**“To take a wyf”: Marriage, Status and Moral Conduct in “The Merchant’s Tale”**

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**Abstract:** Across the eighteen *Canterbury Tales* that deal in some way with marriage, the language of “The Merchant’s Tale” is most concerned with the role of a “wyf” and a concept of “taking” a wife. In contrast the text appears to show little concern for the status “housbonde,” but the limited use of the term is in fact a means to scrutinize the correlation between these medieval marital roles. Using a corpus of *The Canterbury Tales,* this article reveals how Chaucer semantically distinguishes Januarie’s position as one who wishes only to be served by his wife, from “housbondes” that are in partnership with their wives. The study shows that, through terminology and phraseology, Januarie’s status is connected to Walter’s of “The Clerk’s Tale,” to highlight the underlying abusive traits of men who treat marriage as an economical transaction for their own gain, rather than as a union of love.

**Keywords:** Canterbury Tales, Chaucer, gender, marriage, Merchant’s Tale, semantics.

**Introduction**

Chaucer’s “The Merchant’s Tale” approaches the subjects of marriage, status and moral conduct in the style of fabliau, using humor and satire to consider some more tangible fears of the medieval period.[[1]](#endnote-1) Such concerns within marriage include power and dominance, age and adultery; all of which are explored in the narrative through a combination of the more elevated language of courtly romance and that of the “low-footed” fabliau.[[2]](#endnote-2) Due to this amalgamation of genres, the text is comprised of a particularly wide range of gender-based noun terms related to marriage, class, and conduct (for example, “cokewold,” “housbonde,” “knyght,” “lady,” “shrewe,” “wyf”) to define the characters and their actions. While much scholarship has been carried out regarding gender and power dynamics in the text, as well as the moral implications of the tale within a medieval social context, such gendered language has not been considered.[[3]](#endnote-3) There has, however, been some critique on aspects of status, predominantly concerning age within medieval marriage. Margaret Hallissy’s article “Widow-To-Be: May in Chaucer’s ‘The Merchant’s Tale’” and Stephen J. Russell’s examination on “Chaucer’s Old Men” explore the social implications for a young May marrying aged Januarie in light of social practices of the medieval period, each focusing on female and male roles respectively.[[4]](#endnote-4) However, no study has taken a linguistic approach when examining the narrative’s treatment of gender, nor has one considered a comparative study of gender terminology in the text. This study will, therefore, use a corpus of *The Canterbury Tales* to examine the gender terms in “The Merchant’s Tale” to demonstrate how social concerns surrounding marital status are revealed through these words and their phraseology.

**Marital Terms in “The Merchant’s Tale”**

Marriage and status is a central theme to the tale, made apparent from the opening, which dedicates the first 463 lines to Januarie’s deliberation and justification of marrying in his old age, and the picking of his ideal wife. In his lengthy debate on the virtues and vices of wives and marriage, the word “wyf”is the most frequently occurring of these gender terms in the tale. While discussion of a wife’s role is fundamental to this narrative, the occurrence of “wyf”is nonetheless notably extensive, appearing 61 times throughout the tale, its prologue and its epilogue, which the table below clarifies. This equates to eighteen percent of the word’s overall use in *The Canterbury Tales* corpus, and is the highest use of the term in any one of the *Tales*. Moreover, when compared to other narratives of similar lengths in which the term also frequently occurs, such as “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” and “The Clerk’s Tale,” “The Merchant’s Tale” is found to contain a much greater use of “wyf,” as shown in the following table:**[[5]](#endnote-5)**

Insert Table 1 here

Insert Caption 1 here

The use of the term in “The Merchant’s Tale” is, thus, linguistically significant. “Wyf”is also distinctive when compared to other words used to denote gender roles in the tale, the occurrence of which are presented below:

Insert Table 2 here

Insert Caption 2 here

“Wyf”occurs far more frequently than any other term, shown here as appearing 50 times more than the second most frequently occurring term, “sire”. With this in mind, the language of “The Merchant’s Tale” appears to be most concerned with the role of a “wyf”in *The Canterbury Tales*. Yet, upon further consideration of the text’s language and phrasing it seems that it is not

only the position of “wyf”that is under scrutiny, but also that of the correlative role of “housbonde” and, in particular, Januarie’s inability to fulfill what is expected of this status. This is notable through the lack of use of the word itself, occurring only 4 times, as well as the lack of discussion of a husband’s role in the marriage in comparison to the extensive discussion of a wife’s. This study will, therefore, comparatively examine the presentation of gender and marriage through analysis of the language used to denote Januarie and May’s marital statuses, focusing firstly on the discussion of “wyf”and secondly of that of “housbonde”.

***Wyf***

Throughout the opening lines of the tale, “wyf”is used repeatedly as ageing Januarie considers the use of a wife and the worth of marriage. It is perhaps not surprising, in light of critical work on gender and status in the tale, such as that of Hallissy and Kim Phillips, that the language surrounding the term indicates a medieval woman’s economic, social, and moral value granted through marriage.[[6]](#endnote-6) This is revealed through the semantic field of the noun terms around “wyf,” which contain connotations of personal property, economic worth, and servitude. Words such as “tresor,” “londes,” “rentes,” “pasture,” “commune,” “yifte,”which fall under a semantic category of property and income, are found in close proximity to “wyf”. Januarie insists that just as these possessions are gifts of fortune, a wife is God’s gift to man, suggesting a man’s unquestionable right to a wife that has been conferred by divine authority.[[7]](#endnote-7) In the second half of his speech he considers the age and physical attributes of his ideal spouse, using language that falls primarily into the semantic field of food, including “fish,” “pyk,” “boef,” “veel,” and “bene-straw” [beanstalk].[[8]](#endnote-8) The comparison of a wife to food reflects not only Januarie’s preoccupation with a wife’s market-worth, but also his desire for her as one who can satisfy his sexual appetite. This is an image made more explicit when, following the consummation of his marriage, Januarie’s first action is to eat bread in bed, gratifying his sexual desire and physical hunger simultaneously. Further language surrounding the term can be seen to support Januarie’s belief in ownership of his wife and his desire that her primary role in marriage will be to serve him as her husband. This includes adjectives and verbs depicting his ideal wife’s actions as: “trewe,” “ententyf,” “serve,” “helpe,” “obeye” and “humble,” each connoting a serving role.[[9]](#endnote-9) In addition to such concerns of her economic worth, another of Januarie’s ideal traits is that of his future wife’s youth, explaining the merits of marrying a “yong thyng” that can be easily moulded, likening such a woman to warm candle-wax.[[10]](#endnote-10) Her youth is of utmost importance to Januarie who, despite being “passed sixty yeer,” is explicit that he will not marry a woman older than twenty years, stating twice that he will “noon oold wyf han”.[[11]](#endnote-11) Januarie’s outlandish belief that a woman half his age is too old for him is comical, yet, although exaggerated, it reflects an increasingly common viewpoint in medieval society. Phillips explains in her examination of young women in medieval England why Januarie’s beliefs were not altogether surprising for the period, that although he “was being satirized as an old man with unsuitable desires. . . his ideal was a common one. . . Increasingly, youth was becoming a necessary element of ideal femininity.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Youth was seen to indicate a woman’s beauty and fertility, but these are not the only qualities that make marrying a young bride preferable for Januarie. He seems to be most motivated by the fact that he does not want to marry a widow. “Wydwes,” he explains, are too knowledgeable of marital relationships and as thus are inclined to deceive men.[[13]](#endnote-13) His fear of marrying such a woman alludes to the widow’s greater social and, often, financial power than a “mayde” or “wyf” in medieval society. Hallissy describes the freedom that the status of “wydwe” granted a woman, as “widowhood was conferred *sui juris* status, which constituted a woman’s first independence”.[[14]](#endnote-14) She continues that the “wide age discrepancy between the marriage partners” that was favored for widowers or men who married later in life in the Middle Ages meant that the young women frequently outlived their husbands, or perhaps several husbands, and thus, “the widow’s economic sufficiency gave her heightened power in the marriage market, which in turn could enable her to increase her wealth even further. Undoubtedly some men, like Januarie, disliked widows for their knowledge and assertiveness.”[[15]](#endnote-15) Januarie is interested only in marrying a woman he can control, “gye”and dominate, so a widow with greater social rights or financial independence is not desirable.[[16]](#endnote-16) It is for this reason that he must marry someone so young: one he can be certain has not gained any such economic position or knowledge. Though satirized, his standards allow the text to explore the fear of some men of the period of marrying women who carried the status of “wydwe” and the ulterior motives one may have for marrying a “yong thyng,” aside from her ability to reproduce. The irony, of course, is revealed when Januarie’s carefully selected young bride proves as deceiving as he fears an older widow would be.

As shown, Januarie’s frequent use of “wyf”reflects his preoccupation with how the qualities of a spouse will benefit him as “the fruyt of his tresor,” referring to her economic, social, and moral value.[[17]](#endnote-17) Yet, what appears most notable concerning his speech is that of the 40 instances when he utters the word, only 6 are in reference to his actual wife, May. The remaining 36 uses refer to hypothetical descriptions, generalizations, and idealizations he envisions for his future wife. Chaucer’s application of the term in this way emphasizes Januarie’s obsession with his ideal image of marriage, rather than the reality of it. His metaphorical blindness, heightened by his physical blindness later in the tale, concerns not only May’s deception and adultery, but can be extended to his entire approach to marriage. This is demonstrated particularly through his flawed references to wives from classical and biblical sources. Peggy Knapp noted of Janaurie’s examples of wives as justification of his desire to marry that, “he choose[s] four Old Testament women whose resourceful actions did not necessarily benefit their husbands.”[[18]](#endnote-18) This, together with his flawed understanding of classical philosophers’ discussions on marriage, such as that of the Aristotelian Theophrastus, portrays the extent of Januarie’s figurative blindness, manipulating contrasting advice to support his own argument. When Januarie does eventually call May his “wyf”it correlates with the loss of control he feels in the relationship. This takes place around two-thirds into the tale, when having gone blind, Januarie decides he wants to “pleye”in the garden.[[19]](#endnote-19) He addresses May as follows:

Rys up, my wyf, my love, my lady free!

. . .

The gardyn is enclosed al aboute;

Com forth, my white spouse! Out of doute

Thou hast me wounded in myn herte, O wyf!

. . .

I chees thee for my wyf and my confort.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Here Januarie orders May out to the garden he has created especially to confine her in, allowing them to engage in sexual activity undisturbed, as well as enabling him to ensure her fidelity as he alone has access to the space. Thus, when he finally uses the term “wyf”to directly refer to her, and does so repeatedly, it is to remind her of her role and duty to serve him as his spouse. However, now that Januarie is blind he is also at his weakest point physically in the text, and the narrator notes the “outrageous” [excessive] jealousy he feels having lost his ability to keep a close eye on her.[[21]](#endnote-21) His jealousy grows to the point that he will not allow May to go anywhere unless “he had hond on hire alway,” allowing him to dictate her movements even without his sight, and as he continues to grow more insecure it is not long until he begins to call her “wyf”.[[22]](#endnote-22) The repeated use of the address is another means by which he can exercise his control over her, reminding her of her relational duties to him and her marital debt. The irony of this scene is made strikingly apparent when, ordering her into the enclosed space to limit her movements, he calls her his “lady free.”[[23]](#endnote-23) Januarie continues his speech, referring to her three more times as “wyf”as he explains her position and tells her to submit to his sexual desires. Having told her to “Rys up” and “Com forth” he now explains to her why she should be true to him, addressing her with “Now wyf” and “trewe deere wyf.”[[24]](#endnote-24) He says she should be true for the love of Christ, her own honor and the wealth and land she shall inherit from him before instructing her, “Now kys me, wyf, and lat us rome aboute.”[[25]](#endnote-25) The term “wyf” is a means for Januarie to instruct May to do as he wishes: to go the garden, to fulfill his sexual desires, and to justify why she should remain true to him even though he is blind. Therefore, Janaurie first calls May “wyf” and continues to do so only in this scene because the term itself is a means of asserting dominance over his young spouse in his weakened and frail state. However, this is also the first time that Januarie actually perceives May as his wife; the fact that it takes physical blindness to see her this way only heightens the sense of the metaphorical blindness he has suffered until this point. Although Januarie is speaking the term and noting May’s status as his wife for the first time, her actions, however, are simultaneously resisting the role he is enforcing upon her. During this same exchange, May signs to Damien to enter the garden and to climb the pear tree, directly opposing Januarie’s attempts of control, and creating the final, fabliau-esque scene. Januarie’s exasperated use of “wyf”highlights May’s resistance to the role and as he tries to assert his dominance through his language, she comes closer to defying him.

While the language discussed thus far – denoting youth market-worth and servitude – is not altogether unexpected to associate with the status of a medieval wife, the most commonly collocating phrase is more surprising. “Take a wyf” is repeated on six occasions, twice with the addition of the adjective “yong” and three times the phrase is preceded by “to:”

“To take a wyf it is a glorious thyng”

“Thanne sholde he take a yong wyf and a feir”

“And if thou take a wyf unto thyn hoold”

“For whiche causes man sholde take a wyf.”

“To take a yong wyf; by my fader kyn”

“To take a wyf withouten avysement.” [[26]](#endnote-26)

Januarie is the only person to utter these phrases, and he does so during his opening consideration of marriage. From analysis of the entire corpus of *The Canterbury Tales*, the phrase “take a” is found to be solely associated with the gender term “wyf,” only occurring in direct reference to this female marital status.One instance is found in “The Clerk’s Tale,” along with another similar phrase “take another wyf,” which will be discussed in the next section of this analysis. However, as shown, “take a wyf” appears almost exclusively in “The Merchant’s Tale” and, as Januarie is the sole character to utter it, the idea of “taking” a wife is associated specifically with his attitude to wives and conduct in marriage. The phrase structure syntactically deems “a wyf” the object of the utterance, reiterating Januarie’s objectification of a wife as his property once he has married her. Moreover, in Middle English the term “take” connotes particularly negative actions that provide further understanding of Januarie’s self-satisfying intentions for marriage. In the medieval period especially, “take” evokes associations with capture, greed, and selfishness, and it connotes specific actions to women including, to “bring (a woman) forcibly into one’s household.”[[27]](#endnote-27) Although the verb can also connote more positive senses with regards to “taking” a person, such as “to receive into one’s company, care” that one could propose as Januarie’s intentions to take a wife, the term was far more commonly associated with a sense of wrong doing.[[28]](#endnote-28) This idea of wrongfully seizing a wife is further stressed through the inclusion of the characters Pluto and Proserpina in later scenes of the tale. Pluto and Proserpina’s presence in the text acts as a “mirror image” of Januarie and May’s relationship, as Elizabeth Simmons-O’Neill describes in her article on the associations drawn between Pluto and Januarie: “both Pluto and Januarie are feckless old men whose wives, taken initially against their own will and Nature’s, have accepted their lot and learned to keep the upper hand in marriage.” [[29]](#endnote-29) Pluto’s capture and rape of Proserpina draws a clear connection between this couple and Janaurie’s plans to “take a wyf,” reinforcing negative connotations of the phrase and its reference to Janaurie’s desires to marry.

***Housbonde***

The text’s concern with taking a wife becomes more apparent in light of an examination of the corresponding marital status of “housbonde” in the text. As shown in Table 2, there is scarcely any mention of “housbonde;” the term used only 4 times compared to the 60 uses of “wyf”. This lack of use is unexpected, if it is compared with Chaucer’s texts that also include a high frequency of the term “wyf.” For example, as shown in Table 1, “The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale” contain the second highest use of “wyf”in *The Canterbury Tales* appearing 43 times. Yet here the term “housbonde”is also found at a high frequency of 25 occurrences. This balance is reiterated throughout all other narratives within *The Canterbury Tales* that mention “wyf”and “housbonde,” making the disparity in “The Merchant’s Tale” all the more significant. In this tale the word is used only by the narrator when describing hypothetical images of husbands that Januarie thinks upon during his deliberation of marriage, and once in reference to the Old Testament’s Nabal during Januarie’s misjudged discussion of obedient wives.[[30]](#endnote-30) Januarie’s reference to Nabal again demonstrates his ignorance, making reference to a marriage where the wife’s ingenuity results in her husband’s demise.[[31]](#endnote-31) These descriptions all take place at the beginning of the tale during the narrator’s report on what Januarie thinks marriage will entail, but the term is never used to actually reference Januarie even after he has legally become a husband. The fact that “housbonde” is used at all in the text, however, is crucial to the presentation of the old knight. This is because it demonstrates that the word exists in the vocabulary of the text and is available for use by the characters, but Chaucer has purposefully chosen to omit using it in descriptions of Januarie. Instead, another, more frequently occurring phrase with similar connotations, “wedded man,” is found in place of “housbonde” when describing his marital status. This phrase and its plural and possessive variations “wedded men” and “wedded mannes” are found on eight occasions in “The Merchant’s Tale”, which, although a small number, is significant as these phrases only appear 13 times in the whole *Canterbury Tales* corpus.[[32]](#endnote-32) The phrase elsewhere appears in “The Shipman’s Tale,” “The Clerk’s Tale,” and “The Merchant’s Tale,” and far more frequently in the latter, rendering it particularly significant to this text’s presentation of the male marital role. While aspects of style, rhyme, and meter might explain this alternative identification of Januarie’s status, there also appears to be a semantic reason for the labeling of the old knight as a “wedded man.” The phrase is among the first descriptions that the reader receives of Januarie, distinguishing him in this role from the opening lines, as the narrator explains:

Were it for hoolynesse or for dotage

I kan nat seye, but swich a greet corage

Hadde this knyght to been a wedded man

That day and nyght he dooth al he kan

T’espien where he myghte wedded be.[[33]](#endnote-33)

The narrator tells of Januarie’s desire and motivation to marry, explaining that he wants to be “a wedded man,” spending day and night trying to come up with a way to be “wedded.” From this description, and Januarie’s subsequent explanation of the sexual and moral gratification he may obtain through marriage, his motivations to marry do not appear to arise from courtly love or any other desire to serve a woman as her husband. His motives, therefore, are quite different from those of other characters in the *Canterbury Tales* who fight and suffer to win their wife’s love, such as Palamon in “The Knight’s Tale,” who suffers years of lovesickness for Emily, and Arveragus in “The Franklin’s Tale,” who “loved and dide his payne” in pursuit of his wife’s hand in marriage.[[34]](#endnote-34) Although the narrator is reluctant to speculate over Januarie’s true motives, stating he “kan nat seye,” Januarie’s domineering and sexual desires are foregrounded through the imagery and language in his debate, as demonstrated in his wish to take a young wife.[[35]](#endnote-35) Semantically the term “housbonde”denotes not only a man in marriage, but specifically one “Correlative to *wife”*.[[36]](#endnote-36) The fact that the term is not used to denote Januarie, and the more semantically detached “a wedded man” is found in its place, reflects his belief that his wife should serve him with little concern for his role in the partnership. Januarie does not express any interest in being a “housbonde”but only to be wedded. Reinforcing this portrayal, all of the men in the text – Januarie (himself), Justinus, Placebo, and the Merchant narrator – recognize Januarie as a “wedded man” instead of a “housbonde.” This usage hints towards Januarie’s inability to fulfill what is expected of the role of a husband in medieval society. Januarie’s age would lead the reader to question his abilities to reproduce, one which he is aware of himself as he insists upon his abilities to do so to Justinus and Placebo when justifying his case for marriage.[[37]](#endnote-37) Hallissy argues that, based on May’s reaction to Januarie’s sexual abilities, it is unlikely she would be able to conceive, because of the medieval correlation between “female pleasure and conception.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Thus, the lack of “housbonde” may reflect Januarie’s inability to be granted the status because he cannot satisfy his wife, in addition to his lack of concern with the role itself. This connotation of the phrase can be supported by the one occurrence of the plural “wedded men” in “The Shipman’s Tale.” The monk John, when asked by the wife why he is out of bed so early in the morning, responds with:

“Nece,” quod he, “it oghte ynough suffise

Fyve houres for to slepe upon a nyght,

But it were for an old appalled wight,

As been thise wedded men, that lye and dare.[[39]](#endnote-39)

John describes wedded men as old feeble creatures that need to lie and doze, and directly associates this with sexual stamina when, a few lines later, he asks her if the reason she needs sleep is because she has been put to work since the night began, blushing at his improper thought. Through this statement John hints at the old husband’s impotence, forcing his wife to “labour” throughout the night, and, thus, drawing a semantic connection between the wedded man and one who lacks the ability to fulfill a husband’s sexual duty.

Further semantic associations with this phrase can be gathered from the three other uses found in the *Canterbury Tales* corpus, which help to clarify a reading of the language employed in “The Merchant’s Tale.” These additional uses are found in “The Clerk’s Tale,” first occurring at the beginning of the tale in reference to Walter, when his citizens urge him to marry so that he may produce an heir. They tell him, “We might liven in moore felicite. . . if youre wille be, / That for to be a wedded man.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Here the wedded man refers to one who marries as more of an economic transaction than out of love, intending the union as a means of guaranteeing Walter’s lineage. More explicitly negative connotations are felt in the final two instances of the phrase. “Wedded man” is used once more, this time in the “Lenvoy de Chaucer” that follows “The Clerk’s Tale,” in which Chaucer makes a point of commenting on Walter’s cruel treatment of his wife and her acceptance of his behavior, warning that no “wedded man” should test his wife as Walter did and expect her to show the same patience as Griselda:

No wedded man so hardy be t’assaille

His wyves pacience in trust to fynde

Grisildis, for in certein he shal faille.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Chaucer’s reference to Walter and one who wants to test their wife as a “wedded man” associates the role with one who desires control over his spouse. The association with Walter particularly hints toward a “wedded man” as one who treats his wife in a cruel or objectionable manner because of this need to dominate and control. Walter’s reasons for ruthlessly testing Griselda are not clear; the narrator makes numerous comments on how unnecessary his actions are, and by the final test in section four of the tale he notes how Walter could not stop regardless if his intentions were “for ernest ne for game”.[[42]](#endnote-42) The suggestion that Walter may be treating his wife so cruelly for his own pleasure further associates the “wedded man” with a particularly deplorable husband who desires his wife to serve him regardless of his treatment of her. This idea is outlined more explicitly in the third use of the phrase, with the plural variation “wedded men” appearing also in the fourth section of the tale. The narrator interjects here to explain Walter’s continued testing of Griselda, stating that “But wedded men ne knowe no mesure, / Whan that they fynde a pacient creature.”[[43]](#endnote-43) “Wedded men” refers to those, then, who can show no self-restraint in dominating their wives when they find a patient woman like Griselda. These connotations are particularly significant to Januarie because, as a reader, we know that Chaucer intended “The Clerk’s Tale” and “The Merchant’s Tale” to be read in order, as the Merchant recounts his tale in response to the Clerk’s, lamenting how there is a great difference between patient Griselda and his shrewish wife.[[44]](#endnote-44) Therefore, the repeated use of “wedded man” to denote Walter and Januarie in *The Canterbury Tales* appears not as coincidence, but to encourage the reader to reflect on Januarie’s behavior in light of Walter’s. In his envoy, Chaucer clearly advises against Griselda’s acceptance of the oppression that Walter places upon her, instructing women not to allow their husband’s to exploit them because of their youth, stating “Beth nat bidaffed [outwitted] for youre innocence.”[[45]](#endnote-45) Januarie marries the youthful May so that he can control and manipulate her, recalling Walter’s dominance of Griselda in the preceding tale. The status “wedded man” can be seen, therefore, to contain connotations of one who mistreats his wife, or displays excessive desire to control her, in addition to one who is detached from the partnership or unable to fulfill their role of “housbonde”in the marriage.The example provided by Walter and Griselda in the previous tale may allow for further understanding for May’s resistance to Januarie’s control, while also heightening the ironic tone of the narrative, as Januarie’s attempts at dominance are in stark contrast to Walter’s control of Griselda, because they result only in his cuckolding.

The association of the role of a “wedded man” and Januarie and Walter’s treatment of their wives is further understood when reconsidering the use of the phrase “to take a wyf” discussed previously. As noted “take a wyf” appears almost exclusively in “The Merchant’s Tale”: however, there is one instance of “taak a wyf” and a similar phrase “take another wyf” found in “The Clerk’s Tale.” The former phrase appears at the opening of “The Clerk’s Tale’” when Walter’s citizens ask him to “taak a wyf, for hye Goddes sake!” for fear that he will die without leaving them an heir.[[46]](#endnote-46) Walter then later uses a related phrase himself when testing Griselda for the final time, telling her how he will remarry, saying his people have asked him “to take / Another wyf.”[[47]](#endnote-47) This connects Januarie and Walter’s domineering approach to marriage and the phrase “take a wyf,” furthering its negative connotations. In doing so it also associates the “wedded man” as the marital status of one who “takes” a wife, distinguishing such objectionable behavior from that of a “housbonde.” Both men focus on how their wives should serve them, and choose young women of lower social status, suggesting that their ability to give them rank fulfills their part in the marriage. Yet, through the disparity in their marital statuses the text criticizes these beliefs, showing that bestowing rank or financial status is not enough to qualify as a “housbonde.” This evidence builds upon work by Simmons-O’Neill, who shows how Chaucer’s use of classical goddesses in *The Canterbury Tales* “suggests a continuing concern. . . with the issue of how women are defined by more powerful men.”[[48]](#endnote-48) The language of “The Merchant’s Tale” can certainly be seen to explore this issue through Januarie and Walter. Both are determined to have dominance over their spouses, and so are connected through the use of “take a wyf”: a phrase used solely for their portrayal to connote their emotional and, in Januarie’s case, physical inability to fulfill the role of “housbonde,” and locating them in the semantically detached roles of “wedded men.”

**Conclusion**

A comparative analysis of marital statuses in “The Merchant’s Tale” demonstrates expected associations of aspects of trade and economic value concerning wives. However, it also reveals a new idea in Chaucer’s work of “taking” a wife through such trade, rather than a concept of mutual affection or courtly love. Status is revealed as both a means of control and resistance for Januarie and May, and the lack of unity in their marital partnership is expressed through the imbalanced use of “wyf”and “housbonde.”The overuse of “wyf” in contrast to the complete lack of discussion of May herself ridicules the basing of a woman’s actual role in marriage on idealistic exemplars of wives throughout literature and history. The study also reveals how Chaucer employs the status “wedded man” as a means of semantically distinguishing a “housbonde” – one in mutual correlation to his wife – from those who cannot fulfill the position and are not concerned with their role in the partnership. The association of Walter and Januarie’s marital roles through this phrasing enables the text to raise concerns over those that present self-satisfying desires for marriage, as both men imply they are marrying to produce heirs but demonstrate more abusive motives for taking poor, young wives. Ultimately, the satirical tone throughout “The Merchant’s Tale,” and May’s successful opposition to Januarie’s control prevents both characters from transcending the fabliau stereotypes of adulteress wife and cuckolded husband, but nonetheless these profound social concerns of the age are raised through the terming of their marital statuses.

1. **Notes**

   Critics debate whether or not the genre of this tale is in keeping with the more comic of Chaucer’s fabliaux, such as “The Miller’s Tale” or “The Summoner’s Tale,” or if it encourages a moral reading alongside such comic elements, as seen with the style of “The Pardoner’s Tale”. Nevertheless, it may still be felt to contain strong elements of fabliaux even if a moral reading can also be deduced. For readings of the tale’s “amorality” see Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 96. For an interpretation of the text as a “moral fabliau” see J. A. Burrow, “Irony in the Merchant’s Tale,” *Anglia* 75, no. 2 (1957): 199–208. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Donatus calls fable ‘“low-footed” because “of the lowness of its argument.”’ This view is held by classical figures such as Aristotle, Cicero and Donatus, who felt that the comic genre, which includes fabliau and fable, are of low intellect and a mark of the work of lower classes, as “comedy goes against the more intellectual goals of rhetoric.” See Mary E. Leech, “That’s Not Funny: Comic Forms, Didactic Purpose, and Physical Injury in Medieval Comic Tales,” *LATCH: A Journal for the Study of the Literary Artifact in Theory, Culture, or History* 1 (2008): 105–127, at 109–110. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. For example, see Huriye Reis, “Chaucer’s Fabliau Women: Paradigms of Resistance and Pleasure,” *Journal of Faculty of Letters* 29, no. 2 (2012): 123–135 and Alcuin Blamires, *Chaucer, Gender, Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 78–105. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Margaret Hallissy, “Widow-To-Be: May in Chaucer’s ‘The Merchant’s Tale’,” *Studies in Short Fiction* 26, no.3 (1989): 295–304; Stephen J. Russell, “Chaucer’s Old Men,” *Medieval Perspectives* 23 (2008): 85–96. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The data from the *Tales* presented in Table 1 and 2 includes any prologues or epilogues that accompany the texts. The occurrences recorded refer to the single case of the noun term only, and includes any variations of spelling. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270–1540* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Merchant’s Tale,” in *The Riverside Chaucer* ed. Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 153–168. See 1311–1315. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Chaucer, “Merchant’s Tale,” 1418, 1419, 1420, 1422. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 1359, 1288, 1291, 1324, 1379, 1376. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., 1271, 1515, 1557. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid., 1252, 1416, 1432. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens*, 45–47. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Chaucer, “Merchant’s Tale,” 1424–1425. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Hallissy, “Widow-To-Be,” 296. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 297–298. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Chaucer, “Merchant’s Tale,” 1429. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 1270. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Peggy Knapp, *Chaucer and the Social Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Chaucer, “Merchant’s Tale,” 2135. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid., 2138–2148: “Rise up my wife, my love, my lady free! The garden is enclosed all around; come forth my pure spouse! Beyond doubt, you have wounded me in my heart, O wife! . . . I chose you to be my wife and my solace.” All translations are my own. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 2087. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 2091. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 2138. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., 2160, 2164. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 2184. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 1268, 1271, 1305, 1445, 1515, 1531. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Frances McSparren and others, eds., “The Middle English Dictionary Online,” http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/lookup.html, accessed 26 March 2015. See definition 2a. For additional negative connotations see 1d., 3a., and 4a and also, Fiona McPherson and Richard Holden, eds., “The Oxford English Dictionary Online,” <http://dictionary.oed.com.ezproxy.liv.ac.uk>. See definition II. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. McSparren and others, eds., “The Middle English Dictionary Online”. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Elizabeth Simmons-O’Neill, “Love in Hell: The Role of Pluto and Proserpina in Chaucer’s *Merchant’s Tale,*” *Modern Language Quarterly: A Journal of Literary History* 51, no. 3 (1990): 392. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Chaucer, “Merchant’s Tale,” 1260, 1344, 1370, 1389. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See 1 Samuel 25. Note especially 25: 36–38. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 1227, 1255, 1282, 1405, 1546, 1650, 1663, 1665. See also Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Clerk’s Tale,” in Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer,* 137–152, at lines 110, 621, 1179. See also, Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Shipman’s Tale,” in Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer,* 203–208, at line 103. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Chaucer, “Merchant’s Tale,” 1253–1257: “Whether it was for religious reasons or senility, I cannot say, but this knight had such a great desire to be a wedded man that day and night he would do all he could to find out how to become wedded.” [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Franklin’s Tale,” in Benson, *The Riverside Chaucer,* 179–189, at line 709. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Chaucer, “Merchant’s Tale,” 1254. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. McPherson and Holden, “The Oxford English Dictionary Online.” [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Chaucer, “Merchant’s Tale,” 1458–1459. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Hallissy, “Widow-To-Be,” 302. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Chaucer, “Shipman’s Tale,” 100–103: “Niece,” he said, “Five hours should be sufficient for a night’s sleep, unless it were for an old feeble creature, as these wedded men are, that lie and doze.” [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Chaucer, “Clerk’s Tale,” 109–111. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 1180–1182: “No wedded man should be so bold as to test his wife’s patience and expect to find Griselda’s, for he shall certainly fail.” [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 733. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 622–623. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Chaucer, “Merchant’s Tale,” 1223–1225. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Chaucer, “Clerk’s Tale,” 1191. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 135. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 801–802. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Simmons-O’Neill, “Love in Hell,” 394–395. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)