Chaucer and a Proper Name: January in *The Merchant's Tale**

EMERSON BROWN, JR.

This article is based on two assumptions. The first is that proper names in Chaucer's poetry are often, if not always, allusions, and that like his other allusions names may be imaginative, learned, multivalent, and playful. The second is that in his use of names, as in other things, Chaucer expects imagination, learning, playfulness, and even some sense of morality from his audience. There is nothing new about these assumptions, and they need to be mentioned only because two recent articles in this journal vigorously defend Chaucer's names from imputations of subtlety and complexity.[1]

This is not to deny that readers who want great literature to be as simple as possible may find in easily understandable names havens safe from the troubled seas of complicated and often contradictory interpretations. Differ as we may about the final literary effect of *Pilgrim's Progress* or *Everyman,* we can at least cling to the indisputably obvious significance of names like Christian and Fellowship. Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* appears to offer several names of this blessedly uncomplicated sort. The *Merchant's Tale* provides the best examples. In it, a grotesquely old man marries an attractive young woman, and Chaucer names them, obviously and appropriately, January and May.[2]

Even on that level, however, Chaucer has gone a step beyond what is

*I read an earlier version of this paper at the Annual Meeting of the ANS, New York, 1976.

[1]Norman E. Eliason, "Personal Names in the Canterbury Tales," *Names,* 21 (1973), 137–52: "For the names of his characters, [Chaucer] evidently saw little need to expend much time or trouble" (p. 137), and hence he avoided "a finicky concern over trifles like names" (p. 152); Jacqueline de Weever, "Chaucerian Onomastics: The Formation and Use of Personal Names in Chaucer's Works," *Names,* 28 (1980), 1–31: "[Names from the *Tales*] are either found in Chaucer's sources or are everyday names modified to fit rhyme, meter, and stress patterns" (p. 16); "Chaucer makes it very clear when he intends to exploit the meanings of names. Attempts to do so when he does not become rather Procrustean" (p. 21).

[2]As Professor Eliason says, "the metaphor involved in applying these month names to the old husband and his young wife is anything but obscure nor one which demanded much ingenuity of Chaucer" (p. 140).

usually found in this sort of story. In the fabliau tradition characters often have little more identity than their counterparts in stories about traveling salesmen and farmers' daughters. The *Novellino* version of the pear-tree story the Merchant tells is typical in identifying the married couple simply as "a wealthy man" and "a very beautiful woman."[3] In addition to giving that couple significant names, Chaucer names the wife's lover Damian, probably after Saint Damian.[4] By changing the agents of supernatural intervention to Pluto and Proserpina, Chaucer adds to both the comic and moral sides of his story.[5] He also introduces and appropriately names two new characters, January's counselors: the sycophant, Placebo, and the spokesman for the Merchant's cynical wisdom, Justinus. Finally, Chaucer alludes to a dizzying array of Biblical, classical, and other historical and literary figures: Theophrastus, the goddess Fortuna, Adam, Eve, the Virgin Mary, Jacob, Rebecca, Judith, Holofernes, Abigail, Nabal, Esther, Mardochai, Assuerus, Seneca, Cato, Wade, Solomon, Sara, Orpheus, Amphion, Joab, Theodamus, Bacchus, Venus, Hymen, Martianus Capella, Philology, Mercury, the Muses, Paris, Helen, Constantinus Africanus, Priapus, Argus, Ovid, Pyramus and Thisbe, Phebus, Claudian, Jesus filius Syrak, and even the Wife of Bath.

Chaucer has clearly taken the trouble to introduce quite a few names into his story, but even surrounded by such onomastic richness, the name January seems obvious enough to be able to repel attacks from overly ingenious critics. Indeed, if Chaucer's source for the names is Deschamps' similarly mismatched couple *Janvier* and *Avril,* then January would require less explanation even than May, a name apparently of

[3]For texts and translations of this and other close analogues to the *Merchant's Tale,* see *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux,* ed. Larry D. Benson and Theodore M. Andersson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), pp. 206–73.

[4]Treated in Philip Griffith, "Chaucer's Merchant's Tale," *Explicator,* 16 (1957), No. 13 and in my "The Merchant's Tale: Why Is May Called 'Mayus'?" *ChauR,* 2 (1968), 273–77. In spite of Damian's presence in the Canon of the Mass and his widespread cult, Professor Eliason believes interpretations depending "on the assumption that Chaucer was aware of the fact that Damyan was the name of an obscure saint" to be "pointless" ("Personal Names," p. 140). Readers for whom St. Damian is still obscure might now consult Anneliese Wittman, *Kosmas und Damian, Kultausbreitung und Volksdevotion* (Berlin, 1967), which John M. Riddle cites to support his description of "the growth of the cult of Cosmas and Damian" as "phenomenal" ("Theory and Practice in Medieval Medicine," *Viator,* 5 [1974], 166). In a remarkable footnote, Professor de Weever rejects my suggestion concerning the name Mayus, (pp. 16–17, n. 63), but Damian is among the names she does not examine in detail.

[5]See Mortimer J. Donovan, "The Image of Pluto and Proserpina in the *Merchant's Tale,*" *PQ,* 36 (1957), 49–60 and "Chaucer's January and May: Counterparts in Claudian," in *Chaucerian Problems and Perspectives,* ed. Edward Vasta and Zacharias P. Thundy (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1979), pp. 59–69, and Karl P. Wentersdorf, "Theme and Structure in *The Merchant's Tale:* The Function of the Pluto Episode," *PMLA,* 80 (1965), 522–27.

Chaucer's own choosing.[6] He adopted the name January, on the other hand, without change, and the name is so obviously appropriate in a simple allegorical way that one hesitates to seek more in it. However, determining the most obvious explanation is often the beginning, not the end, of the critical process.

One way to seek further meaning in a name is through its etymology. Noting the traditional association of the month January with the Roman god Janus, several readers have argued that Janus has a role to play in the *Merchant's Tale.*[7] Having chosen the name January, Chaucer could exploit that connection with Janus if he chose. What opportunities did Janus present? Perhaps originally a god of passageways over water, Janus was the god of doorways, of entrances and exits, beginnings and endings.[8] The English word janitor, originally meaning doorkeeper, reminds us of that connection. Hence the god Janus often carries a key.[9] In the *Merchant's Tale,* January builds a garden "walled al with stoon," and, carrying a key, attempts to be a successful gatekeeper:

> This noble knyght, this Januarie the olde,
> Swich deyntee hath in it to walke and pleye,
> That he wol no wight suffren bare the keye
> Save he hymself; for of the smale wyket
> He baar alwey of silver a clyket,
> With which, whan that hym leste, he it unshette. (2042-47)[10]

Repetitions of "clycket" (key) and "wycket" (gate) make this a continuing motif (2116-24, 2150-53, 2156-59). Yet the analogues to the *Merchant's Tale* say nothing of keys and gates. This motif is Chaucer's own, and the ironic contrast between Janus and his namesake reaches its climax

---

[6]William Matthews, "Eustache Deschamps and Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale,*" *MLR,* 51 (1956), 217–20.

[7]D. W. Robertson, Jr., *A Preface to Chaucer* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1962) pp. 256–57; Chauncey Wood, "Chaucer's Use of Astrology for Poetic Imagery," diss. Princeton, 1963, pp. 260–62; Gertrude M. White, " 'Hoolynesse or Dotage': The Merchant's January," *PQ,* 44 (1965), 400, 402; Kenneth A. Bleeth, "The Image of Paradise in *The Merchant's Tale,*" in *The Learned and the Lewed: Studies in Chaucer and Medieval Literature,* ed. Larry D. Benson (Harvard English Studies 5), 1974, pp. 56–57; and John F. Adams, "The Janus Symbolism in 'The Merchant's Tale,'" *SMC,* 4 (1974), 446–51, a provocative essay that documentation and more careful attention to features of the Janus myth known to be available in the Middle Ages might have improved.

[8]Concerning the origins of Janus, see Louise Adams Holland, *Janus and the Bridge* (Papers and Monographs of the American Academy in Rome, 21: Rome, 1961).

[9]Ovid, *Fasti,* 1.99, 228, 254. The key was also a common iconographical motif; see, for example, Ives Bonnefoy, *Peintures murales de la France gothique* (Paris, 1954), p. 157.

[10]Citations from Chaucer are to *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer,* ed. F.N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957).

when May's lover uses a key she has helped him counterfeit to enter January's garden and cuckold the foolish old man.

Giving January the key associated with Janus does more than support the allusion to Janus inherent in January's name. It also provides Chaucer with the opportunity for some wry sexual symbolism absent in other versions of the story. Damian penetrates January's walled-in little paradise by going "biforn with his cliket" (2151), and the obscene overtones of "clyket" inserted in "wyket" would surely be as obvious to readers of the 14th century as they are to readers of the 20th.[11]

Furthermore, the garden whose gate January would like to keep is no ordinary garden. It is his paradise, a heaven of sensuality on earth, made legitimate, he believes, through marriage. This motif runs through the tale. The first words we hear January speak are that no other life

> is worth a bene;
> For wedlock is so esy and so clene,
> That in this world it is a paradys. (1263–65)

The Merchant in his own voice sarcastically cites Eve to show that a wife is man's "paradys terrestre" (1332). In his anticipation of the joys of marriage, January fears that by having his "hevene in erthe heere" (1647) he may fail to "Come to the blisse ther Crist eterne on lyve ys" (1652). Justinus responds wearily that far from being his paradise his wife may turn out to be his purgatory (1670). And concerning January's lovemaking and May's evaluation of it, the Merchant comments:

> How that he wroghte, I dar nat to yow telle;
> Or wheither hire thoughte it paradys or helle. (1963–64)

All this leads up to the garden itself, a richly symbolic setting that alludes to several famous gardens, among them, of course, that first garden, in which another man had his eyes opened while standing beneath a tree.[12] Thus January attempts to have his heaven here on earth and attempts to play the role of St. Peter, keeper of the gates of heaven, *Ianitor aethereae commissis clavibus aulae.*[13] He would like to imitate Janus and St. Peter and guard the gates of his terrestrial paradise but "finds instead that he has opened the doors of hell."[14]

---

[11]John Bugge, "Damyan's Wanton Clyket and an Ironic New Twiste to *The Merchant's Tale,*" *AM,* 14 (1973), 53–62.

[12]Professor Bleeth offers the most thorough discussion of January's garden to date but without quite exhausting that complex topic.

[13]From the *Hornbacher Sakramentar, MGH Poet. Lat.* 5,428.

[14]Wood, p. 262.

Chaucer's play on the motif of gatekeeping may encourage a look at other traditions concerning Janus. He was not only an efficient keeper of entrances but also an all-seeing god. As god of the month that looks forward to the new year and back to the old, he had two faces. They served him well in his pursuit of women, as an episode in Ovid's *Fasti* shows. The maid Crane had a clever way of maintaining her chastity. "If any youth spoke passionate words to her, she immediately answered him in this way: 'This place has too much light and with the light too much shame. If you lead the way to a more hidden cave, I will follow.' When he credulously went ahead, as soon as she reached the bushes she stopped and hid and was in no way to be found" (6.113–18). This ploy worked until the day she tried it with Janus: "Foolish girl, Janus sees what is going on behind his back" (123), and he has his way with her. Old January is not so clever. In special powers of vision, as in gatekeeping, he fails to live up to his name. January not only cannot see what is going on behind his back but given the opportunity refuses to see even what is going on before his eyes. Of course, unlike the motif of gatekeeping, blindness and restoration of sight are part of the plot of the story Chaucer has the Merchant tell. But Chaucer enriches that motif and here again chooses for elaboration a characteristic found latent in his hero's name.[15]

Such characteristics appear to exist in abundance. Janus, for example, was a patron of merchants and was associated with ships and with money-changing, facts that may help close the gap between the *Merchant's Tale* and the Merchant of the *General Prologue*.[16] Also, the month of January has physiological and psychological implications that Chaucer develops through January's specific age and through contrastive imagery of age and youth.[17] Further, artistic representations of the month of January (often as a Janus figure) holding a knife may have led Chaucer to reveal January's misplaced self-confidence in the virtue of his marital sexuality through a patently illogical simile which the Parson subsequently saw fit to cor-

[15]Passages relating to vision and blindness that have no counterpart in the analogues: 1577–87, 1598, 2057–71, 2107–14; through two allusions to Rebecca, the latter specifically associating her with May (1362–65; 1704–05), the Merchant may expect us to recall that her advice to Jacob to bind "the kydes skyn aboute his nekke" was for the purpose of deceiving her blind husband. And in the greatly expanded sight-restoring denouement of the traditional pear-tree story, Chaucer shows us the hero's willful self-blinding (2354–410).

[16]See Paul A. Olson, "The Merchant's Lombard Knight," *TSLL*, 3 (1961–62), 259–63; I treat this theme in somewhat greater detail in "Chaucer, the Merchant, and Their Tale: Getting Beyond Old Controversies," Part II, *ChauR*, 13 (1979), 254–55.

[17]Discussed in my "*The Merchant's Tale*: Januarie's 'Unlikely Elde,' " *NM*, 74 (1973), 92–106.

rect.[18] But rather than pursue additional meanings in the name January, at this point the reader may yearn for some validation for this whole approach. Even granting that Chaucer encourages us to allow our imagination full play in working out the implications of his names, how do we know when we have followed his hints beyond acceptable limits?

There is no easy answer to that question, but one way to check an interpretation of a name or any other allusion is through a process we might call "validation by supporting imagery and allusion." Chaucer needed neither the gatekeeping motif nor the name January in order to get his story told, as countless analogues demonstrate. Although a few readers have managed to do so, it must be difficult to sustain an estimation of Chaucer's limitations that would have him able to introduce and elaborate that motif and introduce that name while remaining oblivious to connections between the name and gatekeeping. Even if he had not made our task easier by alluding in an earlier work to "Janus, God of Entre," a Chaucer so obtuse and unimaginative is almost beyond belief. The gatekeeping motif would thus appear to help validate speculations concerning the role of Janus in the rich overlay of meanings that accompany the literal narrative.

Moreover, in setting the late December scene of an episode in the *Franklin's Tale* through allusion to a traditional iconographic motif, Chaucer makes explicit the association of January and Janus:

> Phebus wax old, and hewed lyk laton,
> That in his hoote declynacion
> Shoon as the burned gold with stremes brighte;
> But now in Capricorn adoun he lighte,
> Where as he shoon ful pale, I dar wel seyn.
> The bittre frostes, with the sleet and reyn,
> Destroyed hath the grene in every yerd.
> Janus sit by the fyr, with double berd,
> And drynketh of his bugle horn the wyn;
> Biforn hym stant brawen of the tusked swyn,
> And "Nowel" crieth every lusty man. (1245–55)

The "labors of the months" — sowing grain, harvesting, and so on — are

[18] "A man may do no synne with his wyf, Ne hurte hymselven with his owene knyf," reasons January (1839–40); to which the Parson responds: "And for that many man weneth that he may nat synne, for no likerousnesse that he dooth with his wyf, certes, that opinion is fals. God woot, a man may sleen hymself with his owne knyf. . . ." (858). Later, January says to May that he would rather "dyen on a knyf" than offend her (2163–64). For Janus/January depicted with a knife, see James Carson Webster, *The Labors of the Months in Antique and Medieval Art* (Northwestern University: Evanston, 1938), "Catalogue" (pp. 117–74), items 44, 57, 59, 67, 81.

frequently depicted in sculpture and in illuminated calendars of the later Middle Ages. The scene for the month of January often shows a banqueting figure with the two faces of Janus *bifrons,* thus reflecting the traditional association of Janus and the month that looks back to the old year and forward to the new.[19] These lines from the *Franklin's Tale* clearly evoke such a visual image, and whatever else this passage may accomplish, it should not cause us to retract earlier speculations about January and Janus.

But an elaborate passage of so little narrative significance may do more than simply announce the season of the year or support an earlier allusion. Much is happening here. The *General Prologue* presents the Franklin as an Epicurean:

> To lyven in delit was evere his wone,
> For he was Epicurus owene sone,
> That held opinioun that pleyn delit
> Was verray felicitee parfit. (335–38)

January in the *Merchant's Tale* is also an Epicurean:

> Somme clerkes holden that felicitee
> Stant in delit, and therfore certeyn he,
> This noble Januarie, with al his myght,
> In honest wyse, as longeth to a knyght,
> Shoop hym to lyve ful deliciously. (2021–25)

January also resembles the Franklin in his fondness for a morning sop in wine (A334, E1843). In his fondness for wine, too, he follows the example of the god Janus: *Janus pocula amat.*[20] In the Middle Ages as in our own time, the popular view of Epicurus was that he favored rich living. Hence he was the "Pig Philosopher," as seen in this delightful etymology: *Iste ergo tot us libidini deditus erat; unde Epicurus est dictus,*

[19]See Webster's "Catalogue," *passim;* Rosemond Tuve may have been the first to note the iconographical background of this passage in the Franklin's Tale (*Seasons and Months: Studies in a Tradition of Middle English Poetry,* diss. Bryn Mawr, pub. Paris, 1933, pp. 123–24, 157–59).

[20]From a widely disseminated "De Mensibus" of which Hans Walther lists five pre-15th century manuscripts (*Initia carminum ac versum medii aevi posterioris Latinorum* [Gottingen, 1959], #14217). Bartholomeus Anglicus explains the physiological connection between food and drink and the month of January (*De proprietatibus rerum,* 9.8; Frankfort, 1601, p. 446), and Pierre Bersuire, in spinning the expected moral lesson from Bartholomeus, cites a Biblical verse associated with Epicureanism: *per Januarium potest intelligi conditio golosorum quia scilicet gula dicta est a Deo Jano, id est a carne vel a ventre, de quo gulosi faciunt Deum suum, ad. Phil. 3. Quorum Deus venter est* (*Reductorium morale,* 5.51; *Opera,* Cologne, 1730, 2, 127).

quasi super porcos.[21] January and Janus are often depicted with a pig or a boar's head.[22] Near the center of the *Franklin's Tale,* then, Janus sits in the pose of the calendar illumination for the month of January. He is not only engaged in the Epicurean practice of feasting but also is feasting on the particular animal most closely associated with the much maligned Greek philosopher, "swyn." Through this passage Chaucer brings together several mutually supporting associations — cold, winter, Janus the god, January the month, January the character, the Merchant, the Franklin, wine, swine, rich living in general and Epicureanism in particular.

This is not the place to attempt to draw broad implications from such observations, but it seems unlikely that Chaucer would have placed Janus/January feasting on "swyn" in the midst of the *Franklin's Tale* if he had wanted to mute the Epicureanism of the Franklin which he had so explicitly announced in the *General Prologue* or if he had wanted to dissociate the Franklin and his tale from the Epicureanism of January in the *Merchant's Tale*. Further, this allusion to Janus may contribute to the worldly and largely non-Christian atmosphere of the *Franklin's Tale* (set, apparently, in pagan times, with a lengthy prayer to Apollo, and without the usual concluding Christian exhortation). On the feast of the Circumcision of Our Lord (January 1), it was customary to deplore (citing Augustine) the cult of two-headed Janus as an example of the tenacious superstitious rites of the pagans.[23] All this does not necessarily deny the putative wisdom of the *Franklin's Tale* as noted by Kittredge and many others since, but we should perhaps retain some measure of caution in affirming too strongly Kittredge's conviction that in the Franklin we hear the authentic moral position of Geoffrey Chaucer.

There is more to the Franklin and Epicurus, more to Janus and January, and much more to names in Chaucer.[24] But this will have to do for now. I

---

[21]Edmund Taite Silk, ed. *Saeculi noni auctoris in Boetii consolationem philosophiae commentarius* (Papers and Monographs of the American Academy in Rome, 9: Rome, 1935), p. 121.

[22]Tuve, pp. 124, 151, 157–59; Webster, pp. 129–30.

[23]E.g. William Durandus, *Rationale divinorum officiorum,* 6.15 (ed. Venice, 1581, f.184r), and James of Voragine, *Legenda aurea,* ed. Th. Graesse (Leipzig, 1890), pp. 86–87.

[24]Before being certain that we have done all Chaucer wishes us to do in contemplating the name January, we might, among other things, look more closely at medieval allegorizations of the god Janus (as in Bersuire, above n. 20) and at other key-bearing figures in medieval art and literature. Many of Chaucer's names would probably reward further study, if that study were based on the simple assumption that names may mean more than they first seem to mean. For example, the fact that Chaucer's scribe was actually named Adam does not exhaust the possibilities of further meaning inherent in the name, as Russell A. Peck has recently suggested ("Public Dreams and Private Myths: Perspective in Middle English Literature," *PMLA* 90 [1975], 467) and R. E. Kaske has worked out in detail ("*Clericus Adam* and Chaucer's *Adam Scriveyn,*" in *Chaucerian Problems*

hope this summary of scholarly labor concerning one ostensibly simple name in the *Canterbury Tales* will help show how restricting it can be to remain content with the most obvious explanation for Chaucer's use of a proper name. This is especially so if that explanation depends on the assumption that Chaucer is neither subtle nor imaginative, as explanations based solely on the existence of names in his sources or in real life or on the exigencies of rhyme and meter imply. Indeed, as I write this article more than fifteen years after first beginning to study names in the *Merchant's Tale,* an exhilaration bordering on panic sweeps over me in face of the increasing likelihood that the most exciting discoveries still lie in the future. It is as if a subatomic physicist began to realize that each quark contained vast unexplored galaxies within it. Yet, persuaded as I am that we will never exhaust the incredible inventiveness of Chaucer's onomastic imagination, I am also persuaded that he would smile tolerantly, and perhaps even approvingly, on our stubborn willingness to try.

Vanderbilt University

and Perspectives, above n. 5, pp. 114–18). Two forthcoming essays will provide the name enthusiast with new evidence of Chaucer's onomastic creativity. In an essay now nearing completion, Alfred L. Kellogg will add to our understanding of Madame Eglentyne's name, and in " 'Hooly Chirches Blood': Simony and Patrimony in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale,*" John F. Plummer will show how an important theme can be embodied in the name of a character (forthcoming in the *Chaucer Review*).

Crossville, Tennessee

Crossville (Cumberland County), Tennessee was originally Scotts Cross Roads where all roads crossing the Cumberland Plateau merged: Kentucky Stock Road, Walton Road, Gordon Road, Frost Road, and many other roads of lesser significance. Consequently, it was the Cross Roads of the Plateau.

When Cumberland County was formed in 1856, Scotts Cross Roads was changed to Crossville, due to the French influence of that time in history. Therefore, the *Ville* was added when it became the county seat. In the past, as now, all roads cross at Crossville.

Roy T. Hall

Windsor, Missouri

Windsor was first called Bellmont, but since there was another town in the state by that name it was decided to call it Windsor and drop the word *Castle*. The latter name was chosen because R. F. Means had been reading English history and fancied the name.

Mrs. William C. Boney

Toad Suck (Faulkner County), Arkansas

According to legend, the name was derived from "a story that in the steamboat days there was a saloon on the bank of the Arkansas River, and the thirsty inhabitants 'round about stopped at the tavern to slack their thirst. Heavy drinking at the saloon led a traveler to say, 'Those fellows suck at the bottle until they swell up like toads.' The name caught on, and the place has been called Toad Suck ever since."

Guy W. Murphy