The Villainess Does Damage Control: Cultural Rescue in the Man of Law’s Tale

Lucy Esplin
Brigham Young University, ljesplin@byu.edu

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Women are born to thraldom and penance, 
And to ben under mannes governance” (Chaucer 287–288). These words, uttered by the Roman Princess Constance as her Emperor father orders her to go to Islamic Syria and marry a Sultan, reveal much about the role of women in this particular narrative. If this is the female role, how are women in this tale used?

In the late fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote his masterwork, *The Canterbury Tales*, a satirical-frame narrative centered on English society. The tales follow a group of pilgrims spanning a wide range of English society, who engage in a storytelling contest as they embark on their pilgrimage. One story is the “Man of Law’s Tale,” a crusader romance that follows the pious Constance in her missionary-like journeys. The tale begins with a Muslim Sultan in Syria who, after hearing about the famed beauty and virtue of Constance, negotiates with Constance’s Roman emperor father for her hand in marriage, giving up Muslim control of Jerusalem and converting to Christianity (Chaucer 225–245). Upon Constance’s arrival in Syria, the Sultaness, the Sultan’s own mother, violently ends their engagement. This devout Muslim woman rebels against the mass Christian conversion in her court by killing her son and banishing Constance to the sea. Many readers
see these events as a storybook cliché as the beautiful and innocent heroine falls victim to the evil old hag. However, as I will explore later, these two women are more similar than they first appear. So how does Chaucer take these two similar women and evoke such completely opposite reactions from readers? And for what purpose? I argue that Chaucer foils Constance and the Sultaness to incite fear toward the otherness the Sultaness represents. This fear then serves the ultimate purpose of uniting his audience of Christian men in an attempt at cultural rescue.

Although my claims are centered on Chaucer as an author, I acknowledge that these motivations are layered, and to a degree interwoven, with those of the narrator, the Man of Law. In the general prologue where Chaucer introduces each pilgrim, the Man of Law’s portrait consists mostly of the lawyer’s professional experience and prowess before moving on to less flattering suggestions. One of these observations is that the Man of Law is a buyer of land—a vague statement with a harsh implication that he aspires to a higher social class. In Chaucer’s day, social mobility was limited and aspirations to higher, more innate social classes were deemed deplorable. Mann explains that this aspiration insinuates that he “schemes to increase his estates at the expense of his neighbors” (88). Sanok however notes that despite the elitist mindset of the narrator, it is interesting that this tale “aims to restore a sense of community and the parameters of the storytelling contest after their dissolution across the first four Canterbury Tales . . . a sort of ‘reparative tale’” (Sanok 90). As previous pilgrims have told tales that shock and divide the party, the Man of Law aims to restore and repair the solidarity within the group. It is through this aspirational narrator that Chaucer takes seemingly disparate perspectives and characters to make a tale of unity, at least for some.

In this essay, I first explore my argument that Chaucer places the Sultaness in opposition to Constance in order to draw parallels between the women. While the critical conversation has long been intrigued by similarities between the two women, my argument finds that it is their projected temperamental and religious differences that inform Chaucer’s purpose in foiling them. The tale’s perspective on these women is informed by the cultural context fogging Britain during the fourteenth century, including unflattering societal perspectives on foreigners, non-Christian religions, and even women. As the Sultaness and Constance interact with this perspective and ensuing expectations, we see how their disparate actions
lead to the moral unification of the audience. From this point, I will explore my second argument that Chaucer’s careful vilification of the Sultaness aids his underlying goal of restoring the cultural unity that was disturbed by the Alexandrian Crusade in 1365. The Alexandrian Crusade and the lingering distaste of the First Crusade left many in Britain in a state of moral and cultural dilemma. By analyzing Chaucer in the cultural and historical context of his life and of his literary work, we can consider motivation and discover purpose in his depiction of Constance and the Sultaness.

My argument will employ Floya Anthias’s idea of hierarchical otherness in the framework of positionality to contribute to the critical conversation surrounding the “Man of Law’s Tale.” Positionality is understood as the relationship between individual identities and hierarchies of power. Floya Anthias argues for a framework to understand positionality and study social inequalities in terms of gender, ethnicity, and class. She argues that these divisions share common features in how differences and positions are categorized. Anthias explores these positions as possibilities of discrimination but also points out that “to be proud to be woman/feminine, black/minority ethnic . . . is to refuse the attribution of a hierarchical otherness” (520). While systematic societal discrimination is very much alive, identity is rooted in individual situation. Anthias goes on to explain that identities have different levels of value, and they also place differently on a pole of negative to positive. However, when people choose to reject their hierarchical otherness that results from these power intersections, they take advantage of their multilayered identity and reject their assumed social positioning. These principles are apparent in Chaucer’s work as each character’s identity dictates how the audience expects them to act. The concept of positionality illuminates the tension in the “Man of Law’s Tale” by exposing the tension between the expectations of how certain characters should act based on their intersecting identities and the reality of their behavior and social positioning. This tension is apparent when analyzing the characters of the Sultaness and Constance.

Another method my argument in part relies on is the rhetoric of proximity as originally coined by Jonathan Dollimore and later adopted and expanded upon by Susan Schibanoff. The rhetoric of proximity is a social theory where groups of people are categorized as “us,” “inlaw,” or “outlaw.” Schibanoff asserts that it is not anachronistic to apply this theory to the relationships and characters in the “Man of Law’s Tale” as the notion
is familiar although the term is new. In Schibanoff’s theory, the first group or “us” is defined by the social norm that is being presented. There is then the “outlaw” who embodies characteristics that directly oppose that of the societal norm. Then there is the “inlaw” who falls somewhere in the middle, close enough to show similarities to both parties but different enough to cause discomfort. The rhetoric of proximity is best exemplified in the medieval heresy discourse. In this discourse, the “inlaw” is seen as a greater danger to the “us” or societal norm than the “outlaw.” As opposed to the lesser danger of obvious wrongdoing, this greater danger of the “inlaw” comes from perceived infiltration and perversion of familiar and upheld values. The exemplary parties in the medieval heresy discourse categorize mainstream Christians as “us,” non-believers as “outlaws,” and heretics as “inlaws” (Schibanoff).

The Sultaness

The ultimate victim of both aforementioned methods of social estrangement is the Sultaness, as her character incites a common fear toward the otherness that she represents. On paper, the Sultaness and Constance have a lot in common. They are aristocratic women in male-dominated societies, and they both display unwavering devotion to their respective faiths. However, “while [Constance] is lauded by the narrator for her constancy,—to such a degree that she is nearly transformed into the personification of it—the Sultaness is portrayed negatively obdurate” (Sanok 91). To understand why Constance is applauded where the Sultaness is vilified, we must understand where the Sultaness deviates from Chaucer’s social norm.

In her first appearance, the Sultaness is introduced “first as ‘Sowdanesse’—a term that simultaneously marks (and thus links) her foreignness to her femininity” (Sanok 90). In fact, this is the only title or name the audience is ever given for her. Other accounts of the “Man of Law’s Tale,” such as Chaucer’s source material in Trevet’s Chronicle as translated by R. M. Correale, employ the word Saracen to describe the Sultaness. This is a degrading and catch-all term that refers to those living in Africa of Arab and/or Muslim identity. The word Saracen also has a complex background, shrouded in the European medieval belief of humorism, which argues that one’s location determines a person’s outward appearance, temperament,
and level of civility. Due to the Saracen’s African home being south of Britain, the English cultivated the “racial judgment that Muslims are aggressive and violent” (Whitaker). With the widespread notion that Arab Muslims are dangerous, the Sultaness has already been othered from her first introduction.

The Sultaness is also othered through the rejection of her feminine role. When male figures in Constance and the Sultaness’s lives exert power over them, they have very different responses. As Princess Constance is ordered to go to the “Barbre nacioun” to marry the newly baptized Sultan, she exhibits a remarkable degree of submission (Chaucer 281). Constance carefully adheres to societal conventions according to her familial position as a daughter and welcomes her familial position as a subject to her father, the Emperor of Rome—even though it is obviously not her preference to leave Rome. Constance perfectly exemplifies devotion to her designated feminine and political position and the responsibilities involved. While Constance spends her time in the narrative demonstrating a Christian and feminine passivity, the Sultaness displays treacherous ambition. In light of the Sultan’s infatuation with rumors of Constance, he converts to Christianity, prompting the Sultaness to feign conversion while simultaneously planning a coup. Her actions demonstrate what would have been considered dangerously mannish qualities in the medieval setting. While she is older and assumedly holds a more secure position in her court than the newly arrived Constance, there are still social expectations for her to behave similarly to how Constance has thus far: gracefully and submissively accepting the fate decreed for her by a man in a higher social position. By staging a coup in rejection of her political and social better—as well as the sultanate’s future—she is rejecting her hierarchical otherness and her subordinate positions. Using the rhetoric of proximity as a lens, we can categorize men as “us,” women as “outlaws,” and mannish women as “inlaws” (Schibanoff). As the Sultaness disowns her position as a Sultaness and takes on the role of the Sultan, she rejects her feminine role in favor of the masculine. This others her from her womanly role, marking her as a deceptive outlier.

In addition to the danger associated with being mannish, especially as a Saracen, there was also a European idea that “Saracen bodies were thought to be open to assimilation: through conversion, the female Saracen was especially available to the Christian community, her pollution erased both through a change in faith and through the physical bond of marriage within the Christian community” (Akbari 4). From this insight, we know that due
to her positionality, the Sultaness is expected to be vulnerable to Christian conversion and submission. However, the Sultaness again rejects audience expectations of her positionality as a Arab Muslim woman. She proves herself to be impenetrable to Christian conversion and unwilling to erase her “hethen” (Chaucer 378) nature.

Another way the Sultaness deviates from the actions, or lack thereof, of Constance is in their familial roles as mothers. Later in the tale we see Constance make her way from Syria to the land of Northumbria, where she marries King Alla and has a son. At the conclusion of the narrative this child is dubbed heir to the Christian Roman Empire, an event after which Constance conveniently dies. Shyama Rajendran argues that the “Man of Law’s Tale” frames white, Christian, men as the only viable reproductive future. Rajendran furthers her argument that the narrative treats Constance as a reproductive prop, existing only to produce this viable future for her father’s empire. However, while Constance fulfills her ‘womanly’ duty of producing an heir and getting out of the way, the Sultaness does the exact opposite. In favor of gaining political power and retaining her faith, the Sultaness orders the murder of her son, making her motherly role obsolete. Instead of remaining within the feminine bounds as a reproductive prop by producing a male heir who will continue a tradition of power, she kills her son and heir, taking that place herself. The result of these actions is Chaucer othering the Sultaness so she is seen as a threat to the Man of Law’s audience of pilgrims, and Chaucer’s audience of English society.

The Sultaness comes to represent everything Chaucer and the Man of Law’s audiences fear by representing the wrong race and by rejecting all roles that her gender, political standing, familial position, and religion demand. Meanwhile, Constance is relatively powerless throughout the whole narrative. She suffers in silence for most of her life, but by the end, she is embraced by the audience and lauded for perfectly fulfilling her roles as a woman, reproductive prop, and political subject. When foiled against Constance, the Sultaness comes to represent the danger of being other and causes the “us” (Schibanoff), white Christian men, to unite against her threat.
The Alexandrian Crusade

“What sholde us tyden of this newe lawe, But thraldom to oure bodies and penance,” (Chaucer 337–338). These words, declared by the Sultaness about her forced conversion, echo the words spoken by Constance when sent away. These two women in man’s thraldom carry out the express purpose of uniting the audience for both the Man of Law and Chaucer. In doing so, the Sultaness spurns the boundaries of her positionality and reveals the central purpose of the tale: to undo cultural damage incurred by the Alexandrian Crusade. Chaucer’s method, uniting his audience under a fraternity that is based on this othering of certain people and characteristics, would have been compelling for many who were raised in the aftermath of the Alexandrian Crusade. This time was marked by questions of what it meant to be Christian, especially in the context of acknowledging that genocide had been committed in the name of the Christian God.

The Alexandrian Crusade was led by King Peter I of Cyprus in 1365, with a Christian cause acting as a thin veil for an economic opportunity to raid one of the greatest cities in the Middle East. History indeed reveals the ‘crusade’ “ended in a massacre of thousands of unsuspecting, undefended innocents of all ages; the looting of Muslim and Coptic Christian tombs and holy shrines for personal gain; and the wholesale destruction of a prosperous, cosmopolitan city” (Lewis 353). The crusaders left days later in ships sitting low in the water, heavy with stolen treasures. Accounts of the horrors suffered in Alexandria spread through the Middle East and into Europe, and were received with disgust. Even Francis Petrarch wrote to Boccaccio that the knights “followed the pious king not out of piety but out of greed, departed once they had collected the booty, and, fulfilling their selfish vow, made him incapable of fulfilling his pious vow” (qtd. in Lewis 353). Harsh repercussions followed the campaign as Arab Christians were punished and trade between the Middle East and Europe slowed. These events built upon the existing cultural trauma imposed by events in the First Crusade, such as cannibalism committed by Christian knights. Altogether, the Christian society that Chaucer was a part of was in shock.

The cultural response to this shock was the genre of romance—more specifically, crusader romances. Geraldine Heng informs us that a crusader romance “performs a dazzling cultural rescue by successively passing historical
trauma through stages of memorial transfiguration, so that historical event finally issues, and is commemorated, as triumphant celebration in the form of a romance narrative in which the spoor of history and the track of fantasy creation become one, inextricably conjoined” (3). Evidence of this purpose pervades the “Man of Law’s Tale” as we follow Constance through movements mimicking a crusade. Contrary to previous campaigns, Constance is successful in converting many to Christianity and remaining peaceful, even to the point of becoming the victim of violent Muslims—the opposite situation that Alexandrian crusaders found themselves in. This manipulated narrative releases Christians from the shame of the crusades and excuses the belief that foreigners and Muslims are threats. Through the events of the tale, we see that Constance has won “a great religious and political victory . . . with the sexual conquest of the Sultan” (Heng 189) before becoming the saintly victim to their otherness of the Sultaness. Cultural rescue is achieved by skillfully transforming events, portraying the Sultaness as an other—a symbol embodying elements to be feared and resisted.

As readers of The Canterbury Tales, the “Man of Law’s Tale” acts as a glue that restores solidarity between members of the pilgrimage. As readers of Chaucer, the tale is a balm to the cultural damage wrought by the Alexandrian Crusade, and is a call to European Christians and British society to rally against cultural threats. Overall, Chaucer uses the conflict between Constance and the Sultaness to bring together and strengthen his target audience. This rhetorical strategy of banding together by othering a perceived enemy was not invented by Chaucer. It has not died out either, the more evident examples in historic dictators and propaganda, and more subtle invitations found in politician speeches. One of the greatest evidences is the conflict within the United States as political parties vilify and fearmonger against each other, making neighbors the other. This ultimately begs the question, what ideas are you being invited to join ranks against?


