

# The BBC “Man of Law’s Tale”: Faithful to the Tradition

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The history of Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Man of Law’s Tale” is complicated, as is the narrative itself. Part love story, part saint’s life, Chaucer’s tale of the extremely pious, self-effacing Custance exhibits a pathos that is little appreciated by modern readers.<sup>1</sup> While literary audiences in the medieval period were “unusually receptive” to deeply emotional tales (Frank 179), since the late nineteenth century critics have generally responded with “little sympathy, sometimes even with hostility” to the passive and deeply religious Custance (Keiser 121). After a period of relative critical neglect, during which critics focused on the flaws of the storyteller as a way to excuse the perceived dullness of the story, the tale began to receive greater attention as feminist and new historicist critics concentrated on the questions it raises regarding race and difference.<sup>2</sup> As Carolyn Dinshaw points out, by the 1970s Cus-

<sup>1</sup>For an overview of the critical tradition of the tale, see A. S. G. Edwards.

<sup>2</sup>Carolyn Dinshaw outlines the political response to the “Man of Law’s Tale”; Chauncey Wood articulates the long-held view that the tale “as a whole is a satire—not on Custance but on the Man of Law” (19); and Elizabeth Robertson enunciates a third important view, that Custance represents “a form of nonvio-

tance was “ripe for feminist reconsideration” (276), though feminist readers have differed on questions of Custance’s agency and status. Most recently, the tale has attracted interest as an artifact of cultural conflict between Islam and the West.<sup>3</sup>

With its out-of-fashion heroine, its atmosphere of Christian pathos, and its complex critical history, the “Man of Law’s Tale” seems an odd choice for television adaptation. Nonetheless, it was selected as one of the BBC “Canterbury Tales,” a six-part series broadcast on BBC-1 in 2003 and since then on BBC America. This series, set in modern-day England, is a re-envisioning of six of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*.<sup>4</sup> The setting, structure, and plot elements of the BBC adaptation of “Man of Law’s Tale” differ substantially from the medieval version; even the race of the heroine and the spelling of her name are different.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, the two versions share key elements which connect contemporary sensibilities, emotionally and intellectually, with the medieval story. In T. S. Eliot’s sense of the term, the BBC version follows the tradition of Chaucer’s original, which is, of course, itself part of a larger tradition of stories of Constance.<sup>6</sup> Acutely sensitive to issues of race and culture, the BBC version prompts a rereading of the Chaucerian text in a historicist vein; offering a sympathetic treatment of the tale’s religious aspects, it uncovers, as in a palimpsest, the appeal that is lost to most modern readers. Because it retains and distills critical elements of Chaucer’s tale, each version enriches an understanding of the other. In this sense, the BBC “Man of Law’s Tale” is faithful to

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more communal than, and implicitly challenging and potentially dangerous to” the institutional church (144).

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Kathleen Davis and Cathy Hume.

<sup>4</sup>Four of the episodes are named for and to various degrees retell some of Chaucer’s more popular tales: those of the Knight, the Miller, the Wife of Bath, and the Pardoner. A fifth, entitled “The Sea Captain’s Tale,” is based on “The Shipman’s Tale,” a fabliau. “The Man of Law’s Tale” is the series’ only representative of Chaucer’s tales of religious and pathetic appeal.

<sup>5</sup>In the BBC version Custance becomes Constance.

<sup>6</sup>The major sources of Chaucer’s tale are the *Chronicles* of Nicholas Trevet and John Gower’s “Tale of Constance” from his *Confessio Amantis* (1390).

the tradition of the Constance legend.

It is important, however, to distinguish this idea of faithfulness from what film critics call the “fidelity” of a screen version to its literary original. Brian McFarlane notes that fidelity “depends on a notion of the text as having and rendering up to the (intelligent) reader a single, correct ‘meaning’ which the filmmaker has either adhered to or in some sense violated or tampered with” (8). Fidelity in this sense implies an exact correlation between a work’s expression in two different media, a precision which, as McFarlane explains, is impossible. This is especially so in adaptations of *The Canterbury Tales*, which often omit the characteristics of the storyteller and the byplay among tellers and tales. It is preferable, therefore, to view the BBC “Man of Law’s Tale” not as a copy or even an adaptation per se but as a separate text; thus, its screenwriter, Olivia Hetreed, calls the episode “an original piece inspired by Chaucer.” As Grahame Smith says of filmed Shakespeare plays, the BBC “Man of Law’s Tale” can be understood as “a reading, a rendering, of the original rather than an adaptation in the strict sense” (37).

The idea that film or television can be faithful to a literary tradition is well expressed in Neil Sinyard’s argument that, at its best, adaptation of books for the screen is

an activity of literary criticism . . . a critical essay which stresses what it sees as the main theme. Like a critical essay, the film adaptation selects some episodes, excludes others, offers preferred alternatives. . . . In the process, like the best criticism, it can throw new light on the original. (119)

Hetreed’s version of the “Man of Law’s Tale” and Chaucer’s narrative may be considered companion pieces, instantiations of the Constance story, resonating with each other in essential ways.<sup>7</sup>

A brief comparison demonstrates that the BBC “Man of Law’s Tale”

<sup>7</sup>Speaking of filmed adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays, Sarah Cardwell posits that each adaptation can be seen as “a sort of ‘myth,’ an ur-text that stands outside and before each retelling of the story, and . . . contains the most fundamental parts of the tale without which an adaptation would lose

exhibits little “fidelity” to Chaucer’s text in the formalist sense. In Chaucer’s story, Syrian merchants tell their sultan of the beauty and virtue of the Roman emperor’s daughter, Custance; deeply affected, the sultan plans to convert to Christianity to marry her. The wedding plans are disrupted by the sultan’s mother, who orders that Christian visitors and converts from Islam be slaughtered at a banquet table. Custance, the only survivor, is sent to sea in a rudderless ship, supplied with clothing, food, and a “certein tresor” (l. 442). Washing ashore in Northumbria, Custance is taken in by a constable and his wife, Hermengyld, who convert to Christianity through Custance’s example.

A “yong knyght” (l. 585), who lusts after Custance but cannot seduce her, kills Hermengyld and frames Custance, leaving “the bloody knyf” nearby (l. 601). Custance is brought before the king, Alla, who is moved to compassion for her and has a “Britoun book” (l. 666), a Celtic collection of the gospels, brought forth. When the lying knight swears upon it, a divine force strikes him down. This miracle converts many, including Alla, who marries Custance. When Alla departs for Scotland, however, his mother, Donegild, plots against her daughter-in-law, forging letters that send her again into exile. At one point during this sea voyage, Custance is assaulted on a heathen coast by a “theef, that hadde reneyed oure creance” (l. 915). With the help of prayer and Custance’s struggling, the assailant is thrown overboard. At length Custance is rescued, and she and her son, Maurice, reunite with her father and Alla, who had traveled to Rome to do penance, having executed his mother for forging the letters. Custance and Alla enjoy only a “litel while” of worldly joy before he dies (l. 1132); after his death she returns to Rome with her son, who succeeds his grandfather as emperor.

In the BBC “Man of Law’s Tale,” Constance Musa, a young Niger-

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its identity” (26). She calls each production a “meta-text,” an instantiation of an elemental story. If one adopts the language of film for the medium of television, then both Chaucer’s tale and the BBC production function as

ian woman, refugee from a passing freighter, is found in the Thames estuary in a tiny, coffin-shaped dinghy. Elements of Constance's traumatic past emerge as she suffers from nightmares and posttraumatic episodes, presented as flashbacks to a confusing scene of violence and chaos in Nigeria. Constance is discovered by marine archaeologist Mark Constable and brought to his house. Mark's African-born wife, Nicky, quickly becomes attached to Constance and seeks to protect her from arrest and deportation. Like Chaucer's Custance, Constance is a Christian—a small wooden cross found in her hand is nearly her only possession—and while in town with Nicky she is drawn toward a small evangelical church. Despite Nicky's warning that "it won't be open," the church is indeed open and a service in progress. The minister, himself an African, welcomes Constance to the small, multiracial congregation.

Passed off as Nicky's niece, Constance meets Mark's young boss, Alan King, at a party at the home of Alan's Iranian mother, Leila. Constance speaks openly about her faith with Alan, who jokes that he and God practice "safe religion—like safe sex, but less fun." For Constance, however, religion is no joking matter: "Safe religion—it sounds fine, but I do not think it exists. . . . God is a dangerous lover." Hints of Constance's future begin to emerge when Nicky takes a photo of Constance and Alan at the party; a flash-forward shows Alan, now wearing a wedding ring, holding the photo at the British Embassy in Nigeria. Constance and Alan develop their relationship during outings on his sailboat but share no more physical contact than a chaste kiss.

Constance's faith attracts Nicky, though decidedly not Mark, to the small church and its gentle minister. Also in the congregation is an awkward young Englishman, Terry, who grows jealous of Constance's evolving relationship with Alan. Accusing Constance of thinking only of "sex, sex, all the time," Terry assaults her in the Constables' home. He knifes Nicky in his frenzy and then testifies against Constance when she is tried for Nicky's murder. Shocked that Terry, a believer, has lied under oath, Constance insists that he be called to account for swearing falsely on the Bible; she is vindicated when he breaks down in the

courtroom. Acquitted of the murder charge, Constance marries Alan, but their plans for her to return briefly to Nigeria as part of the process of legal immigration break down when Leila intercepts Constance's phone calls and forges an e-mail from Constance to Alan. When Mark advises Alan about Leila's interference, Alan, traveling to Nigeria to search for Constance, finds her and their baby, Isaac, after much effort. With the viewer he learns that religious strife was the cause of Constance's exile; her Muslim father and Christian mother had been killed in the sectarian tinderbox of Kaduna, her home city.

Clever plays on Chaucer's characters' names make an overt, if superficial, connection between the tales. King Alla becomes Alan King, the constable and his wife are the Constable family, and Custance becomes Constance, as in versions of the story that predate Chaucer's tale. Just as Custance's past is unknown to the Northumbrians, who do not understand her speech, so Constance's is unknown to others and herself, as she cannot remember key elements of her traumatic past. Some plot elements are also common to both stories, including conniving mothers and false oaths and messages. Several subtler parallels also link the two versions; a primary example is the physical presence and power of the Bible. In Chaucer's story the murderous knight swears on a Celtic gospel, which is jarringly out of place in pagan Northumbria. Two Bibles appear in the BBC "Man of Law's Tale": one, the small Bible used by Constance, is itself a curious artifact in secular, post-Christian England. When Mark and Alan interrupt a bible study at the Constable house, the thoroughly secular Mark objects to Nicky's hosting the group: "We can't go on pretending this is a normal situation!" Alan lingers a moment, holding Constance's hand as she fingers her small Bible. The second Bible appears in the courtroom when Terry is sworn in to testify against Constance. Terry's assurance begins to crumble, and he nervously fingers the Bible when Constance's lawyer grills him on the meaning of his oath: "Everything you've told us is a lie, isn't it, Terry? . . . You betrayed your friend, your faith, and your God."

One may also recognize in Terry a conflation of two of Custance's enemies in Chaucer's version. He resembles both the "yong knyght" who kills Hermengyld and the "theef" who physically attacks Cu-stance on

her second voyage of exile. Like both of Custance's attackers, Terry lusts after Constance, in sharp opposition to the agnostic Alan, who desires Constance but respects her chastity. Terry claims to be a Christian, but, as the lawyer points out, he has betrayed his faith—a close translation of Chaucer's "reneyed . . . creance." In the modern story, divine retribution comes not in the form of a lightning strike but in the lawyer's questions, but her line of questioning is entirely the result of Constance's faith. For Custance and Con-stance alike, belief is enough to conquer the enemy.

Another illuminating parallel occurs in shared imagery of the ship. Ships and boats appear frequently in both versions, setting up a pattern of resonances and pointing out differences between Custance and Constance. As V. A. Kolve ably demonstrates, the single most charged image in Chaucer's tale is that of the ship, a significant image in Christian art. Custance sets out for Syria in a ship filled with church dignitaries which, according to Kolve, Chaucer's contemporaries would have recognized as the "Ship of the Church" (308). Custance is set adrift by the Syrians in a "ship al steerelees" (l. 439) and is sent out again in the same ship when Alla seems to have commanded it. As Kolve explains, in both trips Custance, "affirming God's governance and seeking no direction of her own," allows God "to become her steersman" (330). Kolve argues that Custance is not entirely allegorical—"she is finally 'Custance,' not Constancy per se" (339)—but in her voyages she is iconic, static, unchanging.

The BBC "Man of Law's Tale" keeps the motif of the ship and its voyages but in a far different vein. Constance takes four trips aboard Alan's sailboat, which help to distance her from her first terrifying sea journey. On the first of these she confesses her fear, explaining that "the Fulani are a desert people," but happily reports to Nicky that she "did not get sick." On her next trips she learns to help Alan sail, earning his praise as the ship's "crew." These lessons mark the greatest difference between Constance and Chaucer's pathetic heroine. Constance, despite her more allegorical name, exhibits a far greater agency than Custance, who travels passively wherever the waves take her. The camera lingers on Alan and Constance's hands on the rud-

der, emphasizing that the sailboat is no “steerelees” ship; Alan also teaches Constance to handle the sails. After their third excursion Constance allows Alan to kiss her: “I think kissing like that is OK here.” In the final sailboat scene Constance and Alan consummate their marriage and plan her reimmigration process. These boat trips give Constance vivacity and reality, even as they mark symbolically her steps in recovering from trauma.

The two heroines’ spiritual influence suggests another link between the two versions, although Constance’s is more limited. In Chaucer’s tale Custance converts many through her mien and behavior, but in the BBC version Constance converts only Nicky, and even that is subject to dispute.<sup>8</sup> Alan, something of a skeptic, acknowledges Constance’s faith in a jocular fashion: “Save me,” he mocks on his knees the night of the bible study. When in prison, Constance—who does not remember Nicky’s death—declares that Nicky “is with God.” Alan’s response is subtle, not revealing anything of his own belief: “I know—I’m sorry—I know this is hard for you.” Is Alan’s “I know” a statement of belief that Nicky is with God, or does he merely interrupt his expression of sympathy? The ambiguity of his remark is Chaucerian in its elusiveness. In contrast and unlike the constable of Chaucer’s tale, Mark is not at all affected by his guest’s piety. While Constance attributes his rescue of her to her belief that “God was watching over me,” Mark has a blunter take: “You were damned lucky.” He quickly grows impatient with Constance and jealous of her closeness to Nicky and then vehemently derides the Christians at the bible study as “dregs” and labels Constance a “psychopath” who had cast a spell over Nicky, Alan, and himself.

Despite Mark’s antipathy, the religious element of the BBC “Man of Law’s Tale” is more muted than in Chaucer’s version. While Constance’s Christianity is certainly central to the plot, she is no missionary, and the evangelical minister’s role is to welcome, not to proselytize. In fact, the minister’s preaching and prayers function largely as commentary on the events of the story, much as do the Man of Law’s more tedious and didactic asides in Chaucer’s tale. For exam-

<sup>8</sup>Constance remembers Nicky as “an angel,” but Alan counters that she was

ple, in his first appearance the minister leads a prayer asking forgiveness for times the worshipers have not “welcomed strangers among us” and let “anger and passions rule us.” In a bible study at the Constable house the minister’s text is Matthew 10:21–22, an apt commentary on the Christian-Muslim conflict in Nigeria as well as upon the impending violence within his congregation: “Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death.”<sup>9</sup> This scene casts new light on the Man of Law’s rhetorical digressions in Chaucer’s tale, where the Man of Law includes such preacherly asides as “Who fedde the Egipcien Marie in the cave, / Or in desert? No wight but Crist, sanz faille” (ll. 500–01). It is possible for viewers of the BBC version to overlook the scriptural references, or to ignore them, but they offer a textual and cultural interplay that enriches the story as a whole. The minister’s quotation of scripture also invites readers to rethink the perceived dullness of Chaucer’s tale and its teller.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most subtle bonds between Chaucer’s tale and the BBC production is their complex treatments of time. Neither version is recounted in linear fashion, and the nonlinear patterns of narrative diminish their respective audiences’ sense of order and control. In Chaucer’s version the cyclic patterns of romance create this disorientation. Custance sets out to sea again and again, as if trapped in a dream—six voyages in all, though only two are voyages of exile. She faces one female antagonist after another and battles assault and injustice again and again. Chaucer’s tale also oscillates between chronicle history and salvation history as well as between narrative and commentary. The result is a dislocation for readers in the timelessness of

<sup>9</sup>Appropriately, this evangelical gathering uses the New International Version.

<sup>10</sup>The Christian commentary of the BBC version may also bring renewed attention to the Latin marginalia in Chaucer’s tale. Manuscript evidence suggests it is an integral part of Chaucer’s text, for two of the most authoritative *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts, Ellesmere and Hengwrt, contain this marginalia in the scribe’s hand. Not all scholars concur, however, on whether these are Chaucer’s own marginal comments, and printed editions tend to ignore

romance, so that they do not so much comprehend Custance's story as retain significant images from her life. The BBC version achieves a similar disorientation through what Hetreed calls a "folded time structure," with sequences of brief scenes set variously in the Nigerian past, the Nigerian future, and the English present. Sights and sounds are juxtaposed: a human scream in the midst of Nigerian terror becomes the screech of a seagull in the estuary. A shot of Alan crouching in a locked room in Nigeria is immediately followed by one of Constance crouched in an English jail cell. These sharp juxtapositions disrupt the linear energies of the narrative and create in the audience a sense of being out of time and out of control.

In both the written and televised versions of the story, this dislocation of the audience encourages a focus on a few powerful images as a way of restoring some order to the narrative. For example, in the BBC version the small wooden cross which Constance is holding in the dinghy appears at various points, including when Constance is ill, in danger, and in prison. There is no cross in Chaucer's tale, since Custance is identified as Christian from the beginning. There is, however, a parallel with the BBC production: Custance brings to Northumbria a "certein tresor," which is not further identified. The image of Constance's cross enhances one's understanding of this "tresor." Constance's cross, worth little in material terms, to her is indeed a treasure, a symbol of faith. This visible, if humble, treasure which Constance takes with her into exile suggests that the unspecified "tresor" of Chaucer's tale may be a spiritual treasure, the gift of belief, as Kolve has suggested (317-18). Chaucer's description is certainly more ambiguous than is Gower's in his "Tale of Constance" in which the ship is "vitailed full" (l. 711), and his Constance is found in her ship with "gret richesse" (l. 737). If one reads Chaucer's version through a Gowerian perspective, the "tresor" seems to be material; seen in light of the BBC episode, the passage suggests that the most significant treasures that Custance brings to Northumbria are her faith and example. Thus, the parallel between the two versions illuminates different possible interpretations, enriching both stories.

Placing Chaucer's tale in dialogue with the BBC production dem-on-

strates the value of both the earliest and the most recent responses to Chaucer's story. Pity and sympathy, political sensitivity and social awareness are evoked by the stories' complex treatment of difference, race, and alienation. The BBC version of the Constance story raises the question of who is foreign. Certainly, Constance is a stranger in England, and Alan is one, painfully so, in Nigeria. Since almost all the Christians in the televised version are from Africa, Christianity is itself an alien thing in England, and the minister who welcomes the stranger is himself a foreigner, both geographically and culturally, in his small church. The only unattractive Christian, in fact, is Terry, the Englishman. Being foreign, however, does not make one virtuous: Leila is a foreigner but she closes her heart to Constance. Nor does being African: in Nigeria the same priest who shelters Constance when she is pregnant and alone extorts thousands of naira (a few hundred dollars) from Alan. These facts bring the audience back, once again, to Chaucer's story of Custance as a Christian in a godless place, an interloper in a strange society. To the Man of Law—and to many readers afterward—Custance is a secular saint, but at the same time she is unquestionably an avatar of imposed cultural values.

There are other, more complicated aspects to the themes of foreignness and xenophobia in the BBC production. Leila, whose character combines elements of the sultan's mother and King Alla's mother, is plainly racist. She complains that Nicky will bring "relatives by the boatload" to England, and she undermines her son's marriage by sending false messages; yet she assumes a marginal and therefore privileged identity as an immigrant from Iran, struggling to be "at home" in England. She maintains her overlarge house for Alan's sake—"it's your birthright," she tells him—and uses her outsider status to defend herself against Alan's charge that she is racist: "How could I be?"<sup>11</sup> Mark rescues Constance from the boat yet thereby becomes an alien in his own house. Nicky shares Constance's Christianity, but Mark does not. Al-

<sup>11</sup>In considering the complexities of Leila's situation, one should remember the long tradition in Chaucer criticism of sympathy, albeit limited, for the sultan's mother. She at least defends her faith, unlike her son, who converts

though their ethnic backgrounds differ—Constance is Fulani and Nicky Yoruba—Nicky reassures her that “[a]s long as we are both black, no English person would question” the idea that they are aunt and niece. As women, as Africans, and as Christians, Nicky and Constance forge a mother-daughter intimacy from which Mark, white, male, and English, is excluded. Perhaps it is defensiveness, not prejudice, that leads him to reject Constance and the little Christian gathering in his living room.

A final point of comparison between the two versions of the tale combines the pathetic and political appeals found in the Constance story. In her second exile Custance brings with her the “litel child” Maurice, “wepyng in her arm” (l. 834); Chaucer’s audience knows from history that he will be emperor of Rome. At the end of the BBC production the King family—Alan, Constance, and their baby Isaac—is reunited; it is unknown, however, what will become of the baby. As much black as white, a foreigner and unwelcome but at home in his native Africa, Isaac is a physical representation of the fissures that divide black and white, Western and African. But, as Constance tells Alan, Isaac lives up to his name, which means “he laughs.” Constance says that he laughs often and “for no good reason at all,” like his father. Perhaps this laughter echoes the “joye after wo” with which the Man of Law ends Chaucer’s tale (l. 1161); certainly, the episode ends with the family reunited and, in a flashback, Alan and Mark reconciled after the death of Nicky. Then again, Isaac’s laughter, like his name, may reflect the “litel while” that “joye of this world” lasted for Chaucer’s Alla and Custance (ll. 1132–33). Isaac’s name, of course, calls to mind another improbable child, that born to Abraham and Sarah. Genesis 17:19–21 refers to God’s “covenant” with Isaac and the “great nation” to be born to Ishmael. In baby Isaac’s name, in his very existence, is embodied the still unresolved conflict between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria and between differing systems of belief in the developed and developing worlds. The BBC “Man of Law’s Tale” thus ends with an irreducible ambiguity—a most faithful keeping of the Chaucerian tradition.

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