

A CLOSE READING OF *THE MAN OF LAW'S PROLOGUES, THE MAN OF LAW'S TALE, AND THE MAN OF LAW'S EPILOGUE*

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*AUTHORS' NOTE*

Middle English quotations come from the following edition and line numbers are cited parenthetically: Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Cook's Prologue and Tale*. In *The Canterbury Tales*, edited by Jill Mann, 159-63. New York: Penguin, 2005.

Present-Day English translations follow in brackets and are the above authors' translations, which can be found on the Omeka website.

I. Holistic Overview

The *Man of Law's Tale* is of the hagiographic and romantic genres. Hagiography is a genre that was popular in the Middle ages, and is characterized as literature about the life of saints and the miracles which they perform or encounter.<sup>1</sup> This hagiography follows the life of Constance, who is presented as a virtuous Christian woman who faces many obstacles, but is protected through all her hardships by the grace of God. As mentioned previously, *Man of Law's Tale* is also a romance. Though medieval romances were typically focused on male characters, the Man of Law still follows all three of the characteristics of medieval romances defined by Northrop Frye and Joseph Campbell: "(1) the perilous journey, (2) the crucial struggle, and (3) the exaltation of the hero."<sup>2</sup>

The *Man of Law's Tale* is not completely original to Chaucer; it was taken and adapted from another story of the time called "Life of Constance" written by Nicholas Trivet.<sup>3</sup> Chaucer's version of the story is organized into three parts, as well as two prologues and an epilogue that accompany the tale. The tale itself is written with seven-line stanzas that have an ababbcc rhyme scheme. This rhyme scheme is known as rhyme royal, and from Chaucer's time on it was used for sophisticated

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<sup>1</sup> Granville Sydnor Hill, "The Hagiographic Narrators of Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales : The Second Nun, the Man of Law, the Prioress," *University Microfilms International*, 1977, <https://scholarship.rice.edu/bitstream/handle/1911/15296/7719260.PDF?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

<sup>2</sup> Susan L. Clark and Julian N. Wasserman, "Constance as Romance and Folk Heroine in Chaucer's Man of Law's Tale," *Rice University Studies*, 64, no. 1 (1978): 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> Hill, "The Hagiographic Narrators of Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales," 85.

poetry.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that rhyme royal was “used in The Man of Law's Tale, The Clerk's Tale, The Prioress's Tale, and The Second Nun's Tale. All are ‘grave discourses,’ and all are works concerning the suffering of innocent victims.”<sup>5</sup> This shows that Chaucer may have adapted Trivet's story into this rhyme scheme to convey the seriousness with which he hoped this story would be received.

Additionally, this use of poetic form is interesting considering that in one of the prologues, the Man of Law says, “I speke in prose, and lat him rymes make.” (96)/ “[I speak in prose, and let him make rhymes. Despite this statement, the Man of Law proceeds to tell his tale in poetic form and not prose.]” This could be explained as a tactic used by the Man of Law to “exonerate him from any blame.”<sup>6</sup> Some scholarship suggests that the Man of Law is a character of contradictions because in the General Prologue he claims to be wealthy, yet dresses modestly; moreover, he claims to be a legal purist but also seems to be willing to bend the rules to further himself in his profession.<sup>7</sup> If this is accepted, then the use of poetry when he said he would speak in prose just further cements the Man of Law as a character of contradictions. The use of rhyme royal shows that the tale itself is important and meant to be learned from, despite the fact that the Man of Law himself is not the most reliable narrator.

The *Man of Law's Tale* incorporates various aspects of diversity and disability including the way we view women, the elderly, and people of various faiths and religions. This close reading will focus on the way the tale portrays non-Christian people and what this says about the Man of Law and of Chaucer himself.

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<sup>4</sup> L.D. Benson, “Rime Royal,” The Geoffrey Chaucer Page, Harvard University, 2000, <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/litsubs/style/rime-roy.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Benson, “Rime Royal,” <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~chaucer/special/litsubs/style/rime-roy.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Eleanor Johnson, “English Law and the Man of Law's ‘Prose’ Tale,” *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 114, no. 4 (2015): 504.

<sup>7</sup> Johnson, “English Law and the Man of Law's ‘Prose’ Tale,” 508.

## II. Religion in the *Man of Law's Tale*

There are various aspects within the *Man of Law's Tale* that paint a picture of religious discrimination and prosecution. The aspects this close reading will focus on is the portrayal of characters, use of derogatory language, and presence of miracles.

### *Portrayal of Characters*

In the *Man of Law's Tale*, there are three main categories of characters: the Christians, the agnostic, and the non-believers who were later converted to Christianity. Each of these groups is characterized in very different ways. First of all, the Christians are exemplified most profoundly in the main character Constance herself, and are described in only the most positive terms. This can be best seen from the description of Constance's character given in Part One when it says "vertu is hir gide" (164)/ "[virtue is her guide]" and "humblesse hath slain in hir all tyrannye" (165)/ "[Humbleness has slain in her all tyranny.]" Even Constance's physical appearance and age display her as a positive character when it says, "in hire is heigh beautee without pride, youthe, withouten grenehede or folye." (162)/ "[In her is high beauty without pride, youth without immaturity or folly.]" This shows that even though Constance is young and beautiful, she is still even more amazing because she possesses the inner beauty of virtue. These excerpts clearly exemplify that Constance is the saint in this hagiography, and is a clear connection between Christianity and virtuousness.

This connection between Christianity and goodness can further be seen in the fact that all characters who are converted are portrayed in a similar way. One example of this is Hermengild, the wife of the constable, who takes in Constance and is later converted to Christianity. Hermengild allows Constance into her home and treats her with kindness and compassion, and Constance grows to care deeply for her because of this. Nothing bad thing is ever said about Hermengild. Another

example of this is King Alla, who also converts to Christianity and marries Constance. King Alla is described as compassionate and having a “gentil herte” (660)/ “[gentle heart],” showing again how those who convert are portrayed in a positive manner.

This poses a stark dichotomy to the way non-Christians are portrayed. The best examples of this are the two mothers in the story: the Muslim mother of the Sultan and the Pagan mother of King Alla. Both of these women are angered by their sons’ conversion to Christianity and go to great lengths to prevent them from converting. In his article on the tale, Walter Scheps explains that, “the two mothers-in-law are idiosyncratically evil; the motives of Alla's mother especially are difficult to justify, and it is this blatant malice that the Man of Law condemns. Nowhere does he suggest that Constance's enemies behave as they do only because they are not Christians.”<sup>8</sup> But this does not seem to be the case when you consider that only the non-Christian characters are conveyed in extremely negative terms. The clear connection between non-Christians and evil behavior is enough to insinuate that the tale’s intent is to convey that Christians are good and non-Christians are not. The Sultan’s mother is described as a “welle of vices” (323)/ “[source of vices]” and the “roote of iniquitee”(358)/ “[root of iniquity.]” King Alla’s mother Donegild is described in a similar way as “ful of tyrannye”(696)/ “[full of tyranny]” and having a “cursed herte” (697)/ “[cursed heart.]” Based on this, there is a clear pattern of non-Christians being associated with evil and villainous behavior, while Christian and Christian converts are put on a pedestal of positivity. The descriptions of these different groups provide circumstantial evidence that the tale is trying to send a message that Christianity is right and virtuous while non-Christians are villainous.

#### *Use of Derogatory Language*

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<sup>8</sup> Walter Scheps, “Chaucer's Man of Law and the Tale of Constance,” *PMLA* 89, no. 2 (1974): 293.

In conjunction with the way characters are portrayed, the words heathen and barbarian are used in a derogatory way to further assert the inferiority of non-Christians. This is first seen when Constance is lamenting her upcoming voyage to Syria and she said “Allas, unto the Barbre nacioun I moste anon, sin that it is your will” (281)/ “[Allas, unto the heathen nation I must go immediately, since that is your will.]” This is the first, but not the last, time that a foreign country with a different religion is referred to in a derogatory way. This happens again when the mother of the Sultan is pretending to convert from Islam to Christianity and the text says: “repenting hir she hethen was so longe” (378)/ “[repenting that she was heathen so long.]” This insinuates that the Sultanness knew the Christians would want to hear her repent for being of a heathen religion, showing that Islam is considered inferior to Christianity. Finally, at the end of the tale Constance finds her father after her husband’s death and begs him, “Sende me namoore unto noon hethenesse” (1112)/ “[Send me no more into heatheness.]” This shows that Constance, the perfect embodiment of Christianity, does not want to be around non-Christians anymore, implying a dislike or superiority complex towards them. This combined with the repeated use of the words heathen and barbarian, cements a hierarchy with Christianity on top and non-Christians below them.

### *Presence of Miracles*

Finally, the presence of miracles throughout the tale are to the benefit of the Christian characters and the detriment of those who are not believers in Christ. Constance is protected by God throughout two sea voyages that should have killed her. Additionally, the knight who framed Constance is struck down in order to vindicate Constance from the crime of killing Hermengild of which she was falsely accused. These two miracles work in the favor of the Christian saint of this tale, which implies that she has the favor of the one true God. Additionally, another miracle occurs when Hermengild gives the old blind Briton his sight back, which leads to the conversion of the

constable. These three major miracles within the story all work to the benefit of the Christian characters and further promote their beliefs.

### III. Connection to Present Day

Unfortunately, this kind of representation of Muslims as villains is not an isolated incident in the *Man of Law's Tale*. In recent history, “equating Muslims with terrorists has become disturbingly common in American society—and the consequences can be violent. According to a Federal Bureau of Investigation report released in November, the number of assaults, attacks on mosques and other hate crimes against Muslims in 2015 was higher than at any other time except the immediate aftermath of Sept. 11.”<sup>9</sup> This shows that portrayal of Muslims as an evil and dangerous other is rampant in America in particular. This means that Islamophobia has been a long lasting problem, and the *Man of Law's Tale* is just one example of a larger historical issue of unfairly representing Muslims as villains.

### IV. Conclusion

Overall, Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* focuses on the theme of religion and otherness. Through the portrayal of Christian characters as good and non-Christian characters as evil, the use of the derogatory words “heathen” and “barbarian”, and the miracles that act in favor of Christians and their mission to convert others, the *Man of Law's Tale* sends a message that Christianity is the one true faith, and that all other religions are false.

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<sup>9</sup> Rebecca A. Clay, “Islamophobia,” *Monitor on Psychology* 48, no.4 (2017), <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2017/04/islamophobia>.

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