The Shipman's Tale

The *Shipman's Tale:* Deciphering, Coding, and Confusion

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Chaucer's the *Shipman's Tale* represents another fabliau in the *Canterbury Tales* collection, which means another tale of adultery and tricks being played on a husband, in this case a merchant. What makes this tale unique lies in its focus on "taillynge," deciding what a person owes another, which also serves as a point of clever word play by Chaucer. Seeing the actions within the context of exchanges and a desire to remain in balance with one another can help explain why some characters act and speak as they do. The merchant's wife wants money from the monk, and she offers sex for repayment. To get money, the monk borrows the sum from the merchant (unbeknownst to the wife). When the merchant brings up the loan, the monk tells the merchant he provided the money to the merchant's wife already, which causes confusion. Upon hearing this, the wife realizes the monk tricked them both.

The tale focuses on give and take, an unspoken at times need for balance and reciprocity so that one person does not remain in the debt of another. To keep an exchange open-ended not only makes one person indebted, but also makes the relationship feel less equal. Therefore, tallying what one gives and how the other repays becomes all important in the tale, just as it is all important for the livelihood of the merchant. The tools below help decipher how the idea of tallying provided an area of vulnerability.

Tools

Working as a merchant required comfort with a certain amount of ambiguity because his tallying would always be fluid with money coming and going at different times and in different places. Ambiguity does not only exist in the amount of current money on hand. Further areas of ambiguity in a merchant's line of work would include being comfortable with a certain amount of risk-taking, an action necessary to hopefully yield higher rewards. Investments may not pay off. Purchased cargo may not reach its destination, causing irrevocable loss (as in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*). Some people may not prove trustworthy. Even if a person proves trustworthy, the venture may not result in profit. Ambiguity resides in every aspect of a merchant's work.

Comfort with ambiguity extends to the presentation of the merchant and his household. When a profession deals in money, displaying a lack of money would not generate confidence in a

merchant's abilities. In order to appear the kind of merchant that others consider a good investment, merchants needed a reputation of wealth and profitability. The presentation of wealth and profitability needed to be completely unambiguous. This presentation would include a merchant's clothing, his wife's clothing, and the merchant's household, which would involve the support of household staff as well as the expenses necessary to acquire a reputation for generous hospitality. While this elaborate demonstration would also require great cost, the reward would, it was hoped, return in the form of additional business ventures, definitely an indirect, and ambiguous return.

Chaucer's merchant understands this need for comfort in ambiguity perfectly, and the reader realizes this in the description of how the merchant maintains his reputation for "largesse," or generosity (ShipT 22). He understood the importance of appearing wealthy and generous and how that reputation would directly impact his work. Generosity represented the "foremost expression of rank and status," and the reputation of being generous would encourage others to enter into contracts and other negotiations with him (Burkert 130). In a private conversation with his wife, the merchant distinguishes between his public self, his reputation, and his private self. The public self may "wel make chiere and good visage," or appear cheerful and happy (ShipT 230). The merchant must "kepen oure estaat in pryvetee," or keep his true condition private from all, including his guests and those he declares to be close as kin (ShipT 232). This unspoken yet clearly understood expectation links his generosity to his eventual profitability.

Understanding the need for a level of comfort in ambiguity does not mean that Chaucer's merchant feels no anxiety about his ambiguous and sometimes risky trade. More than once in the *Shipman's Tale* the reader finds the merchant counting his money, which may convey an uneasiness about his financial state despite the outward gestures of wealth. At times the merchant counts his money in lieu of entertaining guests or going down to a meal, which causes consternation on the part of his wife. The merchant seems generous with his guests, but his wife considers him stingy when it comes to being generous to her (ShipT 172). In addition, the merchant has possibly taken tallying too much to heart, as his wife believes he keeps a tally for her as well, implying that the merchant views all interactions in terms of amounts given and received, even those between husband and wife.

Outside of specific, outward signs of generosity designed to build and strengthen his influence, the merchant does not freely disperse money. Instead, the merchant regularly counts his money because he considers it his "plogh" (plow), meaning that he sees his work as consisting of knowing the exact amounts of money in play as he buys and sells across many regions (ShipT 288). Basically, his money is a tool for his work just as a plow is an essential tool for a farmer. He uses his money to make more money. And so the merchant believes he must maintain a happy countenance and generous reputation because by profession he must "evermore… stonde in drede / Of hap and fortune in [his] chapmanhede," reflecting the anxiety built upon a lifetime of working in a fragile profession that depends on some bit of chance or fortune ("ShipT 237-38). By counting his money, the merchant allays some of that anxiety. By tallying, the merchant measures where he stands in business and with others, and uncovering those codes helps the reader understand the choices of all of the characters within the tale

The codes delivered in giving, receiving and reciprocating a gift remained clearly defined throughout the medieval period (Mauss 61). To give a gift establishes a bond between individuals, a bond that strengthens when the gift is reciprocated (Hyde 61). By offering his hospitality, the merchant gifts his guests with a room, food, and at times entertainment. This creates a relationship between the merchant and his guests, a relationship that grows stronger with each visit. For example, Don John, the monk, stays with the merchant often, and these repeated visitations create closeness between Don John and the merchant, building on their shared origin in the same "village" so much so that they call each other cousin throughout the tale (ShipT 33-37). Don John understands why the merchant provides hospitality, and the reader can recognize Don John's understanding of the codes involved in such situations because Don John never appears empty handed, often bringing wine and/or food when he arrives. By producing gifts in return for the hospitality of the merchant, the monk realizes the importance of reciprocity. In order to avoid being indebted to the merchant because of the merchant's hospitality, Don John must reciprocate to restore the relationship to a sense of balance (Mauss 12). Restoring balance returns the relationship to one of equals. As any good detective show might say, the key to uncovering the trick is not just to "follow the money" but also to "follow the need for reciprocity." The urgent desire to keep everyone on an equal playing field creates the necessary room for deception and trickery.

Text

When considering the text of the *Shipman's Tale* within the context of money and reciprocity, the reader may find some clarity when analyzing confusing passages and in deciding on the character of the merchant himself. For example, when the merchant responds to Don John's request of 100 franks:

This noble marchant gentilly anon
Answerde and seyde, "O cosyn myn, daun John,
Now sikerly this is a smal requeste.
My gold is youres, whan that it yow leste,
And nat oonly my gold, but my chaffare.
Take what yow list; God shilde that ye spare.
'But o thyng is, ye knowe it wel ynogh
Of chapmen, that hir moneie is hir plogh.
We may creaunce whil we have a name,
But goldlees for to be, it is no game.
Paye it agayn whan it lith in youre ese;
After my myght ful fayn wolde I yow plese."
Thise hundred frankes he fette forth anon,
And privelyhe took hem to daun John.
No wight in al this world wiste of this loone
Savynge this marchant and daun John allone. (ShipT 281-296)

Based on the coded actions involved in gifting, and in particular the need for merchants to appear wealthy, deciphering the merchant's response shows the reader much about the merchant and the merchant's believed relationship that he has with the monk.

Let's break this down. First, the merchant addresses Don John as "cousin," reminding both of them of the closeness they share and a relationship built on many visits and gifts shared between them. While the merchant means this sincerely, the reader, however, understands the irony present in this situation. By borrowing the money he plans to give merchant's wife from the merchant, Don John shows the reader that he does not harbor the same affinity for the merchant. In reality, Don John violates the bonds both built over time with his actions inside the tale.

Next, the merchant reassures the monk that the request for 100 franks is a "small request." By referring to the request as small, the merchant tries to put Don John at ease for asking for a large amount of money. Here the merchant reinforces his reputation of being wealthy, but this statement conveys irony to the reader as well. Not too many lines before this request, the merchant explained to his wife how careful he had to be with money and how anxious he was about staying wealthy given the unpredictability of his career. For the merchant, one hundred franks does represent a tidy sum, and he subtly gives this away later in his response.

The merchant's later sentences serve to elaborate and emphasize the two points above, namely that he considers the monk family and that he is a wealthy man who can easily spare the money with lines such as "my gold is yours" and "take what you like." In each utterance, the merchant reminds the monk of a friendship that the reader knows the monk does not value. By offering the monk the money, the merchant unknowingly sets all the later actions in the tale including his wife's adultery. As the merchant's tone begins to shift in later lines, the merchant reveals more about himself.

In some respects, the merchant's remaining lines also underscore his closeness to the monk. Starting in line 287, the use of the word "but" indicates the tone shift, and in this case, the tone shifts from cheerful generosity to serious business. These lines contain the comparison of money to his "plogh," signaling to the monk that money the monk takes away from the merchant means money the merchant cannot use to lend or invest. Further, by telling the monk "it is no jest to be without gold," the merchant hints at the anxiety of giving away money that he mentioned to his wife in earlier lines. If the merchant needs to keep up a pretense of wealth and "largesse," confiding to the monk that he wants the monk to pay him back when he can shatters the pretense and reveals to the monk that the merchant cares more about his money than he lets on to others. In this light, the reader may be inclined to feel sympathy for the merchant, for he clearly will be faring the worst as the story resolves.

Following the money, and following the ways that each of the three characters seek to keep their relationships in balance, presents the reader with a contradictory image of the merchant. Within the tale, the merchant appears to be a good husband. As Helen Cooper notes, "He is not jealous; he gives his wife liberty; he at least is of the opinion that she has sufficient clothing, livelihood, and silver in her purse, even if he expects her to run a 'thrifty household' (243-8 / 1433-8)" (281). He speaks honestly to the monk and to his wife, but he does not receive the same honesty in turn. Cooper singles out the merchant from other husbands in fabliaux because "If the merchant of St. Denis is a fool at all, it is not because he mistrusts his wife, but because he trusts her" (282). He does not even overly condemn her actions, despite all she has done.

The wife, however, describes the merchant differently to the monk. The wife confesses to the monk that her husband is "the worste man / that evere was sith that the world bigan" (ShipT 161-162). To explain this, the wife lists several complaints. According to the wife, the merchant does not act generously with his money when it comes to her, for she calls him stingy. Once she abandons the pretense of a happy marriage, the wife continues to call her husband worthless and to report that he does not have the basic qualities that wives desire, chief among them the quality of generosity.

When the wife interacts with the merchant, the reader must decipher what appears to be contradictory information, which does not provide solid clues as to whether or not her words to the monk are true. Instead, studying these actions only add to the confusion. The wife accuses the husband of caring more about his money than his friends (or her) when she reprimands him for counting his money instead of coming down so that she and Don John could eat. However, when the merchant returns from his business trip, she greets him at the gate, a customary act of hers, and they have a lovely evening (ShipT 374). Finally, when the merchant brings up the money the monk claims to have paid the wife, she becomes angry and tells him that he can "score it upon my taille" (ShipT 416). In this comment, the wife refers to both methods of exchange covered in the tale: sex and money (the tally), hinting to the reader that she may regard some of her wifely duties as necessary transactions in order to receive the money she desires.

Even the Shipman hints to the audience that the merchant, by his profession, should not engender sympathy. Lines 15-19 of his prologue indicate, according to Welzenbach, "if the traders at each end of a deal fail to work directly and honestly with one another, as partners in a marriage should, then middlemen, money-exchangers, and lenders will become involved, taking advantage of the situation and, as the Shipman states explicitly, this is 'perilous'" (8). Because money is the merchant's "plow," the merchant profits from exchanges between other parties. By making the merchant the victim of the deception, Chaucer may be indicating ironically that the merchant fell victim to someone profiteering as a go-between (the monk) in his marriage in the same kind of way the merchant acts as a go-between in his work. Like the merchant with his deal in Paris, Welzenbach notes, the monk leaves the situation having lost no money and having gained a great deal (8). Finding the parallel between the merchant and the monk can help the reader decipher the overall message or moral of the tale, if one exists at all.

When the Shipman ends his tale, all the pilgrims remain silent except for the Host. The Host's reaction to the tale indicates that he found no fault with the merchant. Calling the merchant a "gentil maister, gentil maryneer," the Host demonstrates a belief that the merchant, and his wife, fell prey to the monk (ShipT 437). The Host claims the monk "putte in the mannes hood an ape" by tricking the merchant and his wife and finishes his speech advising the party not to invite monks into their homes before asking the Prioress to tell her tale (ShipT 440, 442). Placing full blame on the monk absolves the wife of any wrongdoing, despite her willingness to enter into this arrangement with the monk for money.

Ultimately, the reader has to weigh the words of all three characters, as well as their actions, throughout the tale. By doing so, the reader sets about an interpretive tallying system to evaluate the characters. Keeping track of the money assists in this interpretation and should help the

reader come to an independent conclusion about the merchant and whether or not he deserved the trick played upon him by his wife and the monk.

Transformation

1. How does the merchant in "The Shipman's Tale" compare to the other husbands in fabliaux, such as in "The Miller's Tale"?
2. Do you believe that the medieval focus on reciprocity remains important today? Have you ever felt indebted to someone who gifted you in an overly generous way?
3. Based on the contradictory information, what is your assessment of the merchant?
4. Why do you think Chaucer chose a monk to perform this role in the tale?
5. In the prologue to this tale, the Shipman shifts into a first-person voice when discussing the role of women. Why does he do this? What purpose might that serve?
6. At the end of the tale, the Host responded with "wel seyd" (435). What qualities of the tale might have appealed to the Host?
7. What are the implications in looking at life as a series of transactions to be tallied?
8. How do the qualities the wife desires in a husband (lines 174-177) compare to the Wife of Bath's discussion about what women desire in a husband?
9. Compare this monk to the Monk from "The Prologue." What commonalities do you find? Can you deduce any overall social commentary from these presentations?

Further study & projects:

1. Study earlier examples of the fabliau, particularly from *The Decameron*. How does Chaucer use this form in his work for similar purposes?
2. Explore some of the growing concerns regarding the clergy during Chaucer's time. How do those concerns appear in Chaucer's monk?
3. A gifting culture inherently mindful of reciprocity functions very differently than a monetary culture we have today. Mauss's book *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* outlines the gifting culture and provides many examples. After understanding more about this system, examine Chaucer's work for other examples of reciprocity and determine if he creates any consistent social commentary in this regard.

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