, "Ironical Resonances," 75.

been most offended have simultaneously demonstrated that these images harbor genuine moral opprobrium. The Merchant is, in fact, an exegetical critic of no little skill, motivated by what some have seen as "moral ferocity."[49] And the same ambivalence is present in the deployment of courtly discourse. When May is allowed to say, just before entering the garden, "I am a gentil womman and no wenche" (2202), the force of the irony derives from the Merchant's commitment to an idea of gentility that passes judgment on her depravity. The wedding of January and May may be a travesty, but John Burrow, among others, has rightly noted its "generous lyrical note, [its] festal dignity."[50]

For many years the criticism of the *Merchant's Tale* has been largely conducted over the question of the *Tale*'s valence: whether "everything in the tale is either mean, foolish, or ugly," or whether it tells the hopeful, essentially comic story of the conquest of age by youth.[51] Today the answer seems to be both. The *Tale* simultaneously subverts and puts faith in the class-specific discourses it deploys. The point is not that the Merchant nihilistically believes nothing but rather than he simultaneously does and does not believe everything. Teller of an almost perfectly self-canceling *Tale*, the Merchant is revealed as searching for but unable to find a system of values, beliefs, and meanings—an ideology—by which to endow his world with meaning. If the medieval social model of the three estates effaced the commercial classes, if moralists and social theorists provided relentlessly negative critiques of merchants, and if the merchant class itself failed to develop a coherent and assertive self-definition, then in the *Merchant's Tale* Chaucer explores this condition from the inside.

Moreover, and most brilliantly, he shows us that what this instability of social identity precipitates is an ideology of the subject. Lacking a

49. C. David Benson, *Chaucer's Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in the* Canterbury Tales (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 124.

50. J. A. Burrow, "Irony in the Merchant's Tale," *Anglia* 75 (1957), 202. J. S. P. Tatlock, "Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*," *MP* 33 (1935–36): 367–81, reprinted in Richard Schoeck and Jerome Taylor, *Chaucer Criticism I: The* Canterbury Tales (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), described the mythological figures as "gusts of fresh air from the open heavens" (184), and more recent critics have spoken admiringly, in Derek Pearsall's words, of "the lovely opening to the final garden scene" and the "deflation and domestic comedy" of the argument between Pluto and Proserpina (*Canterbury Tales*, 206).

51. The first position is represented here by Norman Harrington, "Chaucer's *Merchant Tale:* Another Swing of the Pendulum," *PMLA* 86 (1971), 30; the second by Martin Stevens, "'And Venus Laugheth': An Interpretation of the *Merchant's Tale*," *ChR* 7 (1972–73): 118–31. The debate has been surveyed by Emerson Brown, Jr., "Chaucer, the Merchant, and Their Tale: Getting Beyond Old Controversies: Part I," *ChR* 13 (1978–79): 141–56.

secure social identity, the Merchant is overwhelmed by an inner selfhood, what he calls at the outset the "soory herte" (1244) that his *Tale* seeks to silence but everywhere expresses. Many critics have complained that to read the *Merchant's Tale* in terms of its teller is to overvalue a pilgrim to whom Chaucer grants only the most attenuated of representations.[52] Yet this is exactly the point: it is the *absence* of representability—of, that is, a social identity derived from a confidently articulated class ideology—that renders the Merchant vulnerable to merely personal feelings. Denied a secure prospect upon the world, the Merchant's gaze instead focuses with obsessive attention upon the inner landscape of unsatisfied desire that is staged in his own failed marriage. Lacking an ideology that would legitimize his commercial life and secure his participation in the political world of events, the bourgeois turns instead to the inner world of the self as the space of self-definition.

That the *Tale* is driven by a psychological dynamic deriving not from his social identity as a merchant but from his failed marriage is shown by the contradictions it harbors. January is both a repulsive old fool who deserves what he gets and a noble victim—"this good man" (1897), the Merchant calls him—betrayed by an uncaring wife whom he has endowed with his wealth and by a serpentlike retainer to whom he has shown nothing but "bountee and . . . gentillesse" (1917). January's thoughtful, even touching offer to May before they enter the garden, and her grossly duplicitous and irreverent reply, are there to solicit our sympathy for the old, blind husband. The *Tale* is pervaded with the contradictions of the Merchant's own feelings about himself: his shame and self-hatred for humiliating himself, his self-pity and anger at having been victimized. The same doubleness affects the role he means his *Tale* to play in the drama of the tale-telling game. He presents himself as a man overcome with grief—"of myn owene soore, / For soory herte, I telle may namoore" (1243–44)—whose *Tale* represents a tactfully reticent bid for sympathy: "I sey nat alle. / God shilde that it sholde so bifalle!" (1231–32). Yet he cannot resist offending the fellow

52. David Benson notes the disproportion between the injury the Merchant has presumably suffered and the emotion expressed by his *Tale:*

> The most serious problem with reading the *Merchant's Tale* primarily in terms of the pilgrim Merchant is that it is reductive in the extreme to attribute all the corrosive skill and dark power of what many see as one of Chaucer's most challenging tales to the unspecified disappointments of a new husband.

Chaucer's Drama of Style, 15. Similarly, Derek Pearsall objects that "the interpretation of the generally 'mercantile' values of the tale as generally appropriate to a Merchant is rather trite" (*Canterbury Tales*, 209).

pilgrims whose understanding he covets. He "quites" the Clerk, for example, by representing him as hopelessly credulous and perhaps a sodomite, and brutally transfers the Knight's creed of gentility—"Lo, pitee renneth soone in gentil herte!" (1986)—to the appetitive transactions between "fresshe May" and "gentil" Damyan.[53] The Merchant may desire sympathy but he tells a *Tale* designed to alienate precisely those pilgrims who might be prepared to give it to him.

Not surprisingly, then, the *Merchant's Tale* is on several levels *about* "fantasye" and self-enclosure, a theme expressed in the various acts of ironic literalization that mark the narrative. January wants a wife as malleable as "warm wex" (1430), wax that then materializes when May imprints the key to the garden; January's description of himself as being "as grene / As laurer" (1465–66) becomes the "laurer alwey grene" (2037) in the garden; the notion that a wife is the "fruyt of [man's] tresor" (1270) reappears in the "fruyt" (2336) in the pear tree that May desires; gazing on May "semed fayerye" (1743) to January, a fairydom that literalizes in the figures of Pluto and Proserpina; indeed, May herself is a literalized metaphor—she is both "lyk the brighte morwe of May" (1748) and is summoned up through an act of "heigh fantasye" (1577). The very governing metaphor of the *Tale*—that marriage is "paradys" (1265), a wife "paradys terrestre" (1332)—reappears as the literal garden where the denouement occurs. And most important, the *Tale* is itself just such a literalization: the Merchant's fleeting sneer about his wife in the *Prologue*—"thogh the feend to hire ycoupled were, / She wolde hym overmacche" (1219–20)—is nastily visualized in the final scene of the *Tale*, with May coupling in the tree with the satanic Damian, a scene in which even the underwriting metaphor of the seducing snake finds a material analogue in the penis with which Damyan "throng[s]" in: "Ye," says January, "algate in *it* wente!" (2376). It is the self-fulfilling dynamic of the jealous imagination that motivates the *Merchant's Tale* and that endows it with its sense of claustrophobic enclosure.

53. Specifically, the Merchant implies the Clerk does not realize what kind of woman an Italian nobleman really wants when he marries, how sovereigns actually respond when they receive advice they dislike, or what in fact happens to those who follow the Clerk's naive injunction to bow the "nekke under the blisful yok / Of soveraynetee, nought of servyse, / Whiche that men clepe spousaille or wedlock" (IV, 113–115). There is perhaps an even more pointed sneer at the Clerk when the Merchant describes January as one who "folwed ay his bodily delyt / On *wommen*, ther as was his appetyt, / As doon thise fooles that been seculeer" (1249–51)—the implication being that those in orders use not women but men for their pleasure. What lies behind this sneer is the attitude expressed in the medieval proverb "pedagogus ergo sodomiticus."

But if the *Tale* witnesses to self-absorption, it also aspires to self-understanding. It is the *ahistorical* nature of this effort that is crucial and that reveals the *Tale* as an externalization of the inner condition of an ideologically bereft merchant class. Far from representing in his *Tale* the forces within fourteenth-century England that were in fact at the heart of his situation, he seeks instead to efface from it every sign of historical specificity. Not only is the *Tale* set in an Italy stigmatized by his contemporaries as a locus of commercial and moral misbehavior, but his characters are endowed with names and characteristics that lift them out of history altogether and into a world of allegorical significance. Moreover, and most tellingly, the story he tells is not about the loss occasioned by specific historical conditions; it is, rather, about loss per se, the primal loss of innocence common to the Western cultural imagination. Indeed, in an act of significant overdetermination, the Merchant models his narrative upon both scriptural and classical paradigms, upon both Adam's exclusion from the garden of Eden and Proserpina's abduction from the eternal springtime of Sicily. What he endures is common to all men: "Assaye whoso wole, and he shal fynde / That I seye sooth" (1229–30).

History is thus understood by the Merchant not as a site of specific social and economic forces but as a generalized metaphysical condition: fallenness rather than innocence, loss rather than possession. Yet the historically specific can never be definitively excluded: the very claim of ahistoricity is itself a function of historical determination, an expression of the social identity the Merchant finds such difficulty in defining. This paradox, and its dialectic of escape and engagement that defines escape *as* engagement, governs the crucial, emblematic exchange between Pluto and Proserpina. This exchange is on its face explicitly and unashamedly escapist: not only are the protagonists unreal—no longer even pagan deities, they are here reduced to fairies—but the topic of their debate is the quintessentially private matter of marriage, the inner workings of an intimate relationship. Yet in the final analysis this moment represents less an evasion, a turn away from an intractable public history into the presumably more malleable world of the emotions, than a displacement. For it stages the central dilemma of the Merchant's historical condition—his sense of being ideologically adrift and denied a secure cultural formation—within the context of marriage. And it suggests that if this dilemma is insoluble it is also bearable.

The Merchant's *Tale* has revealed him to be at once disillusioned and credulous, bereft of ideals and yet still clinging to the possibility of belief. His narrative as a whole stages his sense of loss as the destruction of paradisal innocence and the entrance into the unforgiving world of history. Pluto and Proserpina both represent this process and enact it in their debate. Proserpina has been "ravysshed" by Pluto "in his grisely carte" (2230–33), and their dissension reveals the bitter effects of male violence. But it does more, for the target of Proserpina's attack is authority per se—"What rekketh me of youre auctoritees?" (2276), she angrily retorts to Pluto—as it is embodied here in the figure of Solomon. For Pluto Solomon is "wys and richest of richesse, / Fulfild of sapience and of worldly glorie" (2242–43); for Proserpina he is "a lecchour and an ydolastre" (2298) whose sayings do not, in any case, support the misogynist construction Pluto tries to put upon them. What Proserpina sets against authority is, like the Wife of Bath, the force of her experience and the intensity of her feeling: "I am a womman, nedes moot I speke, / Or elles swelle til myn herte breke" (2305–6). But it is the strategy of dismantling authority by revealing its historicity, by uncovering the specific, contingent individual from whom it issues, that represents the truly radical force of Proserpina's intervention. In rehearsing Solomon's delinquency, she undoes the transcendental claims of *auctoritee*, its pretense that it stands above and outside history. Indeed, this entire episode witnesses to the inescapability of history, both that of the arguing couple and of the wise man who would issue absolutist judgments. By insisting that Solomon is a man like any other, and not a particularly admirable one at that, Proserpina is attacking not just patriarchy but the strategy by which all ideological forms efface the contingency of their origins, their own existence as historically constructed. It is in this sense, then, that the argument between these two mythological figures rehearses the central dilemma of the Merchant's situation: Pluto represents a desire to remain ideologically secure, sheltered by a belief in male superiority despite the fact that his own violence reveals it to be without legitimacy; but Proserpina, relying upon experience and emotion to provide her with a sense of *self*-legitimization, steps outside ideology altogether. And if to us this seems impossible, we should remember that for the Middle Ages the disruptive desire of the female subject was seen as a threat precisely because it sought to locate itself outside and against all forms of cultural order.

In fact, the *Tale* as a whole is underwritten by a well-disguised but nonetheless profound belief in the liberating power of the feminine. For all its bitter misogyny, the narrative not only invokes various biblical types of the redemptive woman but tells a story of the humiliation and then recuperation of the male: January may (or may not) be deluded at the end, but he has achieved not only the status of long-

suffering victim but a genuine affection for his wife.[54] More specifically, the Wife of Bath is a constant presence not only in this episode, where her voice unmistakably subtends Proserpina's, but in the *Tale* as a whole. To be sure, the *Tale* recycles the Wife of Bath's themes in a way that puts her under attack as well as paying her homage. On the one hand, January not only does not want one of "thise olde wydwes" (1423) for a wife but, as a *senex amans* who buys his youthful spouse, he stands as a grotesque, albeit male, version of the Wife herself; and Justinus cites her as an authority on the way in which a wife can serve as "Goddes whippe" (1671) to urge her husband up to heaven, a grim commentary on the demise of her five husbands. But it also acknowledges, at the deepest structural level, the power of feminine discourse.

The *Merchant's Tale* is structured according to two models: one is Claudian's authoritative narrative of loss and lament, the other the Wife's experience-based *Prologue and Tale* that teach us that happiness can be won in this world. The *De raptu Prosperpinae* provides the narrative elements from which the *Tale* is constructed: January's unlikely desire to marry and his celebration of the joys of wedded life and paternity; the presence and example of his brothers; the central role of Venus, her torch, the festal wedding celebrated by Orpheus, and the blessing of the bed; the garden, its tree and fatal fruit; and above all the disparity between bride and groom—all of these elements of his *Tale* are derived by the Merchant directly from Claudian's poem.[55] Indeed, when Claudian tells us he is impelled to song by his *mens congesta* (1, 5) he provides a precedent for the "soory herte" (1244) that simultaneously inspires and censors the Merchant. But if the *De raptu Proserpinae* provides the *Tale*'s narrative elements, they are disposed according to a pattern established by the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*. As with the Wife's *Prologue*, which begins with a *sermon joyeux*, the *Merchant's Tale* opens with a mocking sermonlike discourse (1267–392). Also like the Wife's *Prologue*, the Merchant then explores the topic of marriage through a two-part narrative vastly expanded by the inclusion of the materials of the antimatrimonial and misogynist traditions (the Wife's narrative is divided between the first three and the last two husbands, the Merchant's between January's initial decision to marry

54. See Brown, "Biblical Women," 411–12.

55. Oddly enough, the extent to which the elements of the *Tale* derive from the *De raptu Proserpinae* has not been fully described in Chaucer criticism. But see Mortimer J. Donovan, "The Image of Pluto and Proserpina in the *Merchant's Tale*," *PQ* 36 (1957): 49–60; Karl P. Wentersdorf, "Theme and Structure in the Merchant's Tale: The Function of the Pluto Episode," *PMLA* 80 (1965): 522–27; and Charlotte Otten, "Proserpine: *Liberatrix Suae Gentis*," *ChR* 5 (1970–71): 277–87.

[1245–66, 1393–576] and his choice of May [1577–688]). Finally, after the account of the marriage ceremonies (1689–749), the *Merchant's Tale* turns to a straightforward if expansively dilated narrative—the pear-tree fabliau—that is analogous to the Wife's similarly augmented Arthurian romance. Not surprisingly, then, when Pluto and Proserpina arrive at an accommodation of male and female it is one achieved under the sign of the Wife of Bath. When Proserpina contradicts Pluto she both speaks in the Wife's unmistakable voice and is also impelled, as we have seen, by an irresistible inner force: "I am a womman, nedes moot I speke, / Or elles swelle til myn herte breke" (2305–6).[56] And the accord at which Pluto and Proserpina finally arrive reenacts the mutual repudiation of *maistrye* by which Jankin and the Wife achieved marital happiness. The *Tale* as a whole is thus an attack on the female voice that becomes an act of deference, an initial rejection and then celebration of a socially undetermined subjectivity that is most fully embodied in the Wife.

Finally, the Pluto and Proserpina episode promises that history provides compensation as well as loss. The *Merchant's Tale* is posited on disenchantment, on the disillusion generated by the collapse of an impossible idealism brought in contact with reality: since all value has been invested in that which has been lost, what remains can only be worthless. If the dream of perfect mutuality is an empty fantasy, then it can only be replaced with a coercive patriarchy capable of governing the treacherous creatures women have revealed themselves to be. If husbands nod, wives will frolic. And if the ideological security guaranteed by authority is undone, then what remains is an unmoored world of pure contingency, a realm of historical difference in which no value reigns supreme. But this is not in fact what happens. When Pluto withdraws before Proserpina's wrath—"be no lenger wrooth; / I yeve it up!" (2311–12)—he is rewarded with a corresponding gesture of conciliation: "For sothe," she says, "I wol no lenger yow contrarie" (2319). This is no impossible dream of a utopianist mutuality: husband and wife remain independent and even in conflict, as is shown by the fact that their opposing gifts to January and May remain in force. But what has been uncovered is a resilient forbearance based on unspoken compromises. Agreeing to disagree, they acknowledge that difference is no longer insupportable. If history signifies loss, it also offers consolation; if the idealist is disinherited, the realist finds reparation. The unifor-

56. The Merchant is here referring to the Wife's self-representation in the figure of Midas's wife, who thought that the secret of Midas's ears "swal so soore aboute hir herte / That nedely som word hire moste asterte" (III, 965–68).

mity of monolithic ideologies yields to a differential reality, in which negotiation and exchange are the governing practices. We have entered, almost without noticing, the realm in which a merchant will be most at home.

It is in this way, then, that the debate between Pluto and Proserpina opens the narrative as a whole to the situational, individualistic, market-based ethic that accords with the Merchant's historical condition. That this ethic is defined in terms of marriage, and a marriage focused entirely upon relations between the conjugal couple, is itself an effect of the historical specificity of the Merchant's situation. For there is much evidence to suggest that it was within the bourgeois context that the companionate marriage developed most fully in the Middle Ages, a development that in turn placed spousal relations in question. Thus the late fourteenth century saw the growth of a literature that conceptualized marriage as a problem and that tried to confront the profound contradictions that inhabited late-medieval thinking about the marital relation. On the one hand was the traditional patriarchal ideology that preached male supremacy and wifely obedience, on the other the deeply felt and widely expressed need for a mutual, even intense love between the spouses. In order to follow out this line of investigation, however, we must return to social history; and a search for its most mature Chaucerian treatment will then direct us to the *Shipman's Tale*.

III

Historians of the family have recently challenged the familiar but misleading assumption that the companionate marriage, with its privileging of the conjugal unit at the expense of the kin group and the wider community, did not develop until the seventeenth century.[57] This does not mean, however, that the modern family was either fully developed in medieval England or that there were not important class differences

57. The leading exponents of the outdated view were Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977); J.-L. Flandrin, *Families in Former Times: Kinship, Household and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (London: Collins, 1976). For alternative views, see Alan Macfarlane, *Love and Marriage in England, 1300–1800* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Macfarlane's review of Stone in *History and Theory* 18 (1979): 103–26; and R. A. Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1450–1700* (London: Longman, 1984). An excellent but now somewhat dated overview of this fast-developing field is provided by Michael Anderson, *Approaches to the History of the Western Family, 1500–1914* (London: Macmillan, 1980).

in both family structure and marital practice. Although the evidence is far from plentiful, what there is suggests that the practices and values that typify modern marriage found their nearest late-medieval analogues within the gentry and the wealthy urban classes. For the nobility, the need to preserve and extend the patrimony meant that marriage largely served the needs not of the individual but of the kin, as the parental control of marriage partners most vividly demonstrates. And the aristocratic life-style, which defined the household in terms of political community rather than domestic privacy, made the development of conjugal intimacy difficult.[58] Similarly, the family based economy within which both peasant and artisanal marriages were established naturally emphasized economic requirements at the expense of affectional needs: since the unit of production was equivalent to the unit of reproduction, the marital relation was inevitably absorbed into the social and economic system as a whole.

But the marital practices of the English merchant patriciate seem not to have been as fully governed by these economic and social imperatives. For one thing, merchant prosperity meant that economic pressures had sufficiently abated to allow for a sharp division between the male sphere of commerce and the female sphere of domesticity. Certainly there were merchant wives who engaged in trade or manufacture as, in the words of Sylvia Thrupp, "an outlet for surplus energy or a means of earning additional money to spend"; Thrupp cites several examples of merchant wives who became successful businesswomen.[59] But prescriptions for the behavior of merchant wives—such as the *Ménagier de Paris*, "The Good Wife Taught Her Daughter," "The Good Wyfe Wold a Pylgremage," and so on—make it clear that the bourgeois wife's primary sphere of interest was the home, that her task in life was to manage the domestic establishment with the same prudence and attentiveness as her husband applied to trade. And this is, as we shall see, precisely the attitude expressed by the merchant husband in the *Shipman's Tale*.

Moreover, London merchant families lacked the patrimonial sense of clan that characterized both the English nobility and the merchant class of Italy.[60] Thrupp points out that among London merchants "it had

58. See Kate Mertes, *The English Noble Household, 1250–1600* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

59. Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, 170–72.

60. For the very different situation in Italy, where—in the words of Christian Bec, "Les *mercatores* de la cité du florin conçoivent les afaires dans le cadre de la *gente*" (*Les marchands écrivains*, 279)—see Martha C. Howell, *Women, Production, and Patriarchy in Late Medieval Cities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 16–17; and Diane Owen

never been a universal custom for the son to follow his father's occupation" (204), which is probably one reason why very few sons had their marriages arranged by their fathers. By and large, merchants seem to have left the choice of a marriage partner up to their children (204–5), marriage was quite late, and newly married couples, rather than moving into the family household, established new domestic establishments on their own—the "neolocal" arrangement that social anthropologists consider one of the prime requisites for conjugal marriage.[61] Merchants also seem to have made a sharp distinction between the public world of trade and the private world of domesticity, and they emphasized the family as a haven in a heartless world. Certainly we see these values expressed very explicitly in the *Shipman's Tale*, and the design of merchant houses, with their enclosed gardens and small, private rooms, witnesses to the same impulse.[62]

Of course merchant marriages served economic and social as well as personal needs. Young men used marriage in order to acquire the capital to set themselves up in business, and ambitious fathers used their financially well-endowed daughters to insert the family into the ranks of the nobility. But the economic and social conditions in force among the merchant patriciate meant that the bonds that united husband and wife could be stronger than those to kindred or community, and that the focus of marital attention could consequently be upon the conjugal couple. While the evidence is not extensive, what there is does indeed suggest that for the literate urban middle class the affectional relations between the spouses had become by the late Middle Ages an important topic of discussion. While few domestic manuals have survived from the four-

Hughes, "Urban Growth and Family Structure in Medieval Genoa," *Past and Present* 66 (1975): 3–28.

61. See Macfarlane, *Love and Marriage*, 213–17; according to Thrupp, the age of marriage for men in late-medieval London was 24–26, for women, about 17 (*Merchant Class*, 192); for the late age of marriage in Coventry, see Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, 89–93.

62. On gardens, see Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, 136. According to Philippe Braunstein, in the late-medieval town "people insisted on privacy, as is evident from the way in which the rooms were divided among family members; the primary beneficiary was the master of the house, who now enjoyed a private study to which he could retire" ("Toward Intimacy: The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," in *A History of Private Life*, vol. 2: *Revelations of the Medieval World*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, ed. Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988], 538). Philippe Contamine points out that "it was 'bourgeois' to have a *comptoir*, a counting room, rather than an *ouvroir*, a workroom, and even more bourgeois to have a study instead of (in addition to) a counting room" ("Peasant Hearth to Papal Palace: The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," in Ariès and Duby, *History of Private Life*, 466).

teenth century, there are a good many in the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that are directed specifically to the urban bourgeoisie. And a comparison of these texts to the few earlier instances that remain shows that the bourgeois reader would not have found "a great deal that was new or unusual in these texts," which "were disseminating . . . a rather unchanging style of successful bourgeois family life."[63] There are also other kinds of fourteenth-century texts that discuss marriage, and they witness to the same class interests. For instance, the French chivalric romances that were rewritten into English, which have plausibly been ascribed to the interests of a gentry and bourgeois audience, place the language of *fine amor* in the service of marriage—as does, of course, the *Franklin's Tale*.[64] John Gower's treatise on *Amantz Marietz* and his *Cinkante Ballades* seek to define a very similar ideology of married love, and so does—although it is hardly a marriage treatise—Thomas Usk's *Testament of Love*.[65] On the other side, literary historians have long maintained that misogynist and antimatrimonial writing has not merely a clerical but also a bourgeois provenance; indeed, Jean-Charles Payen recently argued that antimatrimonial literature is generated by a desire to attack the "embourgeoisement" of love and sexuality within marriage—an attack that witnesses to the extent to which bourgeois marriage was perceived as having a monopoly on the theory of the relations between the sexes.[66]

The effect of this bourgeois attention to marital relations was to make glaringly visible, as I have suggested, the contradiction between the traditional supremacy of patriarchy and the equally traditional desire for mutuality and love between the spouses. In many texts, these two components simply lie side by side, their opposition visible but unresolved. A thirteenth-century sermon, for instance, defines the spouses as "pares et socii" who are bound together by a "love founded on partnership" and who enjoy the "friendship of love"; yet it simultaneously deploys the degrading topoi of misogyny in order to justify the

63. Kathleen Davies, "Continuity and Change in Literary Advice on Marriage," in *Marriage and Society: Studies in the Social History of Marriage*, ed. R. B. Outhwaite (London: Europa Publications, 1981), 58–80.

64. Gervase Mathew, "Marriage and *Amour Courtois* in Late Fourteenth-Century England," in *Essays Presented to Charles Williams* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 128–35.

65. John Gower, *Works*, ed. G. C. Macauley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), 1:335–92; for Usk, see Kelly, *Love and Marriage*, 67.

66. Francis Lee Utley, *The Crooked Rib* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1944), 15–20; Jean-Charles Payen, "La Crise du mariage à la fin du XIII^{e} siècle d'aprés la littérature française du temps," in *Famille et parenté dans l'occident médiévale*, ed. Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff (Rome: Ecole Française, 1977), 413–20.

husband's superiority.[67] So too, the Ménagier de Paris counsels his young wife that "in all matters, in all terms, in all places and in all seasons, you shall do and accomplish without argument all [your husband's] commandments whatsoever"; yet he nonetheless posits as the goal of marriage a *mutual* obedience based on a shared love.[68] And in many texts either one or the other half of the contradiction is silently suppressed. While canonical and confessional texts allow for and occasionally even prescribe mutual love between the spouses, their overwhelming emphasis is on male supremacy and female submission; but in lay discussions, and in marriage sermons preached to the laity, male supremacy is quietly assumed while the emphasis is upon the way in which husband and wife are joined "in bodye, in fflesche, and in blode, and . . . in sawle by verre stedffaste luff," on how they enjoy an "amisté de mariage" in which "each holds the other to be better than himself."[69] What is significant about this application of the language of *amicitia* to marriage, both here and elsewhere (it underwrites, for example, Gower's treatise on *Amantz Marietz*), is that friendship had always been seen not only as the highest form of human bond but one that could exist only between equals: hence Cicero had maintained that it was impossible for men and women to be friends. For husband and wife to be urged to partake of the "amisté de mariage," then, the assumption of male superiority had to be silently set aside.

Not surprisingly, three of Chaucer's four tales of marriage in the *Canterbury Tales* are told by pilgrims whom we would now designate as "bourgeois": the Wife of Bath, the Merchant, and the Franklin. What is more important, however, is that those three pilgrims lack both an agreed-upon location within the fluid social world of fourteenth-century England and a stable public identity derived from an explicit

67. See the account of a sermon by Guibert de Tournai (d. 1288) by David d'Avray and M. Tausche, "Marriage Sermons in *Ad Status* Collections of the Central Middle Ages," *AHDLMA* 47 (1980): 71–119.

68. Eileen Power, trans., *The Goodman of Paris* (London: Routledge, 1928), 143, 147–48.

69. For the canonical writers, see John T. Noonan, "Marital Affection in the Canonists," *Studia gratiana* 12 (1967): 479–509, corrected by Michael M. Sheehan, "*Maritalis Affectio* Revisited," in Robert R. Edwards and Stephen Spector, eds., *The Olde Daunce: Love, Friendship, Sex and Marriage in the Medieval World* (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), 32–43, 254–60. For sermons and lay writers, the first citation is from *In nuptiis sollacio*, described by G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961), as a "typical marriage sermon of the day" (385) and found in CUL MS Gg.6.16, fols. 28^{b}–30^{b}; the citation is from fol. 29^{a}. See also, in the same manuscript, *In Solemnizacione matrimonium*, fols. 32^{a}–33^{b}. The second citation is from Nicholas Oresme's gloss to his translation of the pseudo-Aristotelian *Oeconomica: Le Livre de Yconomique d'Aristote*, ed. and trans. Albert Douglas Menut, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s. 47, pt. 5 (1957), 813, 841.

class ideology.[70] They are thus the spokespersons for the private world of marriage in a way that the Clerk, whose allegorically inflected *Tale* invokes a far more spiritually and politically explicit set of values, is not. Moreover, the issue with which the marriage tales deal is in every case (including the Clerk's) the relation of patriarchy to mutuality. But they deal with it largely through gestures of avoidance. The Clerk insists, for example, that his *Tale* is not about marriage at all but about patience; and in both the *Wife of Bath's* and the *Franklin's Tales* the conflict between patriarchy and mutuality is reconciled through transformations that are explicitly marked as magical. The Wife tells an Arthurian romance presided over by an elf-queen and resolved through an act of enchanted metamorphosis, while the *Franklin's Tale* is a Breton lay, a kind of narrative that explicitly asserts its difference from real life. In the *Merchant's Tale* we have, in the conversation of Pluto and Proserpina in the garden prior to the denouement, a similar moment of resolution, and one also marked as outside the bounds of reality, unavailable to human beings embedded within history. Yet as I have argued, what is striking about the *Merchant's Tale* is that its climactic moment does not represent simply an evasion, a turn away from an intractable public history into the presumably more malleable world of the emotions. It is, rather, a displacement that proposes even if it does not fully explore a correspondence between the public world of commerce and the private world of marital negotiation. It is this correspondence that provides the argument of the *Shipman's Tale*. If marital relations are a specifically bourgeois issue, claims the *Tale*, then they can be represented in typically bourgeois terms and their problems will yield to the practices that prevail within the bourgeois world.

IV

The *Shipman's Tale* describes the process by which the circulation of a hundred franks among three people generates, as if by magic, a profit for all of them. The wife repays her creditors, the monk enjoys the wife, and the merchant gets in the place of a previously reluctant sexual partner one eager to do his bidding. Somehow, by a process we can only with difficulty specify, the very fact of exchange has produced a surplus value: something has come of nothing. Because we know, or think we

70. As Paul Strohm points out, the Franklin is "situated as close as he can be to the *gentils* without actually being *gentil* himself. . . . [He is] something of a 'new man' in his society, a person thriving (like Chaucer himself) in a social category largely ignored in traditional descriptions of society" (*Social Chaucer*, 107).