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GEOFFREY CHAUCER

THE SHIPMAN'S TALE

THE PROLOGUE

Our Host upon his stirrups stood anon,
And saide; "Good men, hearken every one,
This was a thrifty* tale for the nones. *discreet, profitable
Sir Parish Priest," quoth he, "for Godde's bones,
Tell us a tale, as was thy *forword yore:* *promise formerly*
I see well that ye learned men in lore
Can* muche good, by Godde's dignity." *know
The Parson him answer'd, "Ben'dicite!
What ails the man, so sinfully to swear?"
Our Host answer'd, "O Jankin, be ye there?
Now, good men," quoth our Host, "hearken to me.
I smell a Lollard <2> in the wind," quoth he.
"Abide, for Godde's digne* passion, *worthy
For we shall have a predication:
This Lollard here will preachen us somewhat."
"Nay, by my father's soul, that shall he not,
Saide the Shipman; "Here shall he not preach,
He shall no gospel glose* here nor teach. *comment upon
We all believe in the great God," quoth he.
"He woulde sowe some difficulty,
Or springe cockle <3> in our cleane corn.
And therefore, Host, I warne thee beforn,
My jolly body shall a tale tell,
And I shall clinke you so merry a bell,
That I shall waken all this company;
But it shall not be of philosophy,
Nor of physic, nor termes quaint of law;
There is but little Latin in my maw."* *belly

Notes to the Prologue to the Shipman's Tale

The Prologue here given was transferred by Tyrwhitt from the place, preceding the Squire's Tale, which it had formerly occupied; the Shipman's Tale having no Prologue in the best manuscripts.

2. Lollard: A contemptuous name for the followers of Wyckliffe; presumably derived from the Latin, "lolium," tares, as if they were the tares among the Lord's wheat; so, a few lines below, the Shipman intimates his fear lest the Parson should "spring cockle in our clean corn."

3. Cockle: A weed, the "Agrostemma githago" of Linnaeus; perhaps named from the

Anglo-Saxon, "ceocan," because it chokes the corn. (Transcriber's note: It is also possible Chaucer had in mind Matthew 13:25, where in some translations, an enemy sowed "cockle" amongst the wheat. (Other translations have "tares" and "darnel".))

THE TALE. <1>

A Merchant whilom dwell'd at Saint Denise,
That riche was, for which men held him wise.
A wife he had of excellent beauty,
And *companiable and revellous* was she, *fond of society and
Which is a thing that causeth more dispence merry making*
Than worth is all the cheer and reverence
That men them do at feastes and at dances.
Such salutations and countenances
Passen, as doth the shadow on the wall;
Put woe is him that paye must for all.
The sely* husband algate** he must pay, *innocent **always
He must us <2> clothe and he must us array
All for his owen worship richely:
In which array we dance jollily.
And if that he may not, paraventure,
Or elles list not such dispence endure,
But thinketh it is wasted and y-lost,
Then must another paye for our cost,
Or lend us gold, and that is perilous.
This noble merchant held a noble house;
For which he had all day so great repair,* *resort of visitors
For his largesse, and for his wife was fair,
That wonder is; but hearken to my tale.
Amonges all these guestes great and smale,
There was a monk, a fair man and a bold,
I trow a thirty winter he was old,
That ever-in-one* was drawing to that place. *constantly
This younge monk, that was so fair of face,
Acquainted was so with this goode man,
Since that their firste knowledge began,
That in his house as familiar was he
As it is possible any friend to be.
And, for as muchel as this goode man,
And eke this monk of which that I began,
Were both the two y-born in one village,
The monk *him claimed, as for cousinage,* *claimed kindred
And he again him said not once nay, with him*
But was as glad thereof as fowl of day;
"For to his heart it was a great pleasance.
Thus be they knit with etern' alliance,

And each of them gan other to assure
Of brotherhood while that their life may dure.
Free was Dan <3> John, and namely* of dispence,** *especially **spending
As in that house, and full of diligence
To do pleasance, and also *great costage;* *liberal outlay*
He not forgot to give the leaste page
In all that house; but, after their degree,
He gave the lord, and sithen* his meinie,** *afterwards **servants
When that he came, some manner honest thing;
For which they were as glad of his coming
As fowl is fain when that the sun upriseth.
No more of this as now, for it sufficeth.
But so befell, this merchant on a day
Shope* him to make ready his array *resolved, arranged
Toward the town of Bruges <4> for to fare,
To buye there a portion of ware;* *merchandise
For which he hath to Paris sent anon
A messenger, and prayed hath Dan John
That he should come to Saint Denis, and play* *enjoy himself
With him, and with his wife, a day or tway,
Ere he to Bruges went, in alle wise.
This noble monk, of which I you devise,* *tell
Had of his abbot, as him list, licence,
(Because he was a man of high prudence,
And eke an officer out for to ride,
To see their granges and their barnes wide); <5>
And unto Saint Denis he came anon.
Who was so welcome as my lord Dan John,
Our deare cousin, full of courtesy?
With him he brought a jub* of malvesie, *jug
And eke another full of fine vernage, <6>
And volatile,* as aye was his usage: *wild-fowl
And thus I let them eat, and drink, and play,
This merchant and this monk, a day or tway.
The thirde day the merchant up ariseth,
And on his needeis sadly him adviseth;
And up into his countour-house* went he, *counting-house <7>
To reckon with himself as well may be,
Of thilke* year, how that it with him stood, *that
And how that he dispended bad his good,
And if that he increased were or non.
His bookes and his bagges many a one
He laid before him on his counting-board.
Full riche was his treasure and his hoard;

For which full fast his countour door he shet;
And eke he would that no man should him let* *hinder
Of his accountes, for the meane time:
And thus he sat, till it was passed prime.
Dan John was risen in the morn also,
And in the garden walked to and fro,
And had his thinges said full courteously.
The good wife came walking full privily
Into the garden, where he walked soft,
And him saluted, as she had done oft;
A maiden child came in her company,
Which as her list she might govern and gie,* *guide
For yet under the yarde* was the maid. *rod <8>
"O deare cousin mine, Dan John," she said,
"What aileth you so rath* for to arise?" *early
"Niece," quoth he, "it ought enough suffice
Five houres for to sleep upon a night;'
But* it were for an old appalled** wight, *unless **pallid, wasted
As be these wedded men, that lie and dare,* *stare
As in a forme sits a weary hare,
Alle forstraught* with houndes great and smale; *distracted, confounded
But, deare niece, why be ye so pale?
I trowe certes that our goode man
Hath you so laboured, since this night began,
That you were need to reste hastily."
And with that word he laugh'd full merrily,
And of his owen thought he wax'd all red.
This faire wife gan for to shake her head,
And saide thus; "Yea, God wot all" quoth she.
"Nay, cousin mine, it stands not so with me;
For by that God, that gave me soul and life,
In all the realm of France is there no wife
That lesse lust hath to that sorry play;
For I may sing alas and well-away!
That I was born; but to no wight," quoth she,
"Dare I not tell how that it stands with me.
Wherefore I think out of this land to wend,
Or elles of myself to make an end,
So full am I of dread and eke of care."
This monk began upon this wife to stare,
And said, "Alas! my niece, God forbid
That ye for any sorrow, or any dread,
Fordo* yourself: but telle me your grief, *destroy
Paraventure I may, in your mischief,* *distress

Counsel or help; and therefore telle me
All your annoy, for it shall be secre.
For on my portos* here I make an oath, *breviary
That never in my life, *for lief nor loth,* *willing or unwilling*
Ne shall I of no counsel you bewray."
"The same again to you," quoth she, "I say.
By God and by this portos I you swear,
Though men me woulden all in pieces tear,
Ne shall I never, for* to go to hell, *though I should
Bewray* one word of thing that ye me tell, *betray
For no cousinage, nor alliance,
But verily for love and affiance."* *confidence, promise
Thus be they sworn, and thereupon they kiss'd,
And each of them told other what them list.
"Cousin," quoth she, "if that I hadde space,
As I have none, and namely* in this place, *specially
Then would I tell a legend of my life,
What I have suffer'd since I was a wife
With mine husband, all* be he your cousin. *although
"Nay," quoth this monk, "by God and Saint Martin,
He is no more cousin unto me,
Than is the leaf that hangeth on the tree;
I call him so, by Saint Denis of France,
To have the more cause of acquaintance
Of you, which I have loved specially
Aboven alle women sickerly,* *surely
This swear I you *on my professioun;* *by my vows of religion
Tell me your grief, lest that he come adown,
And hasten you, and go away anon."
"My deare love," quoth she, "O my Dan John,
Full lief* were me this counsel for to hide, *pleasant
But out it must, I may no more abide.
My husband is to me the worste man
That ever was since that the world began;
But since I am a wife, it sits* not me *becomes
To telle no wight of our privity,
Neither in bed, nor in none other place;
God shield* I shoulde tell it for his grace; *forbid
A wife shall not say of her husband
But all honour, as I can understand;
Save unto you thus much I telle shall;
As help me God, he is nought worth at all
In no degree, the value of a fly.
But yet me grieveth most his niggardy.* *stinginess

And well ye wot, that women naturally
Desire thinges six, as well as I.
They woulde that their husbands shoulde be
Hardy,* and wise, and rich, and thereto free, *brave
And buxom* to his wife, and fresh in bed. *yielding, obedient
But, by that ilke* Lord that for us bled, *same
For his honour myself for to array,
On Sunday next I muste needes pay
A hundred francs, or elles am I lorn.* *ruined, undone
Yet *were me lever* that I were unborn, *I would rather*
Than me were done slander or villainy.
And if mine husband eke might it espy,
I were but lost; and therefore I you pray,
Lend me this sum, or elles must I dey.* *die
Dan John, I say, lend me these hundred francs;
Pardie, I will not faile you, *my thanks,* *if I can help it*
If that you list to do that I you pray;
For at a certain day I will you pay,
And do to you what pleasance and service
That I may do, right as you list devise.
And but* I do, God take on me vengeance, *unless
As foul as e'er had Ganilion <9> of France."
This gentle monk answer'd in this mannere;
"Now truely, mine owen lady dear,
I have," quoth he, "on you so greate ruth,* *pity
That I you swear, and plighte you my truth,
That when your husband is to Flanders fare,* *gone
I will deliver you out of this care,
For I will bringe you a hundred francs."
And with that word he caught her by the flanks,
And her embraced hard, and kissed her oft.
"Go now your way," quoth he, "all still and soft,
And let us dine as soon as that ye may,
For by my cylinder* 'tis prime of day; *portable sundial
Go now, and be as true as I shall be ."
"Now elles God forbidde, Sir," quoth she;
And forth she went, as jolly as a pie,
And bade the cookes that they should them hie,* *make haste
So that men mighte dine, and that anon.
Up to her husband is this wife gone,
And knocked at his contour boldely.
"Qui est la?" quoth he. "Peter! it am I," *who is there?*
Quoth she; "What, Sir, how longe all will ye fast?
How longe time will ye reckon and cast

Your summes, and your bookes, and your things?
The devil have part of all such reckonings!
Ye have enough, pardie, of Godde's sond.* *sending, gifts
Come down to-day, and let your bagges stond.* *stand
Ne be ye not ashamed, that Dan John
Shall fasting all this day elenge* gon? *see note <10>
What? let us hear a mass, and go we dine."
"Wife," quoth this man, "little canst thou divine
The curious businesse that we have;
For of us chapmen,* all so God me save, *merchants
And by that lord that cleped is Saint Ive,
Scarcely amonges twenty, ten shall thrive
Continually, lasting unto our age.
We may well make cheer and good visage,
And drive forth the world as it may be,
And keepen our estate in privity,
Till we be dead, or elles that we play
A pilgrimage, or go out of the way.
And therefore have I great necessity
Upon this quaint* world to advise** me. *strange **consider
For evermore must we stand in dread
Of hap and fortune in our chapmanhead.* *trading
To Flanders will I go to-morrow at day,
And come again as soon as e'er I may:
For which, my deare wife, I thee beseek *beseech
As be to every wight buxom* and meek, *civil, courteous
And for to keep our good be curious,
And honestly governe well our house.
Thou hast enough, in every manner wise,
That to a thrifty household may suffice.
Thee lacketh none array, nor no vitail;
Of silver in thy purse thou shalt not fail."
And with that word his contour door he shet,* *shut
And down he went; no longer would he let;* *delay, hinder
And hastily a mass was there said,
And speedily the tables were laid,
And to the dinner faste they them sped,
And richely this monk the chapman fed.
And after dinner Dan John soberly
This chapman took apart, and privily
He said him thus: "Cousin, it standeth so,
That, well I see, to Bruges ye will go;
God and Saint Austin speede you and guide.
I pray you, cousin, wisely that ye ride:

Governe you also of your diet
Attemperly,* and namely** in this heat. *moderately
Betwixt us two needeth no *strange fare;* *ado, ceremony*
Farewell, cousin, God shielde you from care.
If any thing there be, by day or night,
If it lie in my power and my might,
That ye me will command in any wise,
It shall be done, right as ye will devise.
But one thing ere ye go, if it may be;
I woulde pray you for to lend to me
A hundred frankes, for a week or twy,
For certain beastes that I muste buy,
To store with a place that is ours
(God help me so, I would that it were yours);
I shall not faile surely of my day,
Not for a thousand francs, a mile way.
But let this thing be secret, I you pray;
For yet to-night these beastes must I buy.
And fare now well, mine owen cousin dear;
Grand mercy of your cost and of your cheer." *great thanks*
This noble merchant gentilly* anon *like a gentleman
Answer'd and said, "O cousin mine, Dan John,
Now sickerly this is a small request:
My gold is youres, when that it you lest,
And not only my gold, but my chaffare;* *merchandise
Take what you list, *God shielde that ye spare.* *God forbid that you
But one thing is, ye know it well enow should take too little*
Of chapmen, that their money is their plough.
We may creance* while we have a name, *obtain credit
But goldless for to be it is no game.
Pay it again when it lies in your ease;
After my might full fain would I you please."
These hundred frankes set he forth anon,
And privily he took them to Dan John;
No wight in all this world wist of this loan,
Saving the merchant and Dan John alone.
They drink, and speak, and roam a while, and play,
Till that Dan John rode unto his abbay.
The morrow came, and forth this merchant rideth
To Flanders-ward, his prentice well him guideth,
Till he came unto Bruges merrily.
Now went this merchant fast and busily
About his need, and buyed and creanced;* *got credit
He neither played at the dice, nor danced;

But as a merchant, shortly for to tell,
He led his life; and there I let him dwell.
The Sunday next* the merchant was y-gone, *after
To Saint Denis y-comen is Dan John,
With crown and beard all fresh and newly shave,
In all the house was not so little a knave,* *servant-boy
Nor no wight elles that was not full fain
For that my lord Dan John was come again.
And shortly to the point right for to gon,
The faire wife accorded with Dan John,
That for these hundred francs he should all night
Have her in his armes bolt upright;
And this accord performed was in deed.
In mirth all night a busy life they lead,
Till it was day, that Dan John went his way,
And bade the meinie* "Farewell; have good day." *servants
For none of them, nor no wight in the town,
Had of Dan John right no suspicioun;
And forth he rode home to his abbay,
Or where him list; no more of him I say.
The merchant, when that ended was the fair,
To Saint Denis he gan for to repair,
And with his wife he made feast and cheer,
And tolde her that chaffare* was so dear, *merchandise
That needes must he make a chevisance;* *loan <11>
For he was bound in a recognisance
To paye twenty thousand shields* anon. *crowns, ecus
For which this merchant is to Paris gone,
To borrow of certain friendes that he had
A certain francs, and some with him he lad.* *took
And when that he was come into the town,
For great cherte* and great affectioun *love
Unto Dan John he wente first to play;
Not for to borrow of him no money,
Bat for to weet* and see of his welfare, *know
And for to telle him of his chaffare,
As friendes do, when they be met in fere.* *company
Dan John him made feast and merry cheer;
And he him told again full specially,
How he had well y-bought and graciously
(Thanked be God) all whole his merchandise;
Save that he must, in alle manner wise,
Maken a chevisance, as for his best;
And then he shoulde be in joy and rest.

Dan John answered, "Certes, I am fain* *glad
That ye in health be come borne again:
And if that I were rich, as have I bliss,
Of twenty thousand shields should ye not miss,
For ye so kindely the other day
Lente me gold, and as I can and may
I thanke you, by God and by Saint Jame.
But natheless I took unto our Dame,
Your wife at home, the same gold again,
Upon your bench; she wot it well, certain,
By certain tokens that I can her tell
Now, by your leave, I may no longer dwell;
Our abbot will out of this town anon,
And in his company I muste gon.
Greet well our Dame, mine owen niece sweet,
And farewell, deare cousin, till we meet.
This merchant, which that was full ware and wise,
Creanced hath, and paid eke in Paris *had obtained credit*
To certain Lombards ready in their hond
The sum of gold, and got of them his bond,
And home he went, merry as a popinjay.* *parrot
For well he knew he stood in such array
That needes must he win in that voyage
A thousand francs, above all his costage.* *expenses
His wife full ready met him at the gate,
As she was wont of old usage algate* *always
And all that night in mirthe they beset;* *spent
For he was rich, and clearly out of debt.
When it was day, the merchant gan embrace
His wife all new, and kiss'd her in her face,
And up he went, and maked it full tough.
"No more," quoth she, "by God ye have enough;"
And wantonly again with him she play'd,
Till at the last this merchant to her said.
"By God," quoth he, "I am a little wroth
With you, my wife, although it be me loth;
And wot ye why? by God, as that I guess,
That ye have made a *manner strangeness* *a kind of estrangement*
Betwixte me and my cousin, Dan John.
Ye should have warned me, ere I had gone,
That he you had a hundred frankes paid
By ready token; he *had him evil apaid* *was displeased*
For that I to him spake of chevisance,* *borrowing
(He seemed so as by his countenance);

But natheless, by God of heaven king,
I thoughte not to ask of him no thing.
I pray thee, wife, do thou no more so.
Tell me alway, ere that I from thee go,
If any debtor hath in mine absence
Y-payed thee, lest through thy negligence
I might him ask a thing that he hath paid."
This wife was not afeared nor afraid,
But boldely she said, and that anon;
"Mary! I defy that false monk Dan John,
I keep* not of his tokens never a deal:** *care **whit
He took me certain gold, I wot it well. —
What? evil thedom* on his monke's snout! — *thriving
For, God it wot, I ween'd withoute doubt
That he had given it me, because of you,
To do therewith mine honour and my prow,* *profit
For cousinage, and eke for belle cheer
That he hath had full often here.
But since I see I stand in such disjoint,* *awkward position
I will answer you shortly to the point.
Ye have more slacke debtors than am I;
For I will pay you well and readily,
From day to day, and if so be I fail,
I am your wife, score it upon my tail,
And I shall pay as soon as ever I may.
For, by my troth, I have on mine array,
And not in waste, bestow'd it every deal.
And, for I have bestowed it so well,
For your honour, for Godde's sake I say,
As be not wroth, but let us laugh and play.
Ye shall my jolly body have *to wed;* *in pledge*
By God, I will not pay you but in bed;
Forgive it me, mine owen spouse dear;
Turn hitherward, and make better cheer."
The merchant saw none other remedy;
And for to chide, it were but a folly,
Since that the thing might not amended be.
"Now, wife," he said, "and I forgive it thee;
But by thy life be no more so large;* *liberal, lavish
Keep better my good, this give I thee in charge."
Thus endeth now my tale; and God us send
Taling enough, until our lives' end!

Notes to the Shipman's Tale

1. In this Tale Chaucer seems to have followed an old French story, which also formed

the groundwork of the first story in the eighth day of the "Decameron."
2. "He must us clothe": So in all the manuscripts and from this and the following lines, it must be inferred that Chaucer had intended to put the Tale in the mouth of a female speaker.
3. Dan: a title bestowed on priests and scholars; from "Dominus," like the Spanish "Don".
4. Bruges was in Chaucer's time the great emporium of European commerce.
5. The monk had been appointed by his abbot to inspect and manage the rural property of the monastery.
6. Malvesie or Malmesy wine derived its name from Malvasia, a region of the Morea near Cape Malea, where it was made, as it also was on Chios and some other Greek islands. Vernage was "vernaccia", a sweet Italian wine.
7. Contour-house: counting-house; French, "comptoir."
8. Under the yarde: under the rod; in pupillage; a phrase properly used of children, but employed by the Clerk in the prologue to his tale. See note 1 to the Prologue to the Clerk's Tale.
9. Genelon, Ganelon, or Ganilion; one of Charlemagne's officers, whose treachery was the cause of the disastrous defeat of the Christians by the Saracens at Roncevalles; he was torn to pieces by four horses.
10. Elenge: From French, "eloigner," to remove; it may mean either the lonely, cheerless condition of the priest, or the strange behaviour of the merchant in leaving him to himself.
11. Make a chevisance: raise money by means of a borrowing agreement; from French, "achever," to finish; the general meaning of the word is a bargain, an agreement.