

THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION OF THE PILGRIMS' STORIES IN CHAUCER'S CANTERBURY TALES

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Abstract

Chaucer's medieval England in general and London in particular witnessed a flourishing economy and a prosperous commerce that helped improve medieval English people's social life. The growth of towns, the expansion of trade, the development of industry, the monetization of marketplace, the use of the credit system and book-keeping, and the contrivance of effective methods of paying and recovery of debts all contributed to this economic prosperity. This paper is a study of the story-telling content of selected tales from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* in terms of the commercial notions and values permeating medieval England. It demonstrates that most of the economic terms of the day flow into the pilgrims' discourse and shape their stories, thus signaling medieval English people's consciousness of the marketplace tradition. It is within this economic background and commercial framework that many topics of universal interest are addressed.

Keywords: Economic, dimension, *Canterbury Tales*, marital relations, exogamy

Introduction

The Economic Background of Medieval England

From 1150 to 1500, the English economy went through remarkable changes of fortune. The growth of rapid population caused large expansion in the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Old towns grew and new towns were founded. Trade expanded, cloth and wool industries and exports flourished, marketplace was monetized, and the credit system used. In addition, means of paying and recovery of debts were devised, book-keeping developed, cultivated areas enlarged, farming organized to supply the market with large quantities of crops, society changed, and economy commercialized.

Historians' low evaluation of towns constitutes part of an old view of the Middle Ages which stresses the under-development of the economy, in which illogical and unearthly concerns, combined with short-sighted egotism, were believed to have thwarted technical progress, and inevitably doomed a large section of society to long-term poverty. However, towns are now viewed by historians in realistic terms as settlements holding a combination of people where many occupations are followed, most of which do not necessarily involve direct agricultural production. They appear to have higher populations than the close villages. Historians also pay more attention to towns as focal positions, which function as centers of administration, religion and culture as well as trade. They also recognize the arrangement of market places, public buildings, streets and house plots, by which a king or lord or town government establish a distinct urban space. This image of towns applies to old towns which grew apparently and became more urbanized like, for instance, Birmingham. As Dyer (1997) notes,

[M]edieval Birmingham was once said to have been [...] a village because it had not been granted the status of a borough by charter. Yet by about 1300 Birmingham had a thousand inhabitants and in the following 250 years we know that they made cloth, worked iron, kept inns, tanned leather, traded in fish, spices, cattle and wool - in short followed dozens of occupations which freed them from dependence on agriculture. [...] All over the country places which were not boroughs were still able to develop as local centers of trade and manufacture, [...]. (p. 37)

Obviously, the image one has of Birmingham is that of a growing town, not that of a village.

In addition to the growth of old towns, Medieval England witnessed the establishment of new towns. For example, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries hundreds of new towns were founded, which mostly became modest market towns but which included some notable successes such as Newcastle and Hull. This, according to Dyer (1997) "accounted for a fivefold rise in the whole urban population [...], a faster rate of growth than in the villages, culminating in a total of about a million town dwellers by 1300" (p. 37). The increase in the number of towns was likely to be the product of successive phases of urbanization.

Like towns, trade also expanded. From the fourteenth century, English economy was linked to the Mediterranean trade by direct sea routes. England's most important wool and cloth market in the period was Flanders and the Low Countries. Further west there were major trade routes to the English possessions in South-West France, where cloth and grain were exchanged for wine. Spain and Portugal supplied England with iron ore, wool oil, soap, dyestuffs and citrus fruits. By the late fourteenth century the sea route to the Mediterranean was used fully. The Venetian ships brought to

London drugs and spices. As regards trade to the north, the English were trying to break into the Baltic. The Hansards' interest in England made them exchange for cloth furs, linen, mineral ores, and fish. England's most remote market was Iceland. Ships from Bristol, Hull and London took foodstuffs, manufactured goods and cloth there, bringing back stockfish. In short, England was one of the main centers of European trade, where north met south. Merchants from many lands came there and ships from many countries passed along her coasts. English merchants therefore traded in a European-wide market and that market was affected by general economic circumstances.

The expansion of the cloth industry was the major industrial occurrence of the later Middle Ages. England gradually became the principal provider of broadcloths in Europe, serving markets as Italy and Poland. By the 1350s the English industry had recovered the home market, but exports were limited because of the effects of plague.

However, the growth of a native cloth industry and the rise of a great export trade in cloth were useful to the economy. They offered numerous labour opportunities and brought new profits to manufacturers and merchants as well (Bolton, 1980, pp. 287-301).

Linked with the expansion of trade and its concomitant commercial change of the thirteenth century was the monetization of English society. The impact of the monetized marketplace on the social life of medieval English people was notable. This process of monetization, however, manifests itself in the increase in the amount of coinage in circulation and the frequency of monetary transactions. It was inevitably tied with the rapid growth of trade, markets, and towns. It was also associated with the speeding up of agricultural production, the development of specialized commercial projects and techniques, and the entrance of monetary and commercial values into all domains of social life. The consciousness of money's place and function in society was consistent with the rise of the merchant's state from a lowly position to one of great social and political power over the course of the long thirteenth century. The commercial habit of calculating in monetary terms was applied to almost all aspects of life. The scholars' acknowledgement of the capacity of money to ease calculation in administration and exchange parallels the common people's belief that money can facilitate the problems of life (Kaye, 1998, pp. 15-19).

The Medieval English economy was also familiar with the credit system. By the later Middle Ages the use of credit was everywhere. Sale credits were fundamental to the workings of later medieval trade. Credit enabled the merchant to engage in several businesses at once, since not all his money was invested in any one of them. It allowed the smaller merchant, with a limited amount of money, to enlarge the scale of his businesses by buying on credit just as he sold on credit. Credit also freed trade from the shortage of

financial resources. There would not have been enough money available for all transactions to be conducted in cash (Bolton, 1980, p. 303). In this way, merchants did not have to pay for everything in ready money at the time of purchase.

If the merchant community devised means to avoid cash payment, it also had to develop more flexible means of paying debts. “Merchants,” as Bolton (1980) explains, “regularly discounted or ‘assigned’ debts owed them in payment of debts they owed. This was a regular practice in all branches of trade at home and abroad” (p.304). The merchant community also contrived a method to recover debts “by authorizing their official registration—as recognisances of debt— in the records of particular local courts”(Britnell, 1996, p. 148).

Book-keeping was also familiar to medieval European countries, particularly Italy. At that time, Italian companies had proper corporate structures. Their London representatives were only one part of a larger organization which might have other branches across Europe. However, book-keeping allowed those Italian companies to function in a far more sophisticated way than their English rivals. It also allowed them to check their financial states at any time. “They,” according to Bolton (1980), “acted as both merchants and bankers, accepting deposits from outsiders, at interest, which of course much increased their working capital” (p. 312).

To conclude, medieval English economy became more commercialized, i.e. there was an increase in commercial activity.

Chaucer’s London

Chaucer’s medieval London witnessed a flourishing commerce and prosperous merchants, who were expected to fulfill both remarkable social status and political representation as well. The city was marked by its growing population that went side by side with the flourishing of commerce and the expansion of industry. London became the main wool-exporting port, which contributed much to its growth. By the middle of the 14th century, cloth manufacturing had also been established, exporting cloth and providing plenty of opportunities for work and investment. Similarly, English banking and finance also developed. London became a centre of national credit, its citizens volunteered considerable sums to assist the king to minimize his lack of ready cash. In addition, medieval London society was constantly on the move. It was also marked by its competitive spirit; feelings of unease crept over merchants and crafts, employers and employees, and the regulating bodies controlling markets. Society’s middle groups, as Mair (2005) explains, strove to maintain their position in the economy (pp.132-33).

Chaucer grew in the midst of this commercial and industrial environment, which witnessed his childhood and adult working life. All kinds of goods landed at quays along the Thames, not far from the place where Chaucer grew up. It is no wonder that Chaucer was familiar with the hustle and bustle of industry and shipping, and the smells of spices, wine and other goods. As early as his childhood, Chaucer was exposed to London commerce, being the son of a successful merchant, John Chaucer, who dealt in wines. Chaucer was perhaps raised in a district alongside the Thames. His home was near the Three Cranes Quay, where he saw the business of wine importation managed by his father and his fellow wine dealers. Chaucer always saw the arrival and unloading of imports, which enhanced his familiarity with commerce and merchants. In addition, many famous members of the London business community were wine merchants, who were in direct contact with alien merchants, including Italian wine merchants. The Vintry, where wine is sold, was a favourable residence for those foreign merchants. It was close to other wards whose residents attempted different forms of commerce. The permanent population increased amazingly owing to a foreign population of traders and workers, including French, Italian, Flemish and German merchants. The streets of Chaucer's own childhood helped Chaucer learn Italian, the language that tremendously influenced his public career and literary production. (Mair, 2005, pp. 133-34)

2. How Far the Economic Status and Commercial Practices Shape the Pilgrims' Stories in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*

As the title of this study suggests, there is a close relationship between the economic circumstances and commercial experiences and the content of the pilgrims' stories in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Just as most of the tales narrated by the pilgrims reflect their awareness of the economic status and commercial practices prevalent in medieval England, the economic circumstances and commercial interactions shape most of the stories which the travelers tell in their religious journey from London to Canterbury.

This study examines a number of tales —the *General Prologue*, the *Knight's Tale*, the *Parson's Tale*, the *Shipman's Tale*, the *Merchant's Tale*, the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the *Franklin's Tale*, the *Man of Law's Tale*, and the *Cook's Tale*— in Chaucer's poem to demonstrate how medieval English people's familiarity with and experience of the economic notions of the day —competition, exchange, value, debt, price, profit, money, debtor, creditor, book-keeping, contract, transaction, cot, marketplace— and the commercial activities permeating their society affect and determine their social relationships and values. It is within this economic and commercial

framework that topics of universal interest –love, marriage, honour, obedience, faithfulness, social pretensions, corruption, moral decay, father-daughter relationship, patriarchy, exogamy, promise fulfillment— are addressed.

As one may recall, cloth industry expanded in medieval England and contributed to the development and prosperity of English economy, which influenced the way people were dressed. This finds expression in the *General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* that provides a picture of the merchant-pilgrim, who, as Harper and Mize (2006) demonstrate, is dressed elegantly, while at the same time “focus[ing] on the getting and keeping of wealth” (p. 263). Furthermore, the merchant is portrayed as riding his horse with solemnity. His interest in the signs of material success most likely demonstrates, as Mair (2005) notes, “the kind of merchant he represents: he dresses well to give a favourable impression to new acquaintances because the opening up of markets depends on the establishment of good connections” (p.141). Interestingly, the picture of the Merchant in Chaucer's poem corresponds with the picture of real medieval merchants. The way the merchant is dressed informs the economic prosperity and commercial success of merchants in medieval England:

A Merchant was ther with a forked berd,
In mottelee, and hye on horse he sat;
Upon his heed a Flaundryssh bever hat,
His bootes clasped faire and fetisly. (272-75)

Here Chaucer wants the reader to believe his view of the merchant-pilgrim. Therefore, he depicts him as a worthy man, who manages his trade, financial transactions, bargains and borrowings successfully, without letting anybody know that he is sometimes in debt:

This worthy man ful wel his wit bisette;
Ther wiste no wight that he was in dette
So estatly was he of his governaunce
With his bargaynes and with his chevysaunce. (281-85)

Obviously, this is a picture of the real merchant in medieval England, who is a product of the economic success at that time.

Likewise, elsewhere in the *General Prologue*, Chaucer offers a picture of the Reeve dressed in luxurious clothes: “A long surcote of pers upon he hade, / And by his syde he baar a rusty blade”(619-20). According to Carella (2010), the word “pers” denotes a very expensive cloth with a rich blue dye extracted from the leaves of woad, which can be distinguished from cheaper cloth of a lighter bluish shade which peasants used to wear (p. 526). Here, the Reeve is portrayed as a pretentious man, who attempts to seek identity with the clerical classes by dressing elegantly like them. However,

this picture of the Reeve is a sign of the economic prosperity that pervades the Middle Ages. One is tempted to say that this economic success runs counter to the “view of the Middle Ages which emphasizes the underdevelopment of the economy, in which irrational and other worldly occupations [...] were thought to have prevented technical progress” (Dyer, 1997, p. 37).

Competition, an aspect of commerce, was recognizable to medieval English people. This, to begin with, figures clearly in the *General Prologue*, in which there is an element of competition involved in the telling of stories typical of what happens in the marketplace. Just as merchants compete to sell their commodities in the market, the pilgrims of *Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales* compete to tell “Tales of best sentence and moost solaaas” (800). The pilgrim who tells the best tale “Shal have a soper at oure aller cost” (801), when the group returns to London. Here, the storytelling is given a financial dimension since a prize is to be offered to the pilgrim with the best story. This element of competition “contribute[s],” as Mair (2005) suggests, “to the positioning of the *Canterbury Tales* within a market economy in which [...] social groups jostle to maintain their position and in which stories themselves become identified as the products of work”(p.147). As a matter of fact, the pilgrims’ consciousness of the principles of competition implicit in the narration of their stories reflects the competitive attitudes that mark the commercial practices in medieval England.

In the *Knight’s Tale*, love and arms are portrayed within a commercial framework. A number of commercial terms, such as exchange, cost and payment, appears in the speech of the knight, giving it a commercial flavour. The knight is telling a story about a romance involving a fight between two knights, Arcite and Palamoun, so that one of them could win the love of Emelye, the Duke of Athens’ sister-in-law. Suddenly, in the midst of his tale, the flow of his speech about such a romance is interrupted when he mentions something pertinent to commercial experience. He admits that his fellow travelers will think he is neglectful

If I foryete to tellen the dispence
Of Theseus, that gooth so bisily
To maken up the lystes roially;
That swich a noble theatre as it was,
I dar wel seyen, in this world ther nas. (1023-28)

The Knight’s view that his fellow pilgrims will accuse him of negligence if he does not refer to the costs which Theseus, the Duke of Athens, will undertake to build an amphitheatre for the fight between Arcite and Palamoun “comes,” as Mair (2005) explains, “as a surprise, given that until now, very little has hinted at financial considerations” (p.149). Earlier,

when Theseus takes both Palamoun and Arcite as prisoners, he jails them instead of making them pay a ransom: “To Atthenes to dwellen in prisoun/Perpetuelly, he nolde no raunsoun” (165-66). However, the Knight ends his tale about the sentencing of Palamoun and Arcite by emphasizing that they will, according to the orders of the Duke, remain in prison for the rest of their lives and that no money can secure their freedom:

And in a tour, in angwissh and in wo,
Dwellen this Palamon and eek Arcite
For evermoore, ther may no gold hem quite. (172-74)

Later, the Duke gives his orders that Arcite be set free “ withouten any raunsoun” (347). “If ransom has no role to play, then what is the Knight’s purpose in continually mentioning it?,” Mair (2005) asks, but she offers a view which sounds plausible:

By having the Knight narrator repeat the references to ransom in his tale, Chaucer seems to want to highlight the existence of commercial values and the possibility of a certain type of exchange – money for prisoners–, and thus inject an element of economic realism into this romance narrative. (pp.149-50)

One agrees with the above view adopted by Mair, and adds that the repeated reference to “raunsoun” serves to reflect the great influence which the prevalent economic notions and commercial practices have on medieval English people; that influence is so remarkable that many economic and commercial terms flow into the stories narrated by the travelers to Canterbury.

The exchange of money for prisoners alluded to in the *Knight’s Tale* is similar to a personal experience Chaucer had following his capture in France in the campaign of 1359–60. He was released when Edward III made a ransom payment. In the *Knight’s Tale*, Arcita and Palamon are allowed to return after a year with hundred warriors each and the winner of the battle shall have Emily. The Duke releases them without “ raunson, or daunger” (991). This act on the Duke’s part, according to Jones (1994), goes against the knightly system regarding generosity to one’s adversaries, and is considered a sign of non-generosity on the Duke’s part (pp.163,197). However, there are many occasions which indicate the Duke’s generosity. For example, when he is back to Athens and learns from the weeping widows that Creon has not allowed them to demand the bodies of their dead husbands, he sympathizes with them and promises to retaliate against Creon. On another occasion, he decides to replace the death sentence he has imposed on Arcite and Palamoun by a competition between them. “These and other instances of Theseus’s ‘pite’ apparently contradict,” as Mair (2005) notes, “Jones’s argument that the Knight-narrator misunderstands the nature of chivalry and that Theseus’s behaviour is tyrannical and

unyielding,” and shows instead how “Theseus [is] an employer [...] willing to operate within a market economy” (p.150). Mair’s view seems reasonable, given that most, if not all, medieval English society acts in compliance with the economic norms prevalent at that time, taking into consideration its obligation to follow the rules dictated by the commercial laws in the Middle Ages.

As has been pointed out, medieval English people’s consciousness of the economic status and the commercial experiences shapes and affects most of their social relationships and values. For instance, the marital relationship in some of the tales, particularly the *Parson’s Tale*, the *Shipman’s Tale*, the *Merchant’s Tale*, the *Wife of Bath’s Tale*, and the *Franklin’s Tale*, is defined by economic and commercial terms. Just as merchants pay their debts to their fellow merchants when they are indebted to them, each partner of a married couple pays his/her debt to each other by satisfying each other’s sexual desire. The relationship between husband and wife has become a debtor-creditor relationship. As Hornsby notes,

Like a monetary debt, the marriage debt was something that was owed by one person to another. But[...] unlike a monetary debt, the marriage debt was a mutual obligation owed by spouses to one another by virtue of the sacrament of marriage and not by virtue of some exchange for value. The marriage debt was the mutual duty shared by husband and wife to perform sexually at each other’s request. It was to be granted freely by one spouse upon the need of the other. This conjugal obligation served to keep the marriage bond solidified through the sexual union of husband and wife. The wife had as equal a right as the husband to exact payment of the debt. Neither spouse had the right to withhold its payment. (as cited in Nelson, 2002, p. 168)

In the *Parson’s Tale*, the marital relationship between the two partners is expressed in commercial terms. Each partner of the married couple is both a debtor (the person who owes a debt) and a creditor (the one to whom a debt is owed). During the marriage ceremony, each partner promises to perform sexually at the other’s request. However, as the Parson declares, a man and his wife have three reasons to come together, one of which is “to yelden everich of hem to oother the dette of hire bodies; for neither of hem hath power of his owene body” (as cited in Nelson, 2002, p. 168). He further praises the woman who offers her body to her husband, though she may not be willing to do so. A woman who does this, the Parson says, “hath merite of chastitee that yeldeth to hire housbonde the dette of hir body, ye, though it be agayn hir likynge and the lust [desire] of hir herte” (as cited in Nelson, p. 168). Clearly, some words, such as “yelden” and “dette” flow into the Parson’s speech, which indicates his awareness of the economic and commercial status which governs and shapes people’s social

relationships, including that of marriage. Here, marriage agreement, influenced by the economic and commercial standing, is basic to the development of the story, and informs it as well.

In the *Shipman's Tale*, the marital relationship is seen through a commercial lens. The debtor-creditor relationship again manifests itself in this tale, and informs the story of the Shipman. Each of the two partners in the tale is at the same time a debtor and a creditor. Their marital obligations can be pictured in Hahn's commentary on the complexity of the *Shipman's Tale*. According to Hahn, the complexity arises from the ways in which money and sexuality are linked by the three characters of the tale: the wife, her merchant-husband and the monk. Sexuality allows the wife to gain financially, both from the monk John and from her husband. For the monk, his sexual adventure is justified by his financial obligations. For the husband, his sexual energy can be renewed by economic success (as cited in Nelson, 2002, p. 183). Nelson contends that "Hahn goes too far in describing the effects of the merchant's single-minded pursuit of profit," which "gives his wife opportunity to complain to the visiting monk" (p.183). However, whether Hahn's view is exaggerated or not, the fact remains that success in marriage rests largely on husbands' economic prosperity. As long as husbands can provide financially for their wives' well-being, their marriages will certainly remain safe.

The story told by the Shipman is about a merchant-husband, his wife and a young monk claiming to be the cousin of this merchant. The husband is probably a cloth merchant, who, as Martindale (1992) notes, "makes money on trade, and tries not to lose any on the currency exchange" (p. 310). He is described as rich but economical, while his wife is spendthrift, and therefore drains her husband's money to buy expensive clothes and other fine array to meet the expectations of the society in which she lives. The reader then learns about Daun John, the monk, his friendly relationship with the husband, and his sociable nature. Declaring that he must go to Bruges on business, the husband asks the monk to pay him and his wife a visit before he leaves. In response to the husband's invitation, the monk arrives, carrying presents. Shortly after this, the merchant is shown in his counting house, checking his financial status to see what he has spent and gained and whether he has been richer than before:

The thridde day, this marchant up ariseth,
 And on his nedes sadly hym avyseth,
 And up into his contour-hous gooth he
 To rekene with hymself, wel may be,
 Of thilke yeer how that it with hym stood,
 And how that he despended hadde his good,
 And if that he encesses were or noon. (75-81)

As one may remember, book-keeping was familiar to medieval England. Here in the *Shipman's Tale*, the reader is shown an image of a merchant carefully going over his books behind closed doors, a practice which was recognizable to an urban, merchant-class audience, who had enough knowledge of the process of calculating and gauging with which the merchant was occupied. This picture of the merchant engaged in his book-keeping is, as Mair (2005) argues, “similar to that of the iconography of merchants and bankers” (p.185).

However, while the merchant is busy with his book-keeping, his wife complains that her husband is stingy about offering her money and love. His miserliness brings about her dissatisfaction. Therefore, she tells the monk about it. Further, she asks him for a loan since she must pay a debt of one hundred francs to her husband: “Daun John, I seye, lene me thise hundred frankes, / Pardee, I wol nat faille yow my thanks” (187-88). The monk responds by promising to give her the money, thus releasing her from her cares: “I wol delyvere yow out of this care; / For I wol brynge yow an hundred frankes” (200-01). Ultimately, they embrace, which demonstrates, as Nelson (2002) notes, “that their exchange will involve sex as well as money” (p.184).

As the story proceeds, John asks the merchant for one hundred francs before he leaves on his journey. Then, he gives the merchant's wife the money she has demanded, and she repays John by having sex with him. Later, when Dan John and the merchant meet, he tells the merchant that he has repaid his debt to him by giving the wife one hundred francs. The merchant therefore gets angry and reprimands his wife when he gets home, telling her that she must be careful when others give her money to repay debts. He warns her not to act likewise again:

I prey thee, wyf, ne do namoore so;
Telle me alwey, er that I fro thee go,
If any dettour hath in myn absence
payed thee, lest thurgh thy negligence
I myghte hym axe a thing that he hath payed." (395-99)

The story ends with the wife asking her husband's forgiveness and promising to repay her debt to him in bed: “By God, I wol nat paye yow but abedde! / Forgyve it me, myn owene spouse deere” (424-25).

Obviously, the wife's sexual relationship with both her husband and the monk is primarily driven by her need for money. She is ready to satisfy her husband's and the monk's sexual desires as long as they can meet her financial needs. Chaucer's use of words like “payed”, “dettour” and other commercial terms in the tale suggests business and monetary transactions in reference to the sexual dealings of the characters, and money is found to be

almost exchangeable with sex. The wife agrees to have an affair with Dan John as a business transaction, and she claims at the end that she will repay her debt to her husband in bed. In addition to the view that the wife's sexual relations with her husband and the monk is driven by her need for money, the view that the merchant's wife has to turn to illicit relationship with the monk to cure her sick marriage makes sense particularly if the age difference between them is taken into consideration (Gutierrez, 2003, p. 544).

Again, like in commerce, the wife's relationship with her husband and the monk is a debtor-creditor relationship. She is both a creditor and debtor at the same time; a creditor, in the sense that her husband and the monk owe her the sexual satisfaction which she gives to them; and a debtor, in the sense that she owes them the money which she has borrowed from them. If this shows anything, it indicates how the characters are guided in their social interaction by the economic notions prevalent at that time. These economic notions appear subtly in the characters' stories and govern their interaction with one another, either maritally or otherwise.

The description of exchange (sex in return for money) does not suggest, according to Nelson (2002), that the wife is pleased to accept her obligations to pay her marriage "dette". However, instead of complaining, she will pay the same debt twice. She has already paid the monk in their sex-for-money exchange, but she will "paye", her husband, her principal creditor, as well. Undoubtedly, the wife is delighted to "pay her husband, who is her creditor in two senses. She owes him her marriage "dette," and she also owes him for the money *he*, not the monk, has actually paid for her fine new 'array'" (p.185). This appears in the following passage in which the wife addresses her husband:

Ye han mo slakkere dettours than am I!
 For I wol paye yow wel and redily
 Fro day to day, and if so be I faille,
 I am youre wyf; score it upon my taille,
 And I shal paye as soone as ever I may. (413-17)

The passage above is obviously flavoured with such commercial words as "dettours" and "paye," which shows how the characters involved in the action speak and act in compliance with the economic notions of the age. The age's economic circumstances have affected medieval Londoners so much that this influence flows into the pilgrims' stories.

The foregoing argument about the marital relationship in the *Shipman's Tale* suggests that marriage is a commodity to be exchanged for money. However, this view is disputed by Ladd (2002) who, in his article "The Mercantile (Mis) Reader in *The Canterbury Tales*," contends that "*The Shipman's Tale* does [...] challenge the commodification of marriage

inherent in the business transaction between the wife and the monk (sex for money) and that between the merchant and his wife (sex canceling monetary debt)” (pp.27-28).

In *the Merchant’s Tale*, the economic and commercial terminology and notions also shape the marital relationship of the characters involved in the tale, and display their awareness of and domination by the prevalent, economic circumstances. Again, the debtor-creditor relationship is evident. The Merchant tells the story of an old husband called January and his young wife, May. He says that the old man eventually makes up his mind to marry after he has lived a prosperous life. He explains how January recognizes the importance of the wife, being the most valuable gift offered by God:

A wyf is Goddes yifte verrailly;
 Alle othere manere yiftes hardily,
 As londes, rentes, pasture, or commune,
 Or moebles, alle been yiftes of fortune,
 That passen as a shadwe upon a wal.
 But drede nat, if pleynly speke I shal,
 A wyf wol laste, and thyn hous endure,
 Wel lenger than thee list, paraventure. (99-106)

January also speaks of the wife’s positive attitude towards her husband. He explains that she encourages her husband to better his life if he is poor, and he maintains that “A wyf is kepere of thyn housbondrye”(168), that is, keeper of her husband’s economy and household goods, as Nelson (2002) suggests (p.179). Obviously, many words —‘londes’, ‘rentes’, ‘pasture’, ‘moebles’ and ‘housbondrye’— that are pertinent to economy and commerce appear in the merchant’s story, demonstrating his and other pilgrims’ response to the prevalent, economic status which determines and directs most of the people’s relationships in medieval England.

The economic aspect, taking a monetary form this time, manifests itself when January chooses his wife; his choice is determined by how far she is able to satisfy him sexually. If she fails to perform well in bed, he may turn to a life of adultery, and as a result his heritage will go to strange hands because he has no heirs. However, he does not listen to his friend Justinus’s advice and chooses a young woman to be his bride (Nelson, 2000, p. 179). January believes that each partner in marriage must “leccherye eschue / And yelde hir dette whan that it is due” (239-40). In like manner, May, according to Jacobs (1995) sees “marital relations” as a kind of “doing business” (p. 338). Jacobs elaborates on this point. She explains that some spouses pay reverence to and regard marital contract as a sort of mutual understanding, companionship, consent, obligation, and intercourse upon request. But other

spouses, Jacobs continues, act as if they were mere business partners. They regard each other as the bearers of so many worldly goods, displaying no understanding of the other as an individual. In the *Merchant's Tale*, it does not seem to occur to the husband that he owes his wife many things other than his worldly goods. This is perhaps what leads May to consider her marriage to January a kind of business transaction (p.337). The words 'dette' and 'due' that figure in January's speech supports this view and further show how January-May relationship is clearly one of debtor-creditor relationship, in which partners agree, like in commerce, to pay off their debts to each other.

The way economic and commercial measures determine the relationships among spouses is evident in the case of January and May. January has to offer his wife extra money or property to ensure that she remain faithful to him. As the story progresses, January is unaware that his wife is attracted to his squire Damyan. This demands that January provide more incentives so that his wife may dedicate herself to him and forget all about Damyan. Therefore, he builds a pleasure garden and also offers additional economic benefits. He decides to give his property to his wife when he loses his sight and thus becomes very possessive and jealous. "And all myn heritage, toun and tour; / I yeve it yow, maketh chartres as yow leste;" says January to May (960-61). Like in business dealings, January will offer his property to May if she makes it possible for them to "kisse" (964). Clearly, the economic consciousness of the characters remains constant and grows more intense throughout the story. Chaucer's use of the word 'covenant' in "I prey yow first, in covenant ye me kisse" (964) suggests, according to Nelson (2002), that "January at least knows that love can be purchased only by a man willing and able to pay a very high price" (p.181). The 'take and give' relationship is evident, as in commerce, in January-May's relationship. While January offers May extra incentives to remain faithful to him, she is expected to satisfy his sexual desires.

In the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, the Wife's marital relationship and sexuality are also described in commercial terms. Throughout her tale, the Wife uses a language of commerce in reference to marriage, which shows her conception of the marriage "debt" and, above all, her economic shrewdness.

The *Wife of Bath's Tale* is the story of a woman who informs her travelling companions of her own marital and sexual experience. She tells them that she has been married five times. Referring to her three old husbands, she says how she made them work hard at night in order to "paye [their marriage] dette" (159):

The thre men were goode, and riche, and olde;
Unnethe myghte they the statut holde

In which that they were bounden unto me-
Ye woot wel what I meene of this, pardee! toil
As help me God, I laughe whan I thynke
How pitously a-nyght I made hem swynke. (203-08)

Obviously, the Wife's listeners understand what she means, but they are not quite sure, as it will unfold, if her husbands have sufficient ability to satisfy her sexually. However, since the Wife of Bath takes a firm grip on her husbands' possessions, she no longer needs to please them unless this can endow her with more wealth or pleasure. Referring to her husbands' duty towards her, the Wife comments on her husbands' failure to please her sexually, the thing that makes her rebuke them and demand that they pay more money "in return for her payment of the marriage debt which she also owes them" (Nelson, 2002, p.174).

Namely a bedde hadden they meschaunce;
Ther wolde I chide and do hem no plesaunce,
I wolde no lenger in the bed abyde,
If that I felte his arm over my side
he had maad his raunsoun unto me;
Thanne wolde I suffre hym do his nycetee. (413–18)

Not only does the Wife laugh at her husbands' failures to fulfill their sexual obligations to her, but she also humiliates them publicly. This "male humiliation at the hands of female sexuality and its concomitant emasculation of male desire[...] denies," as Pugh (2003) suggests, "male sexuality its privileged position" (p.125). However, the Wife's speech is marked by the prevalence of such commercial terms as 'raunsoun', which calls attention to her experience of the economic notions of the day and the business dealings characteristic of medieval England.

In the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, the Wife insists that her husbands pay their marriage debts as debtors and slaves to her: "An housbonde I wol have, I wol nat lette, / Which shal be bothe my dettour and my thral"(160-61). Her insistence, however, echoes her economic motivations for sexual activity. It further indicates that she looks upon love as something ridiculous, and a quick examination of her *Prologue* shows that she consistently puts sex above romantic love. She envies King Solomon for possessing multiple wives, and tells the group that she is ready to "Welcome the sixte, whan that evere he shal" (51). Further, she wishes that God will grant her multiple husbands just as Solomon is offered many wives: "As, wolde God, it levelful were to me / To be refresshed half so ofte as he!" (37-38). This wish implies that the

Wife pays more attention to her sexual relationships with her husbands rather than to her love for them, as does her frequent demand that “man shal yelde to his wyf hire dette” (136). It also constructs her as a lusty yet hard-minded woman, not as a feeble romantic with elevated ideals of love. Her hunger for satisfying her sexual desires, as well as her frequent attention to female genitalia, makes Pugh (2003) claim that “[the Wife] views the marriage bed as a means to achieve both independence and sensual gratification” (p.122). Pugh's view of how the marriage bed serves as a means of sexual satisfaction is plausible and understood, as a close scrutiny of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* reveals; however, his view of how this leads to independence appears to be ambiguous. Pugh does not explain how the marriage bed contributes to independence, or provide any evidence to support his view. What does he mean by independence? Does he mean emancipation from men's control, self-determination, or something else? Whatever the word ‘independence’ means, it should be taken into consideration that the marriage bed is shared by two partners, which means that each depends on, rather than be independent from, each other for sensual gratification.

Most scholars, as Ingham (2002) notes, “has read the Wife's interest in sovereignty of wife over husband” (p.42), pointing to her demand that men should be controlled by women. She manages to achieve this by abusing her sexuality. Her “sexual power,” according to Williams (2008), “turns out to be “threatening” (p.390). Furthermore, her candid reference to the commercial aspects (e.g., ‘selle’ and ‘wynnyng’) of marital sexual relations exhibit a woman who abuses love for her own economic pursuits :

And therefore every man this tale I telle,
Wnne whoso may, for al is for to selle.
With empty hand men may none haukes lure.
For wynnyng wolde I al his lust endure. (419-22)

This unashamed consumerist whim of self-prostitution in marriage discloses the Wife's exploitative views of sexuality; she takes advantage of courtly love to achieve her material ends. She forgets that in paying the marital debt, each partner is supposed to be the debtor of the other and that neither of them has power of his own body. She has the better of each of her first three husbands by using tricks, resorting to force, or continuing to growl. She refuses to have sex with them until they have yielded to her demands. She then triumphs over her fourth husband through jealousy and finally overcomes her fifth husband through trickery so that he submits to her control of his house and land, allowing her to take charge of their marriage (Rigby, 2000, p. 145).

Linked with the Wife's obsession with marriage and sex is her repeated reference to and employment of scriptural authorities to justify her own debauchery. For instance, in justifying her propensity to marry many times, she refers to the polygamous examples of Solomon, Abraham, and Jacob as they appear in biblical scripture. Moreover, she wants to see proof of where the word of God explicitly inhibits marriage or approves of virginity. Similarly, she cites the Apostle Paul to support her practice of remarrying after one husband dies (Arnell, 2007, p. 938).

As the above argument about the *Wife of Bath's Tale* demonstrates, the wife's experience with men, particularly most of her husbands, reveals her obsession with economic gain, which highlights English merchants' interest in material gains. It also underlines the pilgrims' consciousness of the commercial activities of the day.

In the *Franklin's Tale*, the marital relationship is similarly viewed from economic and commercial perspectives, and entails many of the prevalent values of the day, such as marital self-denial, faithfulness, honour and obedience.

The *Franklin's Tale* starts with the courtship of a knight called Arviragus and a damsel called Dorigen. The knight serves the lady but is not bold enough to declare his love for her. Sensing his anguish and suffering and persuaded by his humble obedience, she agrees to take him as husband and lord. They are happily married. Their marriage is one of equality, in which neither of the two is master or servant. Dorigen's recognition of Arviragus's timid obedience and her agreement to take him as her lord means, according to Nelson (2002), "that the mutual debtor-creditor relationship agreed upon here [...] involves a responsibility on the part of each partner to obey the other" (p.186). Their commitment to each other, a sign of marital obligations, manifests itself in the scene in which he pledges to assume no mastery over her, show no jealousy for her, and remain obedient to her. In response, Dorigen promises to remain faithful to him for the rest of her life: "Sir, I wol be youre humble trewe wyf, / Have heer my trouthe til that myn herte breste" (50-51).

However, the married couple does not know what is in store for them. Shortly after they marry, Arviragus leaves for Britain on business. Dorigen suffers, but her friends attempt to mitigate her sense of loneliness by taking her on walks where they watch ships enter the port, hoping that one of them will bring home her husband. However, she is distraught by the rocks near the shore: "But whan she saugh the reisly rokkes blake, / For verray feere, so wolde hir herte quake" (151-52). She is afraid lest whatever ship bringing her husband home would crash on these rocks and sink: "An hundred thousand bodyes of mankynde / Han rokkes slayn, al be they nat in mynde" (169-70). Dorigen's friends, however, often give garden parties in which

they invite singers and squires to dance. One of these squires is Aurelius, who has been in love with her ever since she arrived in Brittany. Ultimately he declares his love for her and request her to “Have mercy, sweete, or ye wol do me deye” (270). Dorigen, however, displays her faithfulness to Arveragus by rejecting Aurelius: “I wol been his to whom that I am knyght. / Taak this for fynal answeere as of me” (278-79).

Being concerned about the safety of her husband, Dorigen meets Aurelius and promises to offer her love to him if he manages to remove the rocks that menace incoming ships. Their meeting, however, takes place as a consequence of the commitments that Dorigen, like any medieval wife obliged to act independently for her absent husband, must fulfill by attempting to “maintain social bonds, to attend worship, [and] to honour a contract” (Hume, 2008, p.292). The obligation to honour contracts, according to Hume, echoes another reality about medieval wives whose husbands are away. “They, ” as Hume argues, “must carry out business, whether on their husbands’ behalf or semi-autonomously. This requires them [...]to converse with male acquaintances, as Dorigen does with Aurelius” (p.292).

Finding the task of moving the rocks impossible, Aurelius is advised to seek the help of a student of law who is a magician. The latter demands “a thousand pound!” (519) to clear the rocks. He makes it seem that all the rocks have disappeared for a week. Learning of this, Dorigen is distraught because she must fulfill her promise by offering her body to Aurelius. In a fit of despair, she broods over the various instances in which a faithful wife or a maiden takes her life instead of submitting herself to another.

For which thise woful maydens ful of drede,
Rather than they wolde lese hir maydenhede,
They prively been stirt into a welle
And dreynte hemselves, as the bookes telle. (667-70)

When Arviragus returns home, Dorigen provides him with an account of what has happened. He tells her that he will tolerate the humiliation of her actions; however, he demands that she fulfill her promise by meeting and submitting to Aurelius. Hume (2008) notes that “[Dorigen’s] adulterous promise to Aurelius [...] implies that he respects her as an autonomous human being whose personal word should be honoured rather than someone he owns and controls” (p. 285). Dorigen’s keenness on upholding her promise to Aurelius echoes the ethical codes which most medieval merchants used to live by in their business dealings and commercial transactions. Similarly, Arviragus’s attitude towards his wife implies his interest in autonomy rather than patriarchy.

Recognizing Arviragus's great nobility and learning of his insistence that his wife respect her promise, Aurelius frees Dorigen from her promise to him, choosing to suffer wretchedness rather than "departe the love bitwix yow two" (824).

When Aurelius goes to pay the law student, the latter forgives the former's debt, freeing him from his obligation to pay a thousand pounds: "For, sire, I wol nat taken a peny of thee / For, sire, I wol nat taken a peny of thee" (908-09).

From the above argument pertinent to the *Franklin's Tale*, it is obvious that the notion of exchange which is characteristic of commercial dealings informs and shapes the content of the story told by the Franklin. The reader is made to see lifelike business transactions. The story takes on an economic dimension on account of its delineation of some characters who, like real traders engaged in commercial exchanges, resort to the principle of exchange to resolve their problems and achieve their aims. Dorigen sacrifices her honor in exchange for her husband's safety. She also promises to submit herself to Aurelius in exchange for his undertaking to remove the rocks. Similarly, Aurelius will pay the student a thousand pounds in exchange for the latter's efforts to make the rocks disappear. Here the role of the student embodies a simple business transaction.

Like the idea of exchange, the notions of contract and debt are evident in the *Franklin's tale* and determine the behaviour of the characters involved. There is a contract between Arviragus and Dorigen that necessitates mutual obedience and faithfulness. There is also a contract between Aurelius and the student by virtue of which the former pays the latter a sum of money so that the latter can rid the shore of the threatening rocks. The notion of debt figures clearly in Aurelius's propensity to absolve Dorigen of her debt by forgiving and forgetting her promise. It also appears in the student's decision to free Aurelius from his debt for removing the rocks.

The employment of commercial terms, such as 'raunsoum' (payment), 'dette' (debt), 'selle' (sell), and 'yelde' (pay), mentioned in the above Tales is meant to show the travelers' awareness of and their involvement in the economic atmosphere which characterizes medieval England. Their narratives are informed by and develop in accordance with their experience of the economic milieu which dominates their lives.

In commerce or business dealings, merchants are expected to redeem the promises which they make concerning, say for example, the payment off of their debts to their fellow merchants if they owe them any. This has its effect on the characters in Chaucer's *Canterbury tales*, that is, they are similarly expected to be committed to the promises they make. For instance, in the *Man of Law's Tale*, the Man of Law acts upon the Host's demand to

tell his story, when it is time for him to narrate his tale. This demonstrates that the travelers' propensity to fulfill what they have promised:

“Hooste,” quod he, “depardieus, ich assenteo; agree
To breke forwardo is nat myn entente. agreement
Bihesteo is detteo, and I wole holde fayn promise, obligation
Al my biheste, I kan no better sayn.” (39-42)

The Man of Law's employment of the sentence 'Bihesteo is detteo' (obligation is debt) in his story reflects his consciousness of the current economic and commercial notions which emphasize the moral tendency of medieval London merchants to question their commercial dealings. In Chaucer's poem, the Man of Law narrates his story, taking into consideration the rules of economic and commercial practices; therefore, he will pay attention to the prevalent economic norms.

Father-daughter relationship, patriarchy and exogamy are also seen from a commercial point of view in the *Man of Law's Tale*. Here the commercial notions of exchange and property are best embodied by the father's attitude toward his daughter.

Although the *Man of Law's Tale* is not about merchants, it presents itself as a mercantile account. Merchants are recognized as a source of the tale. They bring the news of Custance's beauty and chastity to the Sultan, but they appear irrelevant to the story of Custance herself (Ladd, 2002, p. 19). However, their role as providers of news gives the tale its economical dimension.

The Tale is an account of a young Syrian Sultan, who makes up his mind to marry Custance, the Roman Emperor's daughter, for her beauty and chastity. Being a Muslim, the Sultan has to embrace Christianity to get the Emperor's consent. Despite his mother's disapproval, the Sultan marries Custance, who bids sad farewell to her father and her home as well:

"Fader," she seyde, "Thy wrecched child Custance,
Thy yonge doghter, fostred up so softe,
And ye my mooder, my soverayn
Over alle thyng, out-taken Crist on-lofte,
Custance, youre child, hir recomandeth ofte
Unto your grace, for I shal to Surrye
Ne shal I nevere seen yow moore with eye. (274-80)

According to Ashton (2000), the Sultan-Custance marriage is an example of "exogamy" in which only men make its "legal and civil arrangements", which suggests patriarchy; however, "Custance herself affirms patriarchal power, as well as her own role as an object of exchange" (p.418), particularly when she sadly admits that women are born to be

enslaved and controlled by men: “Wommen are born to thraldom and penance, / And to been under mannes governaunce” (286-87). This recognition is emphasized when, later in the tale, she is restored by the Roman fleet, sent to Syria under the command of her uncle to regain this property, namely, herself. In a commercial sense, Custance has become a property transported, like in commerce, from one person to another. This equation of Custance with property suggests that she is reduced to an object to be traded amongst men. When Custance eventually allows the two men in her life to meet, neither knows the degree of her connection with the other, for this marriage, unlike her first, demands, as in trade, no mediation between men, or “no exchange of object-gift” (Ashton, pp. 421-22). From commercial and moral perspectives, Custance’s father, by abusing his paternal authority, undermines the paternal-filial relationship when he makes his daughter marry outside her social unit, thus giving her up as if she were an object for sale.

Custance draws her significance and weight from her son and the reunion which she solely has achieved. Now she meets her father not as an empty property “daughter” but as a stranger’s wife. Her new esteemed position has been accomplished outside the domain of paternal authority, when his daughter was detached and lost to him. Deviating from her father’s patriarchal authority, she has entered into a marriage he did not plan. However, near the end, she recognizes herself as her father’s property, admitting his power by calling him father three times, and describing herself as his young child (Ashton, 2000, p. 422).

In the *Cook’s Tale*, the story, like the other stories in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, is described in commercial terms, such as exchange, price and money while at the same time addressing such questions as corruption and moral decay.

The tale is simply about Perkyng Revelour, an apprentice cook working in one of the foodstuff shops of London, “the setting of [his] drinking, dicing, and whoring adventure,” to use Casey (2006)’s phrase (p.190). Instead of minding the shop, he spent most of his life in pursuit of pleasures, dancing, singing, gambling, and fooling around: “To hoppe and synge and maken swich disport; / And ther they setten stevene for to meete / To pleyen at the dys in swich a streete” (58-60). His master has had enough of his shameful behavior. When he discovers the theft of his money from the cash box, he dismisses him. Perkin decides to act upon the old proverb “Birds of a feather flock together”, and becomes friends with a thief, another young man of similar habits. His friend’s wife runs a shop, which is just a cover for her loose, immoral activities.

The Cook’s prologue and tale present the social structure shaped by commerce. Man’s service to God, and his duties toward other men (as in a

host-guest relationship) are affected by the mutual duties of commercial exchange. The centre of this exchange, however, is the foodstuff shop owned by Perkin's master, with its cash box. "The flow of cash, as Woods (1996) notes, "from hand to hand suggests the larger world of urban commercial transactions" (p.189). It also implies the abundance of money inherent in the act of exchange. However, this abundance is undermined, as in the case of the thief's wife, by the moral decay that results from her commercialized act of love. She offers her body in exchange of money in order to earn her livelihood. Her place of business is certainly a fruitful source of income, but at the same time, a cover for her illicit relationships: "[She] heeld for contenance / A shoppe, and swyved for hir sustenance" (98). In a moral sense, and perhaps in a commercial sense as well, her behavior is seen as a "a way of life that famishes what it feeds" (Woods, p. 189). Here the wife's moral corruption represents in a wider sense the corruption that permeates London marketplace.

Perkyn's sexuality, like that of the wife of his friend, also takes on a commercial dimension. The way he dances, leaps and hops from the shop to the streets where he plays dice asserts the demands of youth and sexuality:

Out of the shoppe thider wolde he lepe –
Til that he hadde al the sighte yseyn,
And daunced wel, he wolde nat come ayeyn –
And gadered hym a meynee of his sort. (45-57)

However, Perkyn's expression of his energy opposes the social and commercial codes of conduct and the restrictions imposed in the shop of his master. Here "sex," as Woods (1996) contends, "becomes the exact equivalent of money or money making, since the fullness of Perkyn's social life depends upon his emptying his master's cash box" (p.189).

3. Conclusion

The Tales discussed in this study demonstrate the great influence which the economic status and commercial interactions have on medieval English people. Most of the economic and commercial terms experienced by medieval English people appeared in the stories told by the pilgrims on their way from London to Canterbury. For instance, many commercial words including competition, exchange, value, debt, price, profit, money, debtor, creditor, book-keeping, contract, transaction, cost, marketplace flow into the pilgrims' discourses, which illustrates how the economic norms of the day and the commercial transactions have determined medieval English people's social relationships and values. In the *General Prologue*, for example, the way in which the merchant-pilgrim is dressed testifies to the economic

prosperity and commercial success of merchants in medieval England. Similarly, the Reeve in the *General Prologue* reflects the flourishing economy of the day by dressing elegantly. In the *knight's Tale*, we see how romance and arms are dealt with from a commercial point of view. Commercial terms like payment, cost, and money appear in the discourse of the characters involved. Likewise, in the *Parson's Tale*, the marital relationship between husband and wife has become a debtor-creditor relationship, in which each partner of the married couple is both debtor and creditor, in the sense that each partner is demanded to perform sexually at the other's request. In the *Shipman's Tale*, the marital relationship is also expressed in commercial terminology; each partner in marriage is both debtor and creditor. Within the commercial framework of this tale, interesting issues are raised. In *The Merchant's Tale*, the economic and commercial terminology and notions also shape the marital relationship of the characters referred to in the tale, and display their awareness of the prevalent, economic circumstances. Again, the debtor-creditor relationship is evident. In this tale, the questions of faithfulness are discussed. Similarly, In *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, the Wife's marital relationship and sexuality are also seen from a commercial lens. Throughout her tale, the Wife uses a commercial language in reference to marriage, which shows her conception of the marriage 'debt' and, above all, her economic shrewdness. In the *Franklin's Tale*, the marital relationship is similarly viewed from economic and commercial perspectives, and entails many of the prevalent values of the day, such as self-denial, faithfulness, honour and obedience. In *the Man of Law's Tale*, promise fulfillment assumes a commercial dimension. The Man of Law keeps his promise by acting upon the Host's demand to tell his story, when it is time for him to narrate his tale. If this indicates anything, it demonstrates that the travelers are certainly willing to fulfill what they have promised. Father-daughter relationship, patriarchy and exogamy are also seen from a commercial point of view in the *Man of Law's Tale*. Here again the commercial notions of exchange and property are best embodied by the father's attitude toward his daughter. Eventually, in the *Cook's Tale*, the story, like the other stories in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, is described in commercial terms, such as exchange, price and money while at the same time addressing questions related to corruption and moral decay. In short, the economic dimension is so evident in the pilgrims' stories that it cannot escape one's notice.

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