

## Moral and Physical Blindness in *The Merchant's Tale*\*

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In the Middle Ages there were various types of narratives related to blindness and they were familiar to people at that time. In 1425, an anonymous bourgeois chronicler recorded that four blind people were armed and made to fight against a pig in France. This was a show at that time, and the performance was an entertainment<sup>1</sup>. In addition to the actual show, there are many literary works where blind people appear. The French Romance of Alexander in 1339, for example, describes people with disability. In particular, blind men fighting a crippled man appear in the story. Jean de Grise who illuminated manuscripts also depicts four blind people who fight against a pig. As these examples show, blindness was one of the motifs and utilized in various contexts.

During the Middle Ages, it was thought that blindness was caused by both spiritual and physical reasons. Blindness was basically examined in terms of medicine. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, for instance, states that alcohol consumption causes damage to eyesight because the alcohol damages nutrition. In order to maintain eyesight, it is essential to keep in balance the four humor blood, phlegm, black and yellow bile—and to avoid gazing at the sun directly. If one does not take these precautions, it was thought that human eyesight would decline.<sup>2</sup> Such a medical theory was widespread in England in the Middle Ages.

Simultaneously, in terms of medieval Christianity blindness was regarded as evil. Blindness was not just physical disability, but connected to one's moral quality. In a French play in the thirteenth century, *Le Garçon et l'Aveugle*, blind people, for instance, are said to have 'gluttonous, coarse, cynical, and debauched characters, and the blindness was regarded as vice at that time'.<sup>3</sup> Theologians in the Middle Ages thought that blindness is a punishment for

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks before the Blind* (Arbor: University of Michigan, 2014), pp.2-4.

<sup>2</sup> Joy Howkins, 'Did Drunkenness Dim the Sight? Medieval Understanding and Responses to Blindness in Medical and Religious Discourse', in *Medicine, Religion and Gender in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Naoe Kukita Yoshikawa (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2015), pp.203-20 (p.203).

<sup>3</sup> Wheatley, pp.1-4.

sin. Kelly points out that blindness prevents Christians from seeing God.<sup>4</sup> In medieval literature, blindness is similarly regarded as a consequence of evil plot. In Marie de France's *Lanval*, for example, Guinevere harasses the knight, Lanval, and as the punishment for this, she is blinded by Lanval's lover. Thus, she becomes blind because of her lechery and attitude toward fairy. Blindness could be caused by vice as mentioned. This also suggests that in the Middle Ages, blind people were mostly described negatively and were treated as such.<sup>5</sup>

In spite of the general idea, blindness also did have a good meaning in terms of religion. While some theologians spoke of it as a curse, there were others who saw it as a blessing. It was considered as a gift from God to worthy recipients, an ordeal that Christians were willing to suffer for it would mean they were privileged.<sup>6</sup> That is why saints and other holy persons were sometimes represented as blind because they were God's elect. Some anchoress, for instance, needs to accept her blindness because the blindness is the ordeal from God. If they endured it, they would gain reward afterlife.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, blindness makes people see on a more spiritual level than that of physical sight. Some people can predict what happens in the future because they are blind. Therefore, during the Middle Ages, blindness was perceived from both medical and religious perspectives and had both good and bad aspects.

Multiple aspects of blindness can also be seen in literary works. *The Canterbury Tales* has several cases of both medical and spiritual blindness. In particular, *The Merchant's Tale* centres its narrative plot on an old man who suffers from sudden blindness. His physical blindness comes about only after he shows that he is blinded to his own life; he imagines that he is a good match for a young and beautiful woman. Sixty years old, January finds a young wife, May, and thus achieves his goal of marrying a beautiful woman, but then he suddenly becomes blind. While blind, he is deceived by May, who flirts with January's squire, Damian.

At first glance, *The Merchant's Tale* appears to be a fabliau because January is cheated by both May and Damian. Benson and Anderson, however, argue that *The Merchant's Tale* is not a typical fabliau and does not just describe a cuckold.<sup>8</sup> What makes this tale more interesting than fabliaux is the sudden blindness of January. Before he becomes blind, May restrains her

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Jane Kelly, 'Blindness as Physical and Moral Disorder in the Works of Gonzalo de Berceo' *Hispanic Review*, 73 (2005), 131-155 (pp.131-132).

<sup>5</sup> Wheatley, p.2.

<sup>6</sup> Kelly, p.133.

<sup>7</sup> Howkins, p.220.

<sup>8</sup> Benson Larry D. and Anderson Theodor M., *The Literary Context of Chaucer's Fabliaux: Texts and Translations* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), p.204.

feelings for Damian. After her husband's blindness, however, she no longer feels the need for restraint and betrays him by flirting with Damian. January grows more cautious and so he always keeps her beside him.

Many scholars have shown interest in the reason why January becomes blind. Some insist that January has been punished for his sin<sup>9</sup>. Kloss maintains that January becomes blind owing to his lechery.<sup>10</sup> He states that his lechery is not senile lechery. He still has infantile perception, so such his character affects his view of marriage. According to Kloss, 'like an infant at his mother's breast, he has lived, and continues to live'.<sup>11</sup> From this, he points out that January's blindness symbolizes 'oedipal crime of having taken the mother' because he sees May as his mother.<sup>12</sup> Then, as Oedipus hollows out his eyes and becomes blind because of his incest, Kloss states that Chaucer likens January's love for May to incest, then he is blinded as well. Moreover, *the Merchant's tale* emphasizes January's garden and it has a pear tree associated with sexuality.<sup>13</sup> January takes May to the garden, so January's lechery connects to Oedipus's crime and his garden with pear tree. Thus, at least some of the previous studies of January's blindness indicates that he becomes blind due to his lechery.

January keeps his lecherous behaviour throughout the tale. Before he marries May, he seeks physical pleasure as a bachelor. Moreover, after he takes May as his wife, he also takes medicine in order to invigorate his body, because he is too old to be active: 'He drynke yprocras, clarree, and vernage/ Of spices hooete' encreessen his corage' (IV, 1807-6).<sup>14</sup> After he becomes blind, he still sticks to lecherous life. As a result, he indulges in lechery throughout the tale.

Lechery is one of the seven deadly sins in Christianity. Given that blindness could be caused by sin, this might suggest that unless January gives up his lecherous thought, he can gain disability and pain as a punishment of sin and so, he becomes blind. However, this narrative does not intend to attribute his blindness to only lechery. Even though he is lecherous, the

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<sup>9</sup> Kelly, p.134.

<sup>10</sup> Robert J Kloss, 'Chaucer's "The Merchant's Tale": Tender Youth and Stooping Age', *American Imago* 31 (1974), 65-79 (p.65).

<sup>11</sup> Kloss, p.66.

<sup>12</sup> Kloss, p.74.

<sup>13</sup> Kloss, p.73.

<sup>14</sup> *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). All quotations from and references to Chaucer are from this edition and will be cited in parentheses within the text.

reason of his blindness is not only for the seven deadly sins because it is impossible to explain his blindness through this. The aim of this paper is to show that January's blindness is not only for his lechery, but also for figurative and physical four reasons. In fact, January is blind throughout the tale.

*The Merchant's Tale* can be divided into two parts; before and after January becomes blind. At the crucial moment, it is narrated that January loses his sight by Fortune's whim suddenly in the middle of the tale. Before that, however, the narrator mentions:

O January, what myghtest it thee availle,  
Thogh thou myghtest se as fer as shippes saille?  
For as good is blynd deceived,  
As to be deceived whan a man may se. (IV 2106-2010)

This means whether January becomes blind or not, he does not see things through his eyes. Even before he suffers from physical blindness, he cannot see although his eyes open. In other words, he is able to see, but not able to perceive. This thus can be blindness. From this, before he suffers from his blindness, he in fact may not be able to perceive what he shall see from his own fantasizing.

Before January actually becomes blind, there are several scenes in which January pictures female figures in his mind:

Heigh fantasye and curious bisynesse  
Fro day to day gan in the soule impresse  
Of Januarie aboute his marriage.  
Many fair shap and many a fair visage  
Ther passeth thurgh his herte nyght by nyght (IV, 1577-1581)

In this quotation, what he imagines in his mind is represented as his fantasy. The imagination is filled with women who have beautiful appearances, and have virtuous characteristics as candidates for his wife. Moreover, May is similarly beautified in his mind:

And whan that he was in his bed ynbrought,  
He purtreied in his herte and in his thought  
Hir fresshe beautee and hir age tendre,  
Hir myddel small, hire armes longe and skelendre,  
Hir wise governaunce, hir gentillesse,  
Hir womanly berynge, and hire sadnesse. (IV, 1599-1604)

The quotation mentions that January describes May in his mind. After the quotation, the tale tells that May's figure is fantasized by January as the quotation shows:

For whan that he hymself concluded hadde,  
Hym thoughte echo oother mannes wit so badde,  
That impossible it were to repplye  
Agayn his choys; this was his fantasye. (IV, 1607-10)

At the end of this quotation, Chaucer again states 'this was his fantasye', and shows that the description of May is not real, but fantasy. That is to say, female figures that January sees and describes in his mind are consistently his fantasy. According to Middle English Dictionary, fantasy is a deluded notion or false supposition; an unfounded speculation or suspicion; hence, untruth, a lie. The Wycliffite Bible which was widespread at that time tells that 'As of the womman berende child, thin herte suffreth fantasies'. Here, it mentions that women fantasize something. As mentioned, the Bible refers to female fantasy. In his fantasizing, he certainly imagines a wife who is appropriate for his status as a knight. January himself, however, does not behave as a knight properly. Moreover, Chaucer describes in *The Clerk's tale* that Walter imagines Griselda's character and knows her true virtuous nature. In fact, Walter does know her nature, but so that he trusts her, he dares to make himself blind to her character in in *The Clerk's tale*. January also seems to imagine May's nature, and he thinks that she has virtue and beautiful figure. January, however, misunderstands her nature unlike Walter. That is to say, Walter perceives her true nature, but January cannot see intrinsic nature of May. She actually does not have virtuous characteristics, because she betrays him by flirting with Damian. January thus is blinded to his wife unlike Walter.

January fantasizes May's figure by relying on his memory. Carruthers states that the sources of what is in memory are diverse, but what happens to an impression or an idea once it gets into the brain is a single process resulting in the production of a phantasm that can be 'seen' and 'scanned' by 'the eye of the mind'.<sup>15</sup> She points out that human memory is blur, and with this thought it is possible to think that January's memory also can be obscure, and so his fantasy which depend on his memory can be untrue. Sheridan states that fantasizing reflects unreal thought and he is thus unable to see May's real figure because of his fantasizing.<sup>16</sup> By

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp.18-22.

<sup>16</sup> Christian Sheridan, 'May in the Marketplace: Commodification and Textuality in the Merchant's Tale', *Studies in Philology*, 102 1 (2005), 27-44 (pp.27-28).

the mental power of fancy, January unconsciously transforms the real women into unrealistic illusion, beautifying them in his mind. Therefore, he already has moral blindness before he loses his sight by Fortune's whim.

In addition, January's imagination is also the result of what Mathewson calls 'masculine blindness'—that is, men see only the transient condition of beauty, youth, and virginity of women: 'Hir fresshe beautee and hir age tender,/ Hir myddel small, hire armes longe and sklendre' (IV, 1601-1602).<sup>17</sup> This type of blindness is appropriate for January who beautifies female figures in his mind. Mathewson argues that in *the Physician's Tale* Virginia becomes a sacrifice by blindness of her father, Virginius, as well as of Apius. The reason that Virginia is executed is because both Virginius and Apius are attracted and blinded by her beauty. Apius has a desire for physical possession for Virginia because he only sees her beauty, so he decides to take her as possession. He manipulates Claudius who is his subordinate and insists that Virginia is his daughter. By doing so, Apius thinks that he can possess Virginia. Virginius, on the other hand, wants to keep her beside as his daughter and he does not realize that Virginia is actually afraid of death. She does not have choice and just obeys her father's order.<sup>18</sup> Both Apius and Virginius are, thus, blinded by her virginity, beauty, and herself. Similarly, the greed that January wants to possess May is also the example of 'masculine blindness' so that he does not perceive her true nature. Both *the Merchant's Tale* and *the Physician's Tale* are common in male blindness. January, Virginius and Apius are captured by female beauty. Although both Apius and Virginius are able to recognize Virginia's virtue and beauty, January only sees May through his fantasizing. As mentioned, fantasizing produces unreal thought, so he does not try to face reality. In the view of January's excessive fantasizing and 'masculine blindness', one can say that January cannot see below the surface and is already metaphorically blind before January actually loses his sight. While medieval theologians argued about the nature of physical blindness, Chaucer saw 'masculine blindness' as a moral failure.

Not only spiritual, but also physical blindness is narrated in this tale. When January suddenly loses his sight, his lust is mentioned again: 'Allas this noble January free,/ Amydde his lust and his prosperitee,/ Is woxen blynd, and that al sodeynly' (IV, 2069-2071). January's misfortune can result from his lecherous thought and behavior. From this, his blindness may be thought that he is making atonement for his sin. In the Middle Ages, as mentioned above, it

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<sup>17</sup> Jeanne T. Mathewson, 'For Love and Not Hate: The Value of Virginity in Chaucer's 'Physician's Tale'', *Annuaire Mediaevale*, 14 (1973), 35-42 (p.41-42).

<sup>18</sup> Mathewson, pp.38-39.

was thought that lust has a bad influence on the human body in terms of health. *De Coitu* written by Constantine the African in the eleventh century states that intercourse contains some benefits to keep human health, but sometimes it has bad influences on human body. For instance, the time that people sleep before digesting a meal is not good situation to have intercourse. It also points out that the morning is not the good time because they cannot take a rest if they do that after they wake up. January also drinks and eats bread before and after he goes to bed. Moreover, people who have intercourse frequently can be weakened. Howkins also states that too much semen is bad for the blood and causes disease, and it also affects eyesight.<sup>19</sup> He, however, does not mend his lecherous way after he becomes blind. January is, therefore, blinded because of his lechery. That is because he fantasizes May's figure. That means that he is under spiritual blindness. He also becomes physically blind due to his lechery, which has bad influences on human body. As a result, lechery causes both spiritual and physical blindness.

In addition to January's lechery, alcohol consumption seems to bring about blindness; this can be another physical cause for his disability. For instance, when people drink wine which is hot and dry, the alcohol deflagrates foods and destroys nutrition and this causes blindness in terms of medicine.<sup>20</sup> According to *De Coitu*, great wine drinkers have much lust as well as semen, and then they have excessive desire of intercourse.<sup>21</sup> In the case of January, there are scenes in which he drinks wine many times before he goes to bed. He drinks wine to stimulate himself and even when he wakes up in the morning, he takes wine with bread (IV 1807-8). Moreover, in scene of the feast, Bacchus, a Greek god symbolizing alcohol, appears and provides wine to all. Venus, a love goddess, also appears in the scene that January and May get married and then, Venus dances with torch. Venus relates to blindness because she takes Cupid who is blind. The description that January is with Venus seems to associate readers with the situation that January cannot see May's nature. In other words, from the description it is possible to speculate January's blindness. Judging from these scenes, January at least consumes alcohol both in the night and the morning and so, it can be interpreted that alcohol consumption affects January's eyesight. Thus, there are several possible causes for his blindness: fantasizing, lechery, and alcohol consumption.

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<sup>19</sup> Howkins, pp.210-13.

<sup>20</sup> Delany, 'Constantinus Africanus' *De Coitu*: a translation', *Chaucer Review*, 4 (1970), 55-65, (pp.60-61).

<sup>21</sup> Delany, p.60-61.

Although there are several candidates as causes for January's blindness, he also seems to suffer from it because of Fortune's mischief. Being blind, he is worried about her possible betrayal and so he always keeps May beside him. This ploy fails, however: 'By cause, allas, that he is blynd and old,/ His owene man shal make hym cokewold (IV, 2255-56). Interestingly, here, his old age is emphasized. In fact, January's aging seems to be mentioned repeatedly in this tale. The Bible mentions several cases of blindness due to aging.<sup>22</sup> The eyesight of Isaac declines with his age, but not because of sickness. If one considers the examples of blindness in the Bible, there is a possibility that Chaucer thought that blindness is naturally accompanied by old age. In the Middle Ages, it was known that the eyesight of old people declines and finally they become blind.<sup>23</sup> Medieval literature is full of elderly people with disabilities, such as blindness, lameness and impotence.<sup>24</sup> As one ages, eyes gradually become dry and inflamed, leading to the deterioration of eyesight.<sup>25</sup> Blindness was thought to be a natural consequence of ageing for elderly people; it was inevitable that at the age of sixty years January would gradually lose his eyesight. Thus, it is natural for January to lose his sight owing to his age.

People who lived in the Middle Ages usually thought that senescence starts from thirty-five years old while Hippocrates thought that people are regarded as old when they are fifty-five years old.<sup>26</sup> From such standards, January is certainly an old man. He is aware of his old age:

With face sad his tale he hath hem toold.  
 He seyde, "Freendes, I am hoor and oold,  
 And almost, God woot, on my pittes brynke;  
 Upon my soule somewhat moste I thynke. (IV, 1399-1402)

Furthermore, a characteristic of the old age is especially appropriate for January: one is putrid spittle.<sup>27</sup> The reason thesis appropriate for January is because January drinks wine with

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<sup>22</sup> Eri who appears in Samuel in Old testament is an elderly person so she is blind, but even though Mores is also old, he is not blind even in 120 years old.

<sup>23</sup> Julie Singer, 'Blindness and Therapy in Late Medieval French and Italian Poetry', *Disability and the Social Body*, pp.55-56.

<sup>24</sup> Albrecht Classen, 'Old Ages in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, p.85.

<sup>25</sup> Howkins, p.250.

<sup>26</sup> Joel T. Rosenthal, 'Retirement and the Life Cycle in Fifteenth-Century England', in *Aging and the Aged in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Michael M. Sheehan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), pp.173-188 (p.176).

<sup>27</sup> Rosenthal, p.176.

strong fragrance before he sleeps with May; 'He drynketh ypcoras, clarree, and vernage/ Of spices hooted t'enceessen his corage' (IV, 1807-8). He not only likes to drink alcohol but he drinks wine with fragrance to avoid putrid spittle. The scene can be seen as representing one of the characteristics of old age. Considered this, January seems to be regarded as old age.

To think about reasons for blindness in *the Merchant's Tale*, it is important to consider the end of this story: January regains his eyesight by divine power of pagan gods. Thus, he does not regain eyesight from Christ. Pagan gods give January eyesight again by their whim, so this is a parody of story that Christ recovers human eyesight. If so, *the Merchant's Tale* has less possibilities for Christian interpretation, and his blindness rather should be considered in terms of secular and practical reasons which are both figurative and physical. As long as he fantasizes about May's figure, he is metaphorically blind. That kind of blindness continues to the end of the tale.

January is released from his blindness by pagan gods, but he is deceived by May and cannot see truth. Furthermore, He becomes physically blind in the middle of the tale, but the reason of this blindness is because he is an elderly person with excessive alcohol consumption. He loses his eyesight for natural reasons. We can see that his blindness is caused by four reasons: blindness through his fantasizing and male blindness, blindness by lechery, blindness by alcohol consumption and aging. Judging from the fact that in this tale several reasons are referred, the *Merchant's Tale* does not condemn January's sin by lechery and foolishness. Rather, the tale denies moralistic interpretation with various reasons for his blindness. The tale contains various elements of blindness; medical and metaphorical, and religious, but they do not contradict, but coexist. As a result, *the Merchant's Tale* is an illogical story: it is thought that Fortune manipulates human fate, but it is in fact not true. Divine power does not intervene their fate, so the reason that January becomes blind is for other reasons. From that it is reasonable for this tale to include various kinds of blindness and January suddenly loses his sight. He is cured by Pluto's whim, but he remains blind metaphorically.

