

The Man of Law's Tale

Race and Racism in the *Man of Law's Tale*

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The *Man of Law's Tale* might seem an unlikely specimen for examining the development of race in the Middle Ages: it does not explicitly feature skin color difference among its characters. But skin color is merely one element in medieval race. Color lacks the overwhelming primacy in medieval race that it lays claim to in modern racial ideology. The tale's medieval racial discourse is evident in its predominant interest in identifying borders and then troubling them. Though the *Canterbury Tales'* narrators represent a community characterized most obviously by class and occupational divisions, these are categories that in medieval literature and culture often map onto race. One of Chaucer's most important sources, Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, features a collection of Florentine nobles who vacate the city in order to escape a bout of plague. They tell stories to pass the time while traveling between one another's country villas. Chaucer's tales, however, feature narrators that run the gamut of social standing—from an aristocratic knight to a parson, from a prioress to a miller. The *Tales* represent communal relations when Chaucer's pilgrim-narrators interact among themselves with affirmations, condemnations, and confrontations—in much the same ways that members of a political community react to one another. Together, the pilgrims represent all of the three recognized medieval social estates: the nobility, the clergy, and the peasantry. It is not uncommon to find individual peasants, such as a "churl" in Robert Mannyng's fourteenth-century devotional manual *Handlyng Synne*, described as black, even when they are clearly not recently descended of Africans. The exploration of communal fissures and social bonds is a central concern in Chaucer's tales. Race, the notion that an individual's worth inheres in his or her discernible and immutable membership in a particular group, is a central element in the construction of community and provides ample fodder for the imaginative border-crossing that characterizes the *Tales*.

Race in the Middle Ages was characterized by religious and political differences in addition to and often instead of phenotypic differences such as skin color. Furthermore, these were often augmented with geographical difference. In exploring fissures and bonds between diverse groups of people, the *Tales*—and especially the *Man of Law's Tale*—troubles borders and tends toward representing a global community. Race was often dependent on the notion that the world consisted of three Continents; Europe, Africa, and Asia had been divided among the progeny of Noah's three sons after the biblical flood depicted in *Genesis*. A person's lineal descent from Noah was discernible in his skin color and other features considered indicative of European, African, or Asian ancestry. The *Tales'* settings impressively range across space and time—from local and contemporary happenings in Oxford and Cambridge in the *Miller's* and *Reeve's Tales* to ancient Thebes and Athens in the *Knight's Tale* to contemporary Brittany in the *Franklin's*

Tale. The *Squire's Tale* takes place in the Mongol Empire and features Ghenghis Khan's daughter Canacee, and the *Prioress's Tale* takes place in "in Asye, in a greet citee" [in Asia, in a great city] (PrT 488). But no other tale exhibits the geographic range of the *Man of Law's Tale*, which seamlessly connects Rome and the Mediterranean with the Levant and England. The *Man of Law's Tale*, in troubling and exceeding geographic borders, engages with the discourses of geographic difference that informed medieval race.

The *Man of Law's Tale's* global aspirations and engagement with race are on display in its heroine's travels. Custance, the daughter of the Roman Emperor, attracts the attentions of a Syrian sultan who agrees to convert to Christianity if she will marry him. In order to "destroy" Islam, the Church and the Emperor agree to the marriage. Custance, with a significant retinue of bishops, lords, ladies, and "knights of renown," travels to Syria for the wedding. Endeavoring to save Syria from Christian conversion, the sultan's mother, known only as the Sultanness, surreptitiously raises a force to murder her son, his retinue, and Custance's entourage during a celebratory wedding feast. The Sultanness spares Custance and puts her into a rudderless boat. She floats haplessly until she washes ashore in Northumbria, on the Continent-facing coast of what is now northern England and southern Scotland. Custance is taken in by a local king's constable and his wife Hermengyld. She befriends them and converts them to Christianity. A wicked knight desires Custance and when she rebuffs his advances, he murders Hermengyld and frames Custance. A divine hand and voice exonerates her, and the miracle facilitates the conversion of the Northumbrian King Alla. He subsequently marries Custance, who bears his child. Alla's mother Donegild considers Custance a "strange...creature" (MLT 700); her origins are unknown and her customs are unfamiliar. Her mere presence, and especially her marriage to Alla, threatens to fracture established social bonds between mother and son as well as between the ruler and his pagan polity. Donegild forges letters from Alla, who is away in battle, ordering that Custance and her newborn child be put out to sea in the rudderless boat on which she arrived. For more than five years, Custance and her son Maurice float on the sea. Somewhere in the Atlantic, either in southern Europe or northwestern Africa, Custance washes up near "an heathen castle" where an apostate steward attempts to rape her. She, with the help of the Virgin Mary, fights him off and drowns him in the sea. Her ship then sails back into the Mediterranean through the narrow strait between Gibraltar and Morocco. She is intercepted by a Roman senator who does not recognize her. He informs her that the Romans have conquered Syria in retaliation for the Sultanness's treachery. Custance returns to Rome where she is eventually reunited with the Emperor and her Northumbrian husband. Custance rules Northumbria with Alla, and Maurice eventually becomes Roman Emperor. Assuring religious and political unity, Custance's travels unite Rome, Syria, and England under the banner of one family. Her community transcends the geographic and associated lineal distinctions that inform race in the Middle Ages.

Tools

Geography and lineal descent often underscore the fact that medieval race was characterized by religious and political identity; this chapter takes the examination of religious and political difference as tools for analysis fitting for the *Man of Law's Tale* and texts of its ilk. Religious group membership is integral to medieval race in that it was thought to be discernible by rituals and customs in addition to bodily features including skin color. Rituals and customs were often

religious and political in nature. The tale is a crusading romance, a popular narrative written in the vernacular and “depicting the confrontation of a Christian military power with a non-Christian one in another country because the latter is non-Christian” (Manion 7; Hamel 177-94). The confrontation between a Christian power and non-Christian powers—Syria and Northumbria—is central to the *Man of Law’s Tale* and offers characters whose differences from one another are both religious and political. The tale, like other crusading romances, demands to be understood through the lens of a medieval notion of racial identity that is characterized by religious and political difference.

Using religio-political race as an epistemological tool helps make sense of the religious and political differences that feature in the tale. Religious difference abounds: Custance is a Christian; the sultan, Sultanness, and Syrians are Muslim; and Alla and the other Northumbrians are pagans. Political differences abound as well: Rome is ruled by an emperor, Syria by a sultan, and Northumbria by a king. Each has different relationships with their polities: The Emperor agrees to Custance’s marriage to the sultan only with the intervention “by tretys and embassadrie” [by treaties and ambassadry] of the Pope, “al the chirche” [all the church], and “al the chivalrie” [all the warrior class], but the Emperor does not reach out to them for advice (MLT 233-235). His will is sovereign though he is open to influence. The sultan rules in a parliamentary style when he convenes his privy council in order to “[declare] his entente” to have Custance. He asks them “to shapen . . . som remedye” [to devise some remedy] for his lovesickness (MLT 204-210). The sultan relies heavily on solicited advice. Alla, for his part, rules generously and directly. He is away when Hermengyld is murdered. When Custance stands accused, “The kynges herte of pitee gan agryse” [the king’s heart began to tremble with pity] (MLT 614). He is deeply moved by household members’ attestations that Custance was “evere so vertuous” and “lovyng” toward Hermengyld (MLT 624-630). When a disembodied hand smites the accusing knight and a disembodied voice proclaims Custance’s innocence and her identity as the “doghter of hooly chirche,” Alla converts to Christianity (MLT 669-676). Each ruler’s religious identity correlates roughly with his political style. Alla, with his “gentil herte . . . fulfild of pitee” and his reliance on God’s grace in addition to his own will and advice to reveal truth, is the ruler most amenable to the elision of the difference between a non-Christian and Christian polity (MLT 660). The examination of religious and political differences elucidates the racial nature of the conflicts and resolutions that constitute the *Man of Law’s Tale*. Reading the tale with an eye to religio-political race helps contextualize late medieval England’s comportment toward the world beyond its borders.

Text

Reading the tale for its engagements with politics and religion—two robust conceptual tools but certainly not the only ones—reveals a sophisticated understanding of race in which the borders between groups that appear discrete are shown to be in fact permeable and inconstant. The *Man of Law’s Tale* does not offer the simplistic conclusion that English identity is singularly right for inclusion in the global Christian community. On the contrary, the tale demonstrates that political distinctions often disrupt assumed religious and geographic boundaries, inhering within presumptively unified communities. For example, the Sultanness does not agree with her son’s decision to accept Christianity. She only pretends to agree while she in fact fears that conversion will result in “thraldom to oure bodies and penance, / And afterward in helle to be drawe” (MLT

338-339). What's more, her comportment toward parliamentary politics differs from her son's. While he calls in advisors to help him figure out how to obtain Custance, the Sultanness calls her council in order to tell them how she will proceed and how they will help her (MLT 323-357). The Sultanness's quasi-parliamentary consultation demonstrates political division: the sultan's rule is parliamentary, even if self-interested, while the Sultanness's is absolutist. A similar scene plays out in Northumbria. Though neither Alla nor Donegild act with the help of a council, they represent opposed comportments toward Custance's foreignness: Custance's holiness and her generous pity toward her accuser along with others' entreaties on her behalf causes Alla to respect and marry her. The same characteristics cause Donegild disgust at Custance's "strangeness" and lead her to plot against her son's wife. *The Man of Law's Tale* demonstrates that political differences can readily trump religious and geographic unity. Politics and religion cut across one another, disrupting the coherence of racial categories that inhere in different styles of rule and ideas of divine and human power.

The racial categories the *Man of Law's Tale* explores—Roman Christian, Syrian Muslim, English pagan—are largely the products of the Crusades, and so is Custance. English ideas of the world continued to be informed by the Crusades long after Christendom's hopes of victory ended with the loss of the last crusader stronghold at Acre in 1291. For example, during Chaucer's lifetime, in 1382-3, a "croiserye general" (general crusade) was led by the bishop of Norwich in order to maintain English financial interests in Flanders. Also, John of Gaunt, uncle to King Richard II, launched a crusade in 1386 against Spain to advance his claim, through his wife, to the throne of Castile (Tyerman 334-6, 338-9). The *Man of Law's Tale* draws on textual sources that are the products of the period's crusading culture, including the early fourteenth century Anglo-Norman "Of the Noble Lady Constance" by Oxford Dominican Nicholas Trevet and the later *Confessio Amantis* by Chaucer's contemporary John Gower. Completed around the same time as Chaucer's tale, the *Confessio* also uses Trevet as its source (Correale 279-288). Each version depicts its heroine—Custance in Chaucer's version and Constance in Trevet's and Gower's—as a paragon of feminized apostolic Christianity that is "less coercive, less hierarchical, and more communal" than "masculine" conventional Roman Catholicism (Robertson 143-180). Each version responds to the Crusades by depicting a heroine who transgresses racial categories by abortively transforming Syrian Muslims and successfully transforming English pagans into quasi-Roman Christians.

The heroine's agency responds to the religious and political differences that characterize medieval race. In racial discourse, hierarchies based on skin color are often used to signal the comparative characters and values of individuals and groups. Racism dictates that those higher up in the hierarchy are worthy and honorable while those on its lower rungs are depraved and deficient of good qualities. In the case of the *Man of Law's Tale*, judgments of a group's character are the primary indicators of racial difference without the more obvious skin color hierarchy, and character is expressed in a group's treatment of power. Roman Christians, exemplified by Custance and her father, wield reason and influence rooted in holiness. Syrian Muslims, in the person of the Sultanness, are deceitful, aggressive, and violent. English pagans, in the person of Alla, are reasonable, generous, and predisposed to Christian holiness. There are counterexamples in that the Muslim sultan is rational and willing to convert to Christianity while English king Alla's mother is deceitful and aggressive, but the Sultanness's derogatory example of Islam and King Alla's redeeming presentation of Englishness prevail. In sum, though the tale

does not explicitly present its characters in the embodied black and white forms that often signal race, the tale is constructed upon an ideological platform in which the English are *racially* inclined to accept and practice Roman Christianity because their sovereign's rule is reasonable, generous, and, rather like the Roman Emperor's, open to influence while the Syrians are *racially* inclined to deceitfully and violently reject Roman Christianity. Custance is the catalyst that makes the ineluctability of these differences, and their expression in politics, clear: Custance's presence sets the Sultaness's absolutist treachery in motion and it highlights the rational consideration and receptivity to Christianity that Alla displays. The religio-political nature of race is apparent enough in Chaucer's depictions of different peoples, but the tale taken together with its sources and analogues reveals medieval race to be significantly more complex than even these depictions imply.

Custance's catalysis transcends Chaucer's tale. The passive or active agency in her comportment toward God's power changes across Trevet's, Gower's, and Chaucer's texts, and the changes reveal the complexity of the political and religious structures upon which medieval race stands. The passivity of Chaucer's Custance has prompted readers to consider her a cipher, a zero-value that has no meaning by itself but changes the values of the entities with which it interacts. As I demonstrate below by comparing Trevet's and Gower's heroines, Custance's passive approach, coupled with the divine announcement of her holiness and the possible divine intervention that vanquishes the knight who attempts to rape her, suggests that in the *Man of Law's Tale* crusading agency is God's. God, like the text's Roman emperor and Alla alike, wields a sovereign will that is nonetheless open to influence by the likes of Custance. Custance's submission, rather than positioning her as a zero-value, is a potential change agent; it suggests that Christendom ought to interpret its crusading losses as God's will and submit to it. Chaucer's in particular is a Constance story for a Western Europe whose crusading losses require it to rethink its approach to its eastern Others. Agency is ultimately God's, even if His will admits some influence of other agents. Christendom must adjust to God's will by fashioning itself as a more passive recipient of grace.

The religious and political differences that define eastern identity for western Christians do not escape Trevet, but his heroine's response is far more active and represents a different comportment toward God's sovereignty. Trevet's Constance is put out to sea once she actively and repetitively refuses to give up her Christian faith. Her agency answers the Sultaness's agency when she actively saves herself from rape. Chaucer's Custance is saved by help from "blisful Marie" and it is unclear exactly how she would-be rapist "fil over bord al sodeynly" (MLT 920-922), but Trevet's Constance reasons with her would-be attacker: in order that her two-year-old not witness their intercourse, they must find land where they can copulate unseen. While the knight stands in the front of the ship, looking for land in the distance, "Constance, to safeguard her chastity, came secretly behind his back and pushed him into the sea" (383-394). Like Chaucer's sultan, Trevet's Christian God rules in a parliamentary style: He requires Constance's active participation and decision-making, if not her advice. For Trevet, Christian Europe's agency must answer in kind the brash and violent agency by which Christendom defines its eastern Muslim competitors. In Trevet's Constance story, God's sovereignty requires the active participation of forceful Christian agents. While leaving intact the racial judgment that Muslims are aggressive and violent, Trevet's text suggests that Christians should become more like them in order to beat them at their own game.

Gower's Constance offers a middle ground that questions the racial characterizations in which crusading romances trade. Gower's Constance, like Trevet's, converts the Syrian merchants with "hire words wise / of Cristes feith so full enformed" (606-7). But when threatened with rape, she uses a mix of her own agency *and* divine intervention. While the knight looks out from the boat to make sure no one can see them, Constance, in a move that appears in no other version, prays to God for intervention. "[S]odeinliche [the knight] was out throwe / And dreynt" (1121-1122). Constance's approach—prayer—occupies a liminal space somewhere between the active and the passive. Furthermore, the text does not explicitly state that Constance's prayer is the cause of the knight's ejection. The nature of God's will is indiscernible: it may be absolutist, parliamentary, or somewhere in between. Human agency is equally hard to decipher: Constance is active like the Sultanness even as she is the passive recipient of grace like Alla when he witnesses a divine hand and voice exonerate Custance. Gower's Constance destabilizes the judgments that a medieval English reader might otherwise make: that Muslims are characteristically aggressive and depraved while the Northumbrians, standing in for the English, are necessarily the generous and passive recipients of grace who are predisposed to Christianity. When agency and passivity inhere together in Constance, Gower's narrative troubles the racial categorization of any group as either entirely active or passive, as entirely aggressive and depraved or deserving of grace.

Political organization and religious agency are merely two conceptual sites that are made available when one reads race in the *Man of Law's Tale*. Using race as an analytical tool might also inform readings that consider gender, economics, saintliness, and the sacraments, among other possibilities.

Transformation

Though political and religious differences are perhaps the most prevalent constituents of *medieval* race, skin color—the primary element of modern race—is present, too. The *Man of Law's Tale* may appear unconcerned with race in the modern sense because there is no skin color difference, but a closer look at the tale's sources reveals how elemental phenotypic race is to the Constance narrative. A likely source for Trevet's tale is the late thirteenth- or early fourteenth-century crusading romance *The King of Tars*. The story is basically the same: a Christian princess, the daughter of the king of Tars, is desired by the Muslim Sultan of Damascus. She marries him, conceives a child who is born a lifeless lump of flesh, and convinces him to convert to Christianity. The story diverges when the sultan's skin is described as "blac & lopely" (928). In a conversion miracle, as he is prepared for baptism, his skin "[a] white bicom, þurth Godes gras/ & clere wipouten blame" (929-930). The conversion scene is operative to the narrative's crusading efforts; the sultan's people are forced to convert and, in league with his father-in-law, the Christian king of Tars, he wages war on other non-Christian kings. The *Man of Law's Tale* does not proclaim its sultan's blackness, but it does not disavow it either. If *The King of Tars*, in which the sultan's blackness does not appear until line 928 of some 1240, is any indication, then medieval readers might very well have assumed the Muslim sultan's blackness—whether it is stated or not.

The *Man of Law's Tale* shows medieval race's primary elements to be political and religious difference, though physical difference lurks in the shadows. The transformations that constitute the tale's conclusion are political and religious. The differences between Rome, English

Northumbria, and Syria are elided when Custance and Alla's son Maurice becomes Roman Emperor. Maurice "links two dynastic houses, royal and imperial, in the West and in the East, creating a new blood-pedigree that will furnish an impeccable future genealogy for the re-imagined local community" (Heng 209). The *Man of Law's Tale* and the Constance Group assert England's global influence by grafting English identity onto the history of the Roman Empire in order to create a new English racial identity that enfolds multiple forms of earthly and divine rule. The Roman Empire with its impressive geographical, cultural, and historical reach is no longer only Roman; it is now fully English, too.

Discussion Questions

1. What physical characteristics come to mind when you imagine a person from northern England? from northern Europe generally? from Syria? from elsewhere in the Middle East?
2. What personality traits come to mind when you imagine a person from one of these regions?
3. How do you react when you encounter someone with dark skin who identifies as a European? when you encounter a person who identifies as Middle Eastern or African who appears "white"?
4. Have personal experiences with individuals influenced your answers?
5. Consider your answers in the contexts of politics and religion. Have your political beliefs influenced your answers? Have your religious beliefs? If you answered yes to Question 4, how may your political and religious beliefs have influenced your experiences with individuals?

Exercises

1. *Different and Same*
 - Make three lists—one each for Christianity, Islam, and paganism—and categorize practices, beliefs, and characteristics **you** associate with the religions and their practitioners. These may include material objects such as ritual objects and non-material attributes such as habits of interaction or comportment toward other faith traditions.
 - Consider how **the tale** addresses the items on your lists. Identify the items on your lists that the tale depicts as belonging to a different group, or more groups, than you expected.
2. Politics, Religion, and Race
 1. Compare the actions of the three heroines in episodes other than the near assault by the apostate knight.
 2. Identify how their actions represent different political arrangements.
 3. Identify how their actions represent different comportments to God.
 4. Discuss the implications of the various political arrangements and religious ideas for medieval race.
 5. Discuss whether and how the roles of politics and religion differ between medieval and modern race.

Suggestions for Further Reading:

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