Year 13 : Geoffrey Chaucer, The Merchant's Tale VIMA 1 Model Answer

Paying close attention to the poetic methods, discuss the following extract, showing what it adds to your understanding of Chaucer's concerns in The Merchant's Prologue and Tale

In this excerpt from Chaucer's epic poem, we, along with Chaucer's fictional audience (the pilgrims at the Tabard Inn) and his intended audience (a cross-section of mediaeval English society), are privy to Justinus' words of advice to Januarie about the serious matter of taking a wife. Januarie, speaking from experience, expounds at length about potential wives' virtues and vices, before offering grave warnings of not sufficiently pleasing a young wife. Clearly this extract is dripping with delicious proleptic irony given later events in the Garden of Love, but Chaucer also employs other devices clearly intended to appeal to his listeners, mostly consisting of the serfdom :bawdy, relatable anecdotes with subtle hints at religious satire. Packaged in the staple, jaunty AA/BB rhyme, coupled with the intimate 'locker room' style familiar diction choices, it's easy to overlook the thematic, satirical and often progressive concerns explored here by Chaucer in relation to sex and gender. Indeed, while the sexual elements of marriage are explored towards the end of the structure, Justinus somewhat offers a counterpoint to Prisilla Martin's notion that the tale is fundamentally about 'The male exploitation of economic power for erotic purchase,' offering, as he does, a more rounded view of women.

Chaucer invites his audience to be sympathetic to Justinus' position by beginning the passage with the merchant's narrative. In his brief, but telling description of Justinus, the merchant positions us to view him as a reflective and considered voice, as he 'stille sat and herde', very much in contrast to the hyperbolic flattery of his foil, Placebo. This positioning of the audience is developed when we read Justinus' initial lines to his monologue; not only is there a kindness to his tone, 'brother myn… I preye' but crucially he guards against the hasty rashness advocated by his fellow counsellor, calling on January to 'be pacient'. Perhaps the use of the word 'brother' could be seen as particularly significant by a modern reader. While it seems likely that Chaucer's concern was merely to use the word as a term of affectionate endearment, it is perhaps an example of the pervasive and unconscious omnipotence of mediaeval patriarchy; of course it must be 'brother'- it is a group of older men talking about how to procure a younger woman for a plethora of servile reasons. Whether intended or not, it is the men with the agency at this juncture in the narrative. Of course, as

the ‘father of English letters,’ Chaucer is not so monolithic in his presentation of sexual agency, as we shall see later in the extract.

Chaucer develops Justinus' speech by surprising us with his seriousness. Initially it seems we are going to be receiving more predictable misogynistic objectification of women as ‘lond’ and ‘catel’ are instantly referenced, paving the way for more views of marriage as a mercantile interaction. This proves to be something of a literary sleight of hand on behalf of Chaucer, however, as Justinus then proceeds to reveal that taking a ‘wyf’ is ‘no childes play.’ As well as acting as a didactic message to his audience not to take marriage with levity, this also seems to be a subtle chastisement of January’s feckless and puerile attitude hitherto expressed towards marriage, with his lascivious verbal droolings about ‘tendre flesshe’ .Chaucer strengthens Justinus’ rhetoric, especially with more learned, educated strata of his audience, with an appeal to authority, having Justinus draw these words of ‘avysement’ from ‘Senek’. The classical allusion, as well as being a way to widen the net of his readership, could be interpreted as something of an implicit criticism of biblical- specifically clerical- authority. Up to this point, whenever the Bible has been evoked, it has been to excuse or permit some intended carnal indiscretion.

Chaucer continues to develop Justinus as something of a forward thinker as he at least shows an awareness of different facets of a woman’s personality. Whilst this might seem a given to a modern audience, the readerships of tales concerning courtly love of fabilaux were firmly used to seeing female characters as little more than wafer thin archetypes. Justinus, though acknowledges that a wife can be ‘wys, or sobre, or dronkelewe,// or proud, or elles ootherweys a shrewe.’ It is, however, important not to overstate Chaucer’s ‘progressiveness’ here, as these lines are still very much played for laughs as seen by the syntax meaning that the rhymed word is ‘shrew’, a metaphor surely designed to engender laughter from the male members of the audience.

To a certain extent, January’s continuation of his advice acts against Pearsall’s view that this ‘amoral tale reduces all human behaviour to lust and greed', as Chaucer does indeed offer an alternative view of how marriage could be. Justinus has a pragmatism in his view of women totally lost on both January (and certain members of the mediaeval nobility) , the latter of whom had unrealistic idealised versions of women. January though has more a reasonable criterion, that being that if a wife ‘hadde mo goode thewes than hire badde’, then ‘it oghte ynough suffise.’ Not only this, but as a married man, he tells January a fact the knight would rather forget, namely that ‘ye been a man of age.’ This direct, factual statement is shorn of any of the adornments which Placebo

previously used to elaborately compare January to a late blooming tree, and is deliberately so, so as to identify Justinus as a more good faith actor.

Finally, while January might not be the last word in modern conceptions of romance, few women, after all would care much for being compared to a 'sho' , perhaps his most telling of all pieces of advice is left to the end when Chaucer slyly has him issue a proleptic warning of what might happen to an older man if he 'nat plesen hire filly yeres thre' , there is (in the shape of Damyan of course) 'the yongeste man to bryngwn it about.' The significance of this warning is underscored by the fact that Chaucer takes the rare measure of using a ceasura in line 43 in order to let the import of these words land, both for January and the audience. The gravitas of this advice is of course totally lost on January who pursues his libido rather than his god sense and immediately decides after this scene to court May, the prettiest girl in the village.

And perhaps this is why, despite being 800 years old, this section of *The Merchant's Tale* remains relevant today. Human, or perhaps male nature still can find its purpose in the loins far more than it can in the spiritual or intellectual. Look no further than the average Hollywood red carpet to see a host of Januarys, each one proudly sporting their status and wealth 'won' Mays. If only they had listened better to Justinus' 'observaunce'.

In this passage,Justinus is the closest embodiment to Milton's line that 'Love in marriage cannot live nor subsist, unless it be mutual; and where love cannot be, there can be left of wedlock nothing, but the empty husk of an outside matrimony.' It is the failure of January to heed this advice of Justinus' which leads to his own 'husk' of a marriage and a failure born of hubris, thus being which we feel no sympathy for.

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