

CHAUCER'S DE-COLONIZED CUSTANCE

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

August 2014

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## Acknowledgments

It is appropriate and accurate to say that without the steady and faithful work of two people, this project would not have been completed: my wife and my thesis chair. First to my wife, for doing all the work that has to be done for a family of five, day in and day out, giving me both time, space, and limitless encouragements, for being an advisor, friend, and critical thinker, I humbly thank you, Jessica.

To my committee chair Dr. Kevin Gustafson, for his help, patience, advice, guidance, and superb critiques of countless drafts, I owe an enormous debt. Completing this thesis with excellence would have been impossible without his deep knowledge of Chaucerian and medieval literature and his keen eye in writing grammatically and logically clear sentences.

To my committee readers, Dr. Penelope Ingram and Dr. Jackie Stodnick, please accept my thanks for the impromptu conversations and for helping me work out the kinks in the formulation of my argument and applications of postcolonial/decolonial theory with medieval literature—this was a fun adventure.

The man who started me down this Chaucerian path was Dr. Mark Allen, to whom I am very grateful for his frequent advice, his inexhaustible knowledge of medieval sources, and for accompanying me at Oxford and aiding in my research into Trevet and Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*. I would also like to thank Dean Wright and Assistant Dean Ridingin of the College of Liberal Arts, along with Mr. Ahmed, for their generous funding through the Global Research Fellowship that enabled me to travel to Europe and complete the research for this thesis.

To my office mates in Carlisle 409 I say "Wuzzah," thanks for the constant whirlwind of creative thoughts, for both serious criticism and whimsical inspiration. I'd also like to thank my kids, Scooter, Tyler, and Payton, for the random breaks and constant

love. My parents as well have been a constant source of support: thank you. For the community of friends in Fort Worth who have accompanied me in this journey with many tangible, material, and moral support, I am most grateful.

Lastly, to Dr. Walter Mignolo and Dr. Rolando Vasquez, for their kind invitations to participate in decolonial studies and for their time, instruction, and interviews that have aided me in the process of delinking my mind from seeing the world through only a Western lens—I am deeply indebted to you both for helping me decolonize my heart and consciousness. . . .may the conversations continue.

May 13, 2014

Abstract

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Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* (*MLT*) contains several non-Western views, religious practices, cultures and laws. Most importantly, within the *MLT* readers can discover an alternative to viewing non-Western people as enemies. By role-modeling the simple law of good, Custance becomes a hybridized queen who holds disparate contexts together. This essay blends postcolonial theory with decolonial options to show how Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* presents a less dehumanized narrative than most scholarship maintains, especially when compared to Nicholas Trivet's version of the same story. Rather than vilifying the common foes of Christian Western Civilization, Chaucer's Custance demonstrates a de-colonization of cultural bias by living the law of good, which enables all who practice it to accept the differences of others.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

*"The task of the decolonial thinker is one of listening."*<sup>1</sup>  
Rolando Vazquez, Personal Interview

*"The Man of Law's Tale is a sustained attempt to find meaning  
beyond traditional narrative pattern in the story it tells."*  
A. C. Spearing, *Narrative Voice* 741

*"For swich lawe as a man yeveth another wight,  
He sholde hymselfen usen it, by right;  
Thus wole oure text..."*  
The Man of Law, *The Man of Law's Tale* 43-45

Custance, the central character of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*, is a sixth-century European Christian princess, twice betrothed to "heathens," twice betrayed by her mothers-in-law, and twice exiled to drift in the ocean, before she becomes the Queen of Northumbria and the mother of the future Holy Roman Emperor. But there is a big problem with Chaucer's version of this tale: no one seems to know what it means. This one glaring issue, researchers of the tale have found, can be contributed to all sorts of components of Chaucer's frame narrative, which is attributed to the pilgrim Man of Law (ML), who relates he heard the tale of Custance from merchants. Diverse scholars have reached diverse conclusions of this "unreliable narrator," who refers to himself and even to his author. For most readers the heroine is a typified exemplum-like saint, while a few contend she resists that role. Others have proposed speculative interpretations of Chaucer's religious and political stances based on the presences of multiple rival

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<sup>1</sup> Decoloniality is the study of delinking from the cultural hegemony of Western Modernity's globalization, a result of the rhetoric of Coloniality. A critique of said societal form of governance, which thrives by controlling the societal elements needed to colonize all life, is expounded in Anibal Quijano's "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality" and Walter D. Mignolo's *The Darker Side of the Renaissance*.

medieval religions, unusual international political voices, and the treatment of certain cultures and people groups. Still others focus on the struggles between good and evil, God and Man, Women and Men, or the significance of the presence of both Biblical and Greek history/theology mixed with astrological data.

With the presence of so many components and intentionally included voices, how one sees and listens seems crucial. Similarly important are one's historical time and geographical place in the world, for the differences are potentially vast between how medieval readers understood this poem and how one reads it today. Since the mid-90s, modern readers of medieval literature have asked, "How should readers of a postcolonial age interpret these medieval, pre-colonial components of *The Man of Law's Tale (MLT)*?" That is, with the effects of colonization in mind—specifically its racial, gender, sexual, religious, ethnic, and geographical discrimination in view—what answers might current post-and de-colonial readers present in response to Chaucer's tale of Custance, its enigmatic narrator, and the voices of its characters? Presence, therefore, and voices have seemed to complicate traditional interpretations of the *MLT*, including its narrator and author, which the majority of critics have consistently painted as stereotypically and hopelessly xenophobic, religiously intolerant, and patriarchal. The irony is that these three descriptors match the cause-and-effect relationship within the historical design of our current societal structure—referring to Western Modernity.<sup>2</sup> For centuries Western Civilization has been plagued by the racial, religious, and gender paradigms that were developed and maintained by white European Christian males. Admittedly, blaming all these social ills on white Christian males is reductive of such entangled issues, but the point remains: regarding Chaucer's Custance tale, the traditional interpretations demonstrate colonized thinking—an adherence to viewing Chaucer and his work through

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<sup>2</sup> A general term that refers to our current neo-liberal, capitalist, socio-political structure.



the same universal Western lens that produced Western Civilization's racialized, institutionalized, and gendered thinking. Therefore this study proposes that Chaucer's narrator and Custance—perhaps even the author's intentions—need to be de-colonized from the colonizing paradigms (or lenses) through which they have typically been seen.

Thankfully, much of this work has already begun. One scholar in particular, A.C. Spearing, in his insightful article "Narrative Voice: The Case of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale*," first reports how his precursors have detected a distinctive narrative voice whose moral and intellectual weaknesses can be characterized as: patronizing, short sighted, blind, materialistic, legalistic, antireligious, pharisaical, ignorant, empty, overexcited, and hypocritical (730). His logic is impeccable as he suggests, "many Chaucer critics do not much like Chaucer's work." But Spearing goes on to say that most of the opinions of "Chaucer's intent" can be rendered inaccurate if what most critics say of the narrator is true, and he forcefully criticizes past conclusions based on the presumed problem of the ML's narratorial voice:

(I)f he is an unreliable narrator, then it might be said that, interpretation becomes impossible, because all we can know is that Chaucer must have meant something different from what the tale says, but we have no idea what that might be because there is nothing undistorted against which we can measure the narrator's distortions. (729)

By incorporating language analysis of deixis,<sup>3</sup> giving rigorous attention to the most extreme postulations of previous scholars, and thoughtfully reflecting upon the effect of Chaucer's poetic strategies, Spearing removes the necessity of depending upon how one

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<sup>3</sup> A Saussurean linguistics term for the function of encoding subjectivity that establishes, within the narrative, a process of anchoring the spatio-temporal perspective of the speaker—this creates the effect of the speaker being in the same time and space of the characters of his narrative.

reads the narrator in order to interpret the tale. He posits three categories of narration within the tale: narratorial commentary, managerial commentary, and deixis. He states his main point to be that these voices work to prevent there being any clear distinction between poet and narrator (731). The convergence of these devices authenticate the narration as a whole, stimulate participatory speculation, make the audience aware of the art of narration, and (most important to this study) convey the reality that Chaucer's sources do not tell him all he, or his readers, would like to know. Spearing concludes that he finds none of these characteristics to be peculiar to any one of Chaucer's tales or narrators; "they belong to Chaucer's normal narrative manner" (734).

None of these points contradicts a postcolonial reading of the *MLT*. However, the prospect of a work being impossible to interpret still leaves us with our original problem. This is why I agree with Spearing's observation that Chaucer and his narrator's sources do not tell all we would like to know. I also agree that the tale itself is "a sustained attempt to find meaning beyond traditional" exemplum and folk tale narratives. But I disagree with Spearing on whether or not Chaucer might have distorted his narrator's tale compared to another work. It will help us to revisit another line from above: "Chaucer must have meant something different. . . .but we have no idea what that might be because there is nothing undistorted against which we can measure the narrator's distortions."

In point of fact, there is something against which Chaucer's tale looks distorted: his chief source, Nicolas Trevet's early fourteenth-century, Anglo-Norman, *De la Noble Femme Constance*. About one third of the *MLT* is derived from Trevet's work. Most critics treat the additional material as largely incidental and assume that Chaucer's version expresses the same cultural values as Trevet. However, Trevet's Constance tale

presents an obviously orientalist perspective,<sup>4</sup> of Anglo-Norman thinking in the early thirteenth century, which clearly sought to portray all things 'Eastern' as inferior to things 'Western.' Chaucer's version of this same tale can be read as significantly distanced from Trevet's in this regard. More specifically, the ways that each author was viewing and portraying the presences and voices of their characters constitute radical differences that paint Trevet as the stereotypical white, male, Christian who espoused orientalist visions (which would later become the hallmarks of Coloniality), and paints Chaucer as someone who valued and appreciated different races, religions, and cultures. Against Trevet's piece, I argue Chaucer's work can be read as decolonized, in that it opens up the possibility of seeing multiple cultures and religions pursuing harmonious relationships, rather than positing that all Easterners should be subjected to Westerners. Consequently, by applying the work and theory of postcolonial theorist Edward Said, I will first show that Trevet's work is a profound orientalist fiction that works to demonize and sever anything non-white, non-Christian, and non-European from its presence.

The obvious question is how do these theories relate to Chaucer and medieval texts that were written one hundred years before Europeans sailed to the Americas and became colonizers? Not surprisingly, Chaucer, his characters, and his sources and analogues have until recently been criticized primarily for their patriarchal, Christian, heterosexual slant. Then, in the early 1990's, a few medievalists familiar with postcolonial theory began reading medieval texts through postcolonial lenses.<sup>5</sup> Since then, critics like Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Sheila Delany have contributed much in the way of seeing the

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<sup>4</sup> That is, a work written by a Westerner (in the occident) that constantly paints "all things Eastern" (or, oriental) as bad, dark, and in all ways inferior. So then, an "orientalist" is a Western author who contributes to the work of oriental-ism, which Said's groundbreaking book outlines in detail.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen published his *Postcolonial Middle Ages* in 2000, but it is comprised of articles published in the 90s. Sheila Delany published her *Chaucer and the Jews* in 2002.

groups of people present in Chaucer that had not received much attention. The work of these authors has greatly aided many medievalists in advancing the use of postcolonial applications, thereby making medieval literature more accessible to a wider audience. Unfortunately, for Chaucer and especially his *ML*, the Custance tale has still been labeled as fostering the monolithic view of the dominant white heterosexual Christian male who holds all women and non-Christian non-whites as inferior. On this point I disagree with most recent scholarship, primarily because of how Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale (MLT)* departs from the traditional macro-narratives of his day. The *MLT* can be viewed as "pluriversal"—that is, embracing many "ways of knowing" as "options" to the current hegemonic forces of late-medieval culture, and by extension Western Modernity more generally. Chaucer responds to the xenophobia and religious intolerance of his day by crafting a fiction that espouses a different central message than his source, Trevet's pseudo-historical Constance tale.

In Chapter Two, I will closely read Trevet's Constance,<sup>6</sup> which he included in his *Les Chronicles* as a matter of history. The problem with this text is that it is not historical at all—although it might have fit medieval standards—but rather a compilation of multiple sources that span over seven centuries, which has consistently been treated as a reliable source. I seek to provide evidence of the colonized mindset present in this fiction, by investigating Trevet's Constance tale via postcolonial theory, primarily orientalism. In his book *Orientalism*, Said led the way to understanding how the colonizing mindset developed in the West, primarily by constantly projecting itself as holistically superior to all those who were different. I find that Trevet's work provides a perfect orientalist case study and opens further exploration of the presence of discrimination within medieval texts. Thus my study will show how putatively objective kinds of writing about the East

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<sup>6</sup> Translated into English by Correale.

produce the exact kind of orientalism Said described. Essentially, Trevet's work represents an oriental discourse that could have been used by colonialists to engender the kind of thinking that would lead to a colonized mentality. This is what readers can delink from in order to see Chaucer's *Custance* differently. While orientalism, delinking and other post- and de- colonial terms (like hybridity) are theoretical lenses that do not have a long history with medieval texts, applying them will provide me with the opportunity to perform two very timely tasks. The first is to offer a possible answer as to why Chaucer's *MLT* has been so misread for so long—because it is linked to a fiction (which has been passed down as history) that openly propagates an orientalist worldview. The second is to create a space within the field of medieval scholarship for the application of study that I find helpful in dealing with the presence of orientalism: decoloniality.

How one 'de-colonizes' a thing is the central topic of research with decoloniality—scholars in the field refer to this as a process of delinking. The character of *Custance* and the central message of the *MLT*, for example, might be delinked from being read as colonized and orientalist in nature if today's readers see and hear the pluriversal elements within the tale. As the terms "decolonial" and "pluriversal"<sup>7</sup> are perhaps the biggest points of my argument, a brief definition may be helpful. The reason I have, in my title and thus far, hyphenized the word 'de-colonized' is precisely to emphasize that prefix, 'de,' in relation to the process, elements, and history of the word 'colonized.' As Walter Mignolo relates, "Decoloniality means confronting and delinking

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<sup>7</sup> This key decolonial term confronts the global design of "uni-versalism"—a one world dominant system of governance, i.e. Eurocentrism and the hegemonic rule of Western Society. Pluriversity (not to be confused with pluralism—which is the rule of many nation states) is a one word descriptor for the global emergence of localism, a decolonial project, and confronts the existence/development of a master-global design that rules all (*Western Modernity*, 329-331).

from coloniality and the macro-narratives such as Christianity and Liberalism” (*Western Modernity* xxvii). In case it is not clear, the way previous scholarship has critiqued the ML and Custance is as characters who have been colonized, that is, held under the subjectivity of the same forces that hold other humans: human prejudice based on whiteness and maleness, and a Euro-Christian origin. While Trevet’s tale embraces such paradigms, even celebrates them, Chaucer’s tale can be read as resistant to these identifications and stereotypes in ways that literally are eye-opening. Two quick examples are the *MLT*’s inclusivity of speaking non-white males and females as well as points-of-view from non-Euro-Christian presences, voices, and cultures.

While I hope to make the literary differences between my medieval authors clear, an aspect of this study that poses potential for confusion is dealing with terms. Regarding postcolonial theory, scholars agree that there has never really been a ‘post’ because colonization is still active. Literary theorists are also quick to accept that it was Said’s *Orientalism* that broke the ground of what has been for decades a flourishing field of study in academia. Thus, all academic decolonials are connected with postcolonial studies. However, decolonials prefer the ‘de’ prefix because it also describes the process of providing options for delinking, that is, de-colonizing subjects from Coloniality—the social paradigms of race, religion, and gender control (just to name three) that have been actively colonizing Western thinking since Columbus’ pre-colonial times.

By way of contrast to the orientalist views of authors like Trevet, in Chapter Three, decolonial readings of Chaucer may offer medievalists and decolonials insight on the formation of colonialism. The goal is to articulate how Chaucer can be read as an advocate of pluriversal and decolonial options. Furthermore, I hope to articulate how thinking decolonially not only helps read Chaucer otherwise, but also uncovers and enunciates options as a revolutionary decentering practice with medieval literature. A

decolonized reading of Custance will show how Chaucer's *MLT* functions as an engine of pluriversality, a role model in thinking otherwise, and provides medieval examples of transformations of being that hold value and practical options in order for modern readers to delink from our colonized Modernity.

The use of narration, I feel, must be addressed, especially within the *MLT*, because there has been so much emphasis on the narrator to suggest why, for many, the poem is so enigmatic. I will discuss narration at length therefore, not solely because Chaucer's narrator has been so wildly misread but also because his narrator's language/diction carries decolonial attributes that differentiate it from the language/diction of Trevet. To be more specific, Chaucer's version is by far less Eurocentric (or orientalist). Chaucer's work naturally falls under the microscope of either furthering an orientalist agenda, opposing it, or "thinking otherwise" (to avoid falling prey to binaries). I read Chaucer as juxtaposing himself and his tale from traditional exemplum form to free it from the burden of his source and tell a tale that views Christians from a non-Christian point of view. While diverse criticisms of the language, content, and tone of his narrator are justified, it is imperative that this be seen as distinctly different from Trevet's omniscient narrator, who at no time allows another perspective to enter or be heard from. Contrary to his source, Chaucer's version includes characters that openly resist the presence of the aforementioned discriminatory societal paradigms. Here one can see a parallel between Chaucer's *MLT* and the work of decolonial thinkers: whereas much medieval writing is often held to propagate a uni-versal (one world) order to replace all other orders, the *MLT* does not seem to do so. Instead, the *MLT* offers a pluriversal view of medieval society specifically because it can provide readers with decidedly non-traditional non-Christian views of non-Christians, women, and non-Europeans, just as Spearing's quote in the epigraph suggests.

In addition to analyzing Chaucer's language, the *MLT* seems to articulate the efficacy of a less-Christianized version of the Royal Law, the dictum that one ought to treat others the way one would want to be treated. Both the ML and his law are important elements of Chaucer's design, as Chaucerian scholar Gerald Morgan certifies. Therefore, in addition to Spearing's work on the importance of narrative voice, Morgan's work on the importance of the narrator's social position as judge will be drawn upon, as will the judge's "law of good." These two important aspects seem to confirm that Chaucer may have indeed elided the creation of another rendition of "the old Constancy exemplum" to promote a pluriversal "transformation of being" that created the hybrid character of Custance, whose non-institutionalized Christian faith functioned by the law of "doing good" rather than on evangelistic conversion skills. This hybridized character, twice set a drift to wander over vast spaces and periods of time, subsequently brought peace between hostile cultures, hostile religions, and hostile races.

From this pluriversal view, Chaucer can be seen to portray Custance as a liminal being who exists in the interstices or borderlines between two or more autonomous entities. More specifically, and to employ one of postcolonial theory's most famous metaphors, I see Custance and her son Maurice as the presence of hybridity that spans across borderlines. These multicultural beings are the kind of bridges Homi Bhabha describes in his book *The Location of Culture*.

(T)his borderline existence inhabits a stillness of time and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive image at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world. (13)

This study is thus an attempt to further multicultural conversations through scholarship of the literature that preceded Europe's 'colonialist' history. Because Chaucer died in 1400, I think it is fair to assume that military actions meant to exclude and/or dominate other



people groups was something Chaucer the poet would be very sensitive to. Although the prospect of having colonies across the Atlantic was in no one's mind, the Crusades and the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290 are two instances of the kind of orientalist/colonial mindset that one can clearly see in the literature of that age. It is with such narratives as Trevet's and Chaucer's, with their hidden histories and discursive images, that we modern readers can bridge our postcolonial home with that of the medieval world through literature.

Once Trevet's piece is understood as the orientalist piece of fiction it is, the presences within Chaucer's de-colonized Custance tale can come into sharp focus and the voices of his non-white, non-Christian, non-European characters can be heard. Thus, an entirely different interpretation will become visible when Trevet's uses of colonized histories are revealed. By applying post-and de-colonial theory to view Trevet's work as orientalist, readers will be able to see a de-colonized Custance who resists stereotypical colonialist forms of oppression and discrimination.

## Chapter 2

### Trevet's Orientalist Constance

*Decoloniality means decolonial options confronting and delinking from coloniality (...) claiming legitimacy among existing academic projects among options offered by the macro-narratives such as Christianity and Liberalism.*  
Walter Mignolo, *Western Modernity* xxix

### Trevet and his Constance Tale

Although little is known of his early life or family, Nicolas Trevet is reputed as one of late-medieval England's foremost scholars. The most thorough and easily accessed information on Trevet may be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* online, where according to James G. Clark he was born c.1257 and died c.1336. Trevet's father was a judge who sent his son Nicolas to study at Oxford and then at Paris. Oxford's records indicate Trevet returned there to teach and was a senior lecturer by 1297 (Clark para 1). But perhaps the most telling personal characteristic of Trevet is that he was also a Dominican Friar. After his career at Oxford, Trevet retired to a London convent, where he became the community's lector (para 5). It was during this time that Trevet wrote for his patroness, Princess Marie, or Mary of Woodstock, the daughter of Edward I, who was a nun at Almesbury convent (Lewis 364). Thus, Trevet had a career-long affiliation with the institutional Catholic Church and was writing his famous "chronicle," which contains the story of Constance, for a nun. It is this religious influence—one of the chief agents of advancing the singular Western marco-narrative—that entangles Trevet's other reputation, as "historian." The task of decolonials is to confront such entanglements.

At an international level, Trevet was known more for his scholarship than for his religious career. According to Clark, Trevet's "commentaries offered European scholars complete and accurate texts of works of undisputed importance, such as the *De consolatione* and the *De civitate Dei*. Almost 300 manuscripts survive from all parts of

Europe” (para 1). Clark also quotes Ruth Dean to confirm that Trevet’s best-known work was probably his commentary on Boethius, which was used by both Petrarch and Boccaccio in their works. His commentary on Seneca’s Tragedies also circulated widely and was cited in a letter attributed to Dante” (Clark para 2). Trevet was known as a historian. In his exhaustive work on *Source and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*, Robert Correale quotes Alexander Rutherford to report that Trevet used word-for-word quotations from all the major English and Anglo-Saxon chroniclers: Bede, St. Gildas, and Geoffrey of Monmouth. Clark also confirms Trevet’s reputation as an historian when he says, “In England his commentaries do seem to have inaugurated a tradition of classical scholarship” (para 3). Biographically, when putting Trevet’s religious career<sup>8</sup> together with his academic career, it makes sense that most of Trevet’s work is also loaded with hagiographic material. Correale’s description of Trevet’s Constance tale is that it exhibits “high usage of pathos and religious intensity to give his work an increased moral tone” (285). One might interpret this information as saying that Trevet was known as a historian with a flare for writing Christianity into his works—though perhaps he didn’t see it that way. That this type of “traditional classical scholarship” was accepted as “history”—*claiming legitimacy among existing academic projects*—is what this chapter confronts and questions.

Trevet’s Constance tale is found toward the end of his *Les Chronicles*, also known as *Chronique anglo-normande*. Alexander Krappe puts the compilation of Trevet’s work between 1334 and 1337 (368), which indicates that he wrote it during his position as lector for one of London’s convents. But it is the following statement that seems to confirm Trevet’s critical methods. According to Clark, Trevet thought that

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<sup>8</sup> For more information on Trevet’s religious life see Ruth Dean’s, “Nicolas Trevet, Historian.”

(C)lassical fables must be thoroughly decoded and Christianized to make them safe for modern readers. He was, nevertheless, one of the first English scholars since the twelfth century to develop an extensive knowledge of classical authors, and certainly the earliest northern European writer to absorb the new Italian currents in classical scholarship. (para 4)

I do not maintain that his audience would have been able to tell what of Trevet's work was actual historical event and what was fiction. I think this is part of the problem: scholars then, and for the last hundred and fifty years, knew Trevet as both historian and Christian scholar. My contention, however, is that his work is better seen as orientalist propaganda—the kind of storytelling that creates a dehumanizing and negative image of 'the other' or subaltern that was consistently perpetuated and complicit in the formulation of Western Modernity. To the best of my knowledge, though some scholars have made implications, Trevet's work has never been directly confronted as such.

#### Clarifying Terms

The terms "orientalism" and "Western Modernity," each with long histories of their own, have functioned, hand-in-hand, as projects of severing and separation. In this chapter, though the text analyzed is medieval, and therefore not "colonial" or Modern, I will argue that Trevet's Constance tale is orientalist in nature. This term was made famous by Edward Said's groundbreaking postcolonial work, *Orientalism*. At the beginning of his book, Said asserts that orientalism "always demonstrates the comparatively greater strength of the Occident" (4). He also explicitly compares the orientalist project with religious conversion and details the history of said practice in literary works (62-73). Thus, both Said's work and this study of Trevet are concerned with

point of view—in seeing the West’s colonizing gaze of itself. Decolonial work, by contrast, is empowered by a desire to de-colonize our Western minds, to borrow from Ngũgĩ. This chapter is therefore a decolonial effort of uncovering “hidden histories” (Mignolo, *Renaissance* 6) and is preoccupied with unfolding, laying out for all to see, the true multi-cultural damage that can be done *when historians distort history*. Said’s work underscored Western ontological dominations of ‘the East’ as doctrines of orientalists, the fruit of which is referred to as orientalism. This tool of criticism is what connects us with medievalism and the reception history to follow. For it was during the Middle Ages that the practice of imperialistically viewing non-Europeans as weak, black, and fundamentally “other” was perfected, and it has been in the Modern age that several scholars have unfortunately carried on orientalist/imperialist practices, whether knowingly or not. Even in academia, the tendency of scholars has been one of avoidance. As Said argues,

(T)here is no getting away from the fact that literary studies in general (...) have avoided the effort of seriously bridging the gap between the superstructural and the base levels in textual, historical scholarship (...) the literary-cultural establishment as a whole has declared the serious study of imperialism and culture off limits. (13)

The concern here is not what constitutes medieval fiction literature. Rather, it is what was passed off as fact and then perpetuated without question. For if a researcher is to take the charge to interrogate a medieval literary text, Said insists that we must ask “what sorts of intellectual, aesthetic, scholarly, and cultural energies went into the making” (15) of orientalist documents, which espoused imperialistic views and shaped European (occidental) medieval culture as unquestionably superior to that of any other (oriental).

Thus I argue that Trevet’s chronicle presents a summary of world history (from the time of the creation account until the crusades of the late 1200s) that purposefully

inscribes and then transmits a broadly Eurocentric view of the world. My method will be to select various portions of the Constance tale that demonstrate such a view, that hide or distort “what actually happened,” or that share a relationship with one or more aspects of Western Modernity because of their orientalist nature. This process will provide us with the ability to see *how* Said’s major thematic question from *Orientalism* can be answered:

How did philology, lexicography, history, biology, political and economic theory, novel-writing, and lyric poetry come to the service of orientalism’s broadly imperialist view of the world? How does orientalism transmit or reproduce itself from one epoch to another? (15)

In the case of Trevet we can see how bent he was on subjugating the Saracen, Muslim, Pagan and other peoples of difference. What follows then is a synopsis of Trevet’s Constance tale and the reception history (since the 1850s) of this pseudo-history, as Krappe calls it (369). After this I will provide a sequential textual analysis that will highlight some of the major places where Trevet exercised intellectual, aesthetic, scholarly, and/or cultural energies to maintain Western dominance while severing the Zoroastrian, Arab, Saracen, and Pagan influences from what medieval Christian historians claimed was their Christian world. My main intention is to enable current readers of medieval literature to see false or hidden histories for what they are, without distraction, and to require that that which has immeasurable value be spoken of, understood, celebrated, and legitimized in our Western centers and institutions of knowledge and power, where ‘all things different’ were once severed, silenced, shunned, or rejected. What will come into focus is the skill Trevet demonstrated in weaving together a complex historiographical Christian fable and that this fiction backed up the Christian macro-narrative, a key element in maintaining Christianity as the dominant culture while suppressing all others.

### Summary of Trevet's Constance

One of the chief problems with Nicolas Trevet's "history" is that its few identifiable accounts of history are misleading. Trevet's readers were not likely aware of his anachronisms, with characters that historically span seven centuries, from the 580s to the mid-1200s. A quick summary of the tale, with the above data in mind, will set up the textual analysis, aid us in seeing the trajectory of Trevet's tale and the major events he puts his heroine through, and highlight the following three major messages I wish to focus on. First is that Christian Europeans conquer and occupy the Holy Land and Jerusalem. Second, along the way to victory, either all "heathens" convert "to the true form of the Christian faith" (*Trevet* 201-2), or, if they will not, are annihilated by Christian Europeans, who are boldly led by either suffering saints like Constance or by military leaders. And third, because the tale ends with Constance's Anglo-Norman son on the throne and in sole possession of Jerusalem prior to the advent of Mohammed, a final suggested purpose (though it of course was only wishful thinking) is the complete destruction of Mohammedanism, also known as Islam.

As a part of a much larger work, Trevet's story of Constance begins temporally under the reign of a Roman Emperor and spatially in Rome. Constance is the daughter of sixth-century Roman Emperor, Tiberius II. Her journey away from home and back again starts when she converts several rich, heathen, Saracen merchants to Christianity; these men were visiting her father's court. Upon returning home these new converts tell their Sultan about Constance and the ruler immediately falls in love, works a deal with the Emperor, and commits to believe in the Christian religion in exchange for Constance in marriage. The Sultan then gives the Emperor many incredible gifts, including free visitation to any holy places, and even surrenders Jerusalem (cf. 50-62). When the Emperor sends Constance to "the Saracen land," there is just one problem: the Sultan's

mother. She plots the death of all the Christians, overthrows her son, and sets Constance adrift in a rudderless, sail-less boat with three years of provisions. Three years later, the boat miraculously lands on the shore of Northumbria, where Olda, the constable of a castle, receives Constance. The heroine quickly converts Olda's wife, Hermegild, and many other converts soon follow, including the King of Northumbria, who marries Constance and has a son with her. Like all good kings in the Constance Saga, Alla goes to war before his first child is born. Then Alla's mother, Domild, forges letters to the king that describe Constance's baby as a deformed devil and Constance as an evil witch. Domild then has the new queen and baby exiled, put back into the boat, and set adrift. Upon his return, King Alla mourns his re-exiled wife and son, slays his mother, then waits several years before deciding to visit the Pope at Rome, for absolution of Constance's assumed death. Five years later, an old Roman Senator (the friend of Emperor Tiberius) is traveling back from defeating 11,000 Saracens when he spots Constance's ship along the Mediterranean coast. Her son Maurice, at this point five years old, grows to be a man by the time Alla comes to Rome. The tale ends when Alla, Constance, and Maurice are reunited, as is Constance with her father, and Maurice becomes Emperor. Then all of the Holy Land is Christian and ruled by an Anglo-Saxon Christian while Alla and Constance return in peace to England.

#### Trevet's Reception History

The search for a real Constance has taken scholars through many medieval worlds, centuries, countries, and literary forms, but, as far as I know, it has always been a practice of orientalism or has at least turned a blind eye. What connects the summary above with the research that has been done on this tale is the hunt for a single source. This point fits my argument in two ways. First, this hunt for the single source is precisely



what Westerners still try to do to verify (or falsify) data for the purpose of solidifying supremacy by establishing authenticity through location or time of origin.<sup>9</sup> With Said, I adamantly resist this tendency and will use the text in relation to other sources to demonstrate some of the things Trevet tried to accomplish. Secondly, one of the primary vehicles of propaganda is to tell the same fictional story over and over until it is universally accepted as fact. The reality is that Trevet's work shows an amazing intentionality in the development of a piecemeal, one-of-a-kind adaptation of multiple medieval European folk tales, Arabic legend, hagiographic romances, and historical accounts from the sixth, tenth, and twelfth centuries. In spite of this, previous scholarship has nearly always viewed Trevet's Constance as a stable source that must have had a single point of origin; but no such analogue has ever been found. Because of this, the Constance tale's reception history itself can be seen as an exercise in orientalist history making/preserving, though at least one scholar saw through the façade: Margaret Schlauch, a Constance Saga expert, who in 1950 claimed Trevet's piece was "of course a fiction" (402).

Scholarship on Trevet's Constance tale starts in the 1840s, according to Schlauch, who points out that it was a Swede by the name of Bäckström, in 1845, who discussed the similarities of Trevet's *The Life of Constance* with the folk tale *Hélène Antonia of Constantinople*. After the Chaucer Society published Trevet's work in 1872, Schlauch mentions that an inquiry was first made by Puymaigre, in 1884, that forever labeled all legends of Constance as the Constance Saga. Scholarship to corroborate all this was done more than four times by Suchier in 1900, Gough in 1902, and Rickert in

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<sup>9</sup> Though I am ready to concede this is not necessarily a 'western' trait only, it is nonetheless true of our culture. A famous example is the attempt of English royalty to connect their lineage to Arthur.

1906, and then Schlauch in her book length study *Chaucer's Constance and Accused Queens* in 1927. To this body of research, at least four more scholars have each added one more potential source. Lillian Hornstein introduced the *King of Tars* narrative. Then Krappe discussed the connections of Trevet's version with the *Offa-Constance Legend*. Then it was Schlauch again in "Historical Precursors of Chaucer's Constance," written in 1950, which connected the real-life Princess Constance from the twelfth century. And lastly, and most interestingly, Phillip Wynn, in 1982, brought to the list the *Annales Eutychiei*, written in 937 in Arabic, by a Greek Orthodox patriarch of Alexandria named Eutyclus. This last source is most interesting because he presents his findings as if he thinks there is still a chance the fable could be real, even though Schlauch had openly decried Trevet's tale as fiction. It is also interesting because Wynn first seems a perfect accomplice to Trevet, as a case study in orientalist history making. But after Wynn takes a circuitous route in defending that Trevet's inspiration was a real Constance in the sixth century, he then curiously demonstrates how Trevet's work is indeed fictional.

The point that stands out here is that this scholarship operates from an orientalist perspective and thus reproduces orientalism. The apparent contradiction within Wynn's study perfectly demonstrates two things: first, it shows how an orientalist that predated Trevet changed history over 1,000 years ago—about this Wynn says nothing; and second, with this whole reception history in view, we can also see how most scholars, even since Said published *Orientalism*, do not see how, intentionally or not, their work accepts the macro narrative of 'occidental' superiority over the supposed 'orient.' None of these scholars has ever asked "Why did Trevet (and Eutyclus for that matter) distort history to tell this unbelievable tale?" Here I quote Said, who refers to Norman Daniel's study of the reception of Islam in the West, a useful parallel:

One constraint acting upon Christian thinkers who tried to understand Islam was an analogical one; since Christ is the basis of Christian faith, it was assumed—quite incorrectly—that Mohammad was to Islam as Christ was to Christianity. Hence the polemic name “Mohammedanism” given to Islam, and the automatic epithet “imposter” applied to Mohammed. Out of such and many other misconceptions ‘there formed a circle that was never broken by imaginative exteriorization. . . . The Christian concept of Islam was integral and self-sufficient.’ Islam became an image (...) whose function was not so much to represent Islam in itself as to represent it for the medieval Christian. (60)

Because these scholars of Eutyclus and Trevet never question the act of forming “a circle that was never broken by imaginative exteriorization,” they all approach the subject as if it is normal to paint and describe Muslims as enemies, as “others,” as even less-than-human miscreants that deserve death because they do not believe alike, look right, or come from the right place. Not standing up in resistance against this practice is the same as allowing the same single origin narrative to be told over and over, until it is believed and/or accepted as fact. Schlauch presents compelling evidence, as Krappe, Celia Lewis, Robert Correale, and Hornstein, that Trevet was really concerned with making all the previous folkloric tales coded and Christianized into legends suitable for his and future Christian audiences. That is, all these academics confirm that what Trevet wrote was not true. But none takes the next step to decry the practice as orientalist or racist; at most, they said it was just religious zeal.

This chapter will take a stand against Trevet’s orientalist history making, not only to show how it is done, by resisting the spread of such erroneous and hateful macro-narratives, but also to show medieval readers today how this practice is destructive,

unethical—because it is academically dishonest—and to encourage modern scholars to have a better view of people, whether historical characters or living ones, that treats each person as equally valuable, regardless of origin, color, or religion.

To start the textual analysis, we will first see how Trevet situated his narrative as history, although which analogue or source he started with is anyone's guess. Schlauch, Krappe, Hornstein, and Wynn might debate it was either of the four tales from the Constance Saga (1250-1275), from any of the six *King of Tars* crusade legends (dated at 1280 thru 1299), or from the *Annales Eutychii* (970s). Schlauch would also probably argue that Trevet borrowed from history close to home (and from the generation right before him) and that he used a twelfth-century princess named Constance for a character that his audience would recognize. Either way, what he did with any or all of these stories created a wholesale rearrangement of ancient history that viewed all non-white non-Christians as enemies worthy of death.

#### The Constance Tale as History

The first move Trevet makes seems like an ethos appeal to establish his historical credibility and a temporal move to place his narrative as early as historically possible. In line two, Trevet himself claims to quote “les anciens croniques des Sessouns,” that is, “the old Saxon Chronicles.” On eight other occasions the author uses his whole chronicle to certify his own consistency, with references such as when he introduces Pope John III in line 40 as “who I mentioned before in the previous chapter.” There is no other narrator, as there perhaps would be with a fictional story or fable, a feature that functions to establish Trevet as the authority of the subject. Trevet quickly introduces Maurice, the son of his central character, under the reign of Emperor Tiberius Constantius (578-82 CE). Bede and Gildas contain nothing of a Maurice connected to a

Tiberius Constantine, as Trevet indicates. But a line from Geoffrey of Monmouth does seem very close to one of Trevet's descriptions of Maurice. Observe Trevet's almost word-for-word quote from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *De Gestis Britonum*, of Maurice's physical and mental capacities. Here is Monmouth's Latin text followed by Wright's English translation, then Trevet's in the French,<sup>10</sup> and the translation of Correale:

Erat ipse Mauricus pulchrae staturae magnaue probitatis atque audaciae et qui ea quae iudicabat armis si contradictio fieret et duello probabat. (V 212-214)

This Mauricus was handsome, able and bold, a man who in the face of opposition could uphold his judgement (sic) by recourse to arms. (100)

Estoit un juvencele apele Moriz ... trop graciouse et mervaillousement vigerous de son age et de sen sages et agu.

(T)here was a youth named Maurice ... a very handsome youth, exceedingly strong for his age, and wise and keen of mind. (2-4)

If this is indeed the "old Saxon Chronicle" Trevet paraphrased, the problem is that Monmouth's Maurice was born in Cornwall and is the son of Duke Caradocus. Trevet says, "Cist Moriz, solonc l'estoire de Sessions avantdite, estoit le fitz Constance" (2-4). "This Maurice, according to the aforementioned history of the Saxons, was the son of Constance," who was Italian.

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<sup>10</sup> All quotations of Trevet's *De la noble femme Constance*, and Correale's English translation *The Noble Lady Constance*, come from Robert Correale's *Sources and Analogues of the Canterbury Tales*. Correale tells us that among the thirteen extant originals, he has used the Paris BN Manuscript, c.1340-50 in the French, which was published in 1872, by the Chaucer Society.

I am not the only researcher to find incongruences in Trevet's history. Schlauch mentions that Trevet identifies this child's mother to be Constantina in another area of his Chronicle, and then adds, "Either she is a duplicate Constance, or she was not intended at first to become the wife of a mythical King Alle of Northumbria" (404). Schlauch then spends four pages proving that the Maurice Trevet actually had in mind was one of the worst Emperors of his day, and that Trevet whitewashed his story in order to be able to say that the son of Constance was known "as the most Christian Emperor" (404-408). Additionally, Krappe reminds us that Tiberius II and Emperor Maurice ruled from Constantinople, not Rome. Krappe also doubts whether Tiberius II had a daughter who married an Anglo-Saxon king. "The truth of the matter is that Tiberius II did have a daughter, named Constantina, who married Maurice" (368-9). In other words, Trevet made Maurice Constance's son rather than her husband. This rearrangement also made Maurice Tiberius' grandson. Krappe confirms this was not so: "This Maurice became Tiberius' son-in-law and successor to Tiberius II. It is equally certain that the Anglo-Saxon king Ælla<sup>11</sup> was a contemporary of Tiberius." Apparently, Trevet got this part right—as far as placing King Alla in the right time—but another of Trevet's historical rearrangements brings Alla into sexual contact with Tiberius' daughter, thus establishing an Anglo-Saxon heir on the throne of Tiberius, which, while being absolutely untrue, does serve to inscribe an Anglo-Saxon king on the throne of the Holy Roman Empire (which at that time should have been Byzantine). Krappe continues, "It goes without saying that no Anglo-Saxon kinglet (sic) ever had the honor of marrying into the family of an emperor and basileus of the East" (369). The orientalist practice here is obvious, especially for a crowd that supported the Crusades, though we have no idea what his audience would have

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<sup>11</sup> Though Krappe used the Ælla spelling, throughout the rest of the paper I will use what both Correale and the Paris Manuscript use: Alla.

thought of breeding Englishness into the European political scene at a time that actually predated the advent of Mohammed (on which I will comment soon). However, it is Krappé's response to this wholesale fictionalizing of history that also constitutes orientalism:

How are we to explain this curious piece of pseudo-history? Needless to say that Trevelyan is completely innocent of this falsification of history: he merely followed an older model written in Latin or Norman French (...) Endowed with a keen practical sense, like most Normans, he tried to enliven the arid lists of unpronounceable Anglo-Saxon kings, synchronized with Byzantine emperors (a common practice of medieval chroniclers), by boldly identifying the characters of an Eastern story, carried to Europe by the first crusaders (...) to flatter the pride of his public by linking it to an Anglo-Saxon king about whom he had little else to report. (369)

Written in 1937, this is exactly the kind of orientalist scholarship that proves, and even fully describes the process of how, Western scholars have maintained blatant falsifications of Eastern stories to create pseudo-history—"with a keen practical sense" we are even told the motivation: "to flatter the pride of his public." As for Krappé's assumption, no such "older model" has even been found, though we can identify several parts of legend, hagiography, folklore, and historical figures/events from three different epochs, but these have been twisted to fit the fiction.

In keeping with the project of revealing false histories, I wish to set the record straight. One European, Otto II, did actually accomplish marrying into a Byzantine throne. Princess Theophanu became the first Byzantine royalty to ever marry a Westerner, in 972, when she married the German son of Otto the Great. But this was 400 years after

Maurice's time (Eyck 82). It is unclear whether Trevet knew of this intercultural marriage, but the theme strikes a chord with orientalism. This last piece of history has been well researched by historians such as Eyck, in his book *Religion And Politics In German History* (82), Southern, in *The Making of the Middle Ages* (34-36), and Bloch, in *Feudal Society* (79). These sources not only testify to the wedding between Otto II and Theophanu, but also point out that it was really the Byzantine King who married off the princess, as Otto I had recently forced his coronation as Holy Roman Emperor by the Pope. So the mercy marriage may have been in place but it was not from a Christian to a Saracen or Muslim, but rather from a Greek Orthodox basileus under duress giving up a princess to a conquering Christian Germanic king. Trevet may not have had this story in mind—to my knowledge no other scholar has implied this Otto II and Theophanu connection—but it is not unreasonable. The fact remains that there was no earlier Saxon union with any eastern princess. As far as real history is concerned, the Constance/Alla love connection never existed. The importance of this observation lies in the fact that this paper has an answer for said type of religious and historiographical reinscription: it is orientalist history making, the purposeful retelling of global history to tell a narrative that conforms to a society's desired perception of itself and its neighbors. As Marc Bloch puts it: people came to reconstruct the past as they considered it ought to have been (92). For an imaginary like Trevet, the desired outcome would not have been a hybrid religion, but a systematic religious and political takeover, with the Occident over the Orient, just as Trevet's orientalist fiction *Les Cronicles* has it.

#### Constance and the Saracen Merchants

After making his historical move, Trevet attempts to establish Constance as a powerful evangelist. The block quote below is the first extended look at Trevet's



Christianity in action with non-Christians. This sequence may sound favorable to Westerners, if it can be viewed as a demonstration of Constance's or Trevet's concern for the "unsaved." But from a non-western point of view, it demonstrates an orientalist practice that: 1) works to dehumanize the foreign "guests" in order to elevate the protagonist hostess, 2) perpetuates orientalist ontology, or 'way of knowing,' that is, a way of inaccurately or incompletely knowing a non-Westerner, and 3) provides a good example of hiding or reconstructing history to say what orientalists need it to. I will not here address the conversion practice of orientalism, which as Said suggests always seeks the conversion of that which is different (67), because I go into depth on this issue later. The focus here is on the treatment and description of the presence of "heathens," which will also lead to our next section about the placement of Saracens in a pre-Mohammed time. Specifically, in the quote below we see how Christian Europeans silenced, ridiculed, undermined, and in all other ways disrespected their neighbors. Here is how Trevet constructs his heroine's first encounter with "merchants from the great Saracen land":

Puis quant ele estoit entre le treszisme an de son age, viendrent a la court son pere Tyberie marchaunz paens hors de la grant Sarizine, aporauntz [trop] diverses et riches marchandises, a queux descendi Constance pur aviser lour richesses, si lour demanda de lour terre et de lour creaunce. Et quant ele [entendi] q'il estoient paens, lour precha la foi Cristiene. Et puis q'il avoient assent a la foi Cristiene les fist baptizer et enseigner parfitement en la foi Jhesu Crist.

(W)hen she had begun her thirteenth year, there came to the court (...) heathen merchants from the great Saracen land carrying much diverse and rich merchandise; Constance went down to see their riches and asked them about their land and their religion. And when she understood that they were heathens, she preached the Christian faith to them. And when they had assented to the Christian faith, she had them baptized and instructed perfectly in the faith of Jesus Christ. Then they returned to their country. (18-25)

This quote reveals several ways the ontological construction of orientalism is accomplished. In the first minutes of this 600-line narrative, we have witnessed a thirteen-year-old girl immediately dismiss her guests as 'heathens.' First, she did not have them removed, but intellectually, psychologically, and spiritually, if not emotionally, she immediately moved from curious to "in control." "(W)hen she understood that they were heathens, she preached." In the *Middle English Dictionary (MED)*, 'Saracen' has two main meanings: a religious term meaning "not-Christian" (which is noted as a synonym with heathen); and, it geographically refers to "A Turk; also, an Arab; also, a Moslem; -- often with ref. to the Crusades." It should be noted that in the *MED* the term does not refer to any specific geographic location. As soon as the word "heathen" is mentioned, Constance begins proselytizing, then baptizing, and finally indoctrinating: "she had them baptized and instructed perfectly in the faith." Second, Constance asked them about their land and religion, and the Saracens replied, but we do not hear their voice. It could be mentioned that we do not hear Constance either in this section, which is true, but later on we do—however, the narrator never speaks in place of one of his Saracen characters. Whatever the answers these merchants gave to the girl, whatever knowledge from

distant lands, ancient wisdom or actual religious practices, their answers do not matter. The term “non-Christian” is enough to understand that they believed in error and it was the thirteen-year-old’s duty to instruct them. Third, we notice the name of their home is hidden: she is introduced to a group of rich foreigners from “the great Saracen land,” which might have sounded like “an indiscriminate land with a scary name” to a crusade-era medieval Christian. The text then indicates that they returned to their “country.”

A historian educated enough to write Constance’s tale would have known the sixth-century names of countries where ‘Saracens’ dwelled. The fact that he posits his work as history would seem to even require such a detail. The implication here is that his omission was purposeful, and for two reasons. First, denying the mention of the Saracen’s home helped to maintain the verisimilitude,<sup>12</sup> or life-like sameness, of the unidentifiable “other” in the mind of his reader—in other words, it just was not important where these merchants were from—anyone non-European is the same as any other. Second, as we learn from the *MED*, the word “Saracen” is not connected to a nation because such a nation did not exist, especially in the sixth century.

#### Constance’s Betrothal to a Sultan

Perhaps the most striking cultural manipulation is Trevet’s placement of Saracens in the sixth century. This intentionally changed the culture, the religions, the principle characters, and the geography (physically and politically), and therefore adjusted all the contexts to the Roman Empire, of the south-south eastern European and Middle Eastern theatre. Trevet was not necessarily aware of what he was doing, but from this side of Modernity, what we can see happen is the obscuring of Islamic and

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<sup>12</sup> I’ve formed this neologism to blend verisimilitude with homogeneity to express something that is repeatedly represented as real in a uniform way.

Zoroastrian culture. Trevet reports that, after being converted to Christianity, “Puis retournerent a leur terre. Et quant reconstrurent la foi devant leur voisins et parentz Sarazins, estoient accusez a l’haut Soudan de leur foi” (“They then returned to their country. And when they had acknowledged the faith before their Saracen neighbors and family, they were accused concerning their faith before the high Sultan”) (25-27). Readers learn nothing from this information regarding the culture, religion, or country the merchants returned to—we learn only that their faith was noticeably different to those who knew them.

This inconsistency actually works much to Trevet’s historical disadvantage—at least from our point of view (but not necessarily for his original readers). In the late sixth century there were no Saracens or Sultans—the first use of the title ‘sultan’ appeared in the 1100’s, very close to the time of the first crusade. Both Hornsby and Leeks mention the title’s origin is connected to the reason why the crusades were ever started: the creation of the name indicated the gathering of a geo-political force close to Constantinople that attracted Byzantine attention. As for how the name “Saracen” appeared, which was well after the mid-650s, one suggestion attributes the dislike some Muslims had over thinking of themselves as “sons of Hagar.” Sons-of-Sarah became Sara-sons, thus Saracens, a hypothesis confirmed by Leeks. Even the way the *MED* lists it, as geographically referring to three different socio-political groups, confirms that there was never a country by that name. Whether aware of it or not, Trevet’s use of these words huddles all Persian Zoroastrians, Syrian and Arab Muslims, and North African Moors under the same ubiquitous “Saracen” umbrella. Thus, while it is rational that Trevet used the name “Saracen” for his audience, by placing Saracen’s before Mohammed’s time he made a history that hid several other real histories, cultures, and religions, a true orientalist practice.

Yet distinct homelands and religions were not all that Trevet covered up. He also disregarded or ignored the real spatio-temporal history. In 1982, Phillip Wynn actually tracked down “an Arabic text” that he says is the oldest extant source containing the conversion story of an ancient Saracen (notice Wynn does not use the correct nationality either). The text was written by Eutychius in the ninth century (877-940), who Wynn reveals was a Greek Orthodox bishop in Alexandria. Wynn relates that the story is about an Eastern Sultan (again, he uses orientalist language) who wanted to marry Emperor Maurice’s daughter. The deal could have reportedly been sealed by the conversion of the Sultan, but this is where the story breaks down, because the Sultan did not in fact convert. This story is found in Iranian historical accounts as well as in the writing of Eutychius. Through Eutychius we learn that there was indeed a Constantina that married a Maurice in the late 500s. However, Constantina was from Constantinople, Maurice was from Armenia, and the *king* who was offered the hand of a Christian woman in exchange for his conversion was Chosroes II, a Zoroastrian king of Persia, of the Sassanid Empire, who died in 589, two decades before Mohammed’s vision—as such he was not a sultan. Therefore, while this tale is a dead end as far as a historical Saracen presence at the time of Tiberius, Eutychius’ account also makes it clear that a Sassanid Zoroastrian king refused to betray his faith.

The contrasts between Eutychius’ tale and Trevet’s are worth noting. Trevet was bent upon distorting history, if indeed he knew of it. Through Eutychius’ work we can also see and listen to the very people writers like Trevet silenced. Because there is much to learn from these histories, we will look at how Trevet portrays his Sultan, then we will read the alternate version that Wynn presents as the possible source for Trevet’s conversion story.

(E)stoient accusez a l'haut Soudan de lour foi. (...) furent repris par les sages de lour ley (...) Mes puis q'il avoient suffisamment defend la [loi] Jhesu Crist encontre les paens, qi ne savoient plus contredire, comenserent de preiser la pucele Constance de trop haut et noble sen et sapience, et de grant et merveillous beaute et genterise et noblesce de sanc; par quels paroles lui Soudan, trop surpris de l'amour de la pucele, com il estoit home de juven age, maunda (...) a Tyberie (...) un admirail paen ove grant aparail et richescs et presens endemaundant la pucele en mariage

(T)hey were accused concerning their faith before the high Sultan (...) rebuked by the wise men for their faith (...) But after they had sufficiently defended the religion of Jesus Christ against the heathens, who no longer knew how to contradict it, they began to praise the maid Constance for her very high and noble mind and wisdom, and great and wondrous beauty, and gentility and noble lineage; by these words the Sultan, greatly overcome with love for the maid, as he was a young man, sent (...) to Tiberius (...) a heathen emir with great array and wealth and gifts, asking for the maid in marriage. (26-37)

The Sultan imagined in this section is a rather lustful, immature man who lacked conviction in his own religion. But the real emphasis here is on the characteristics of Constance. These descriptions come after we learn that the way in which the thirteen-year-old instructed the merchants was too powerful to be contradicted. It appears that it is worth betraying one's people, lands, culture, and religion for a beautiful maiden. This is what Trevet reports the Sultan did, though it ended up costing him everything he had,

including his life, and we never learn if he actually did convert. Perhaps all Trevet needed was the idea of a possible Christian/Saracen conversion story, which Wynn says he might possibly have gleaned from the following tenth century text:

The Persian general Bahram caused the flight of the Sassanid Chosroes II to the Byzantine emperor Maurice to ask for help against the usurper (...) According to Persian tradition ... Firdausi gives us details of the banquet given by Chosroes II after his victory over Bahram, at which he appears dressed in a robe ornamented with the cross (...) There is some basis with this tradition (...) when Chosroes fled to the Byzantines Domitianus preached to him in an unsuccessful attempt to convert the Persian king to Christianity. Although Chosroes II remained a Zoroastrian, he did exhibit remarkable tolerance toward Christianity (...) his wife Shirin was a Nestorian Christian. (266-7)

The first observable difference between the sultan above and Chosroes II is that of title—the former is a made up, obscure character 700 years out of his era. The latter is a king, his religion is identifiable, and so is his nationality. Secondly, Chosroes II refused to betray his faith—that's the presence of powerful spiritual belief that does not match up with the sultan's lustful betrayal. Next we see that this Persian Zoroastrian king not only was preached to and resisted, but also was actually tolerant of the opposite faith and even wore the emblem of the cross after one of his victories, while the Byzantines were present. The reinterpreting enacted here—even if it wasn't Trevet that used this story—demonstrates orientalism in practice: hiding the history of Zoroastrian worship of Ahura Mazda (which was one of the world's first monotheistic faiths); hiding actual titles/people groups and diminishing them with umbrella names meant to generalize that which is specific; and suppressing an example of actual diplomacy between rivals. One questions

why anyone would want to hide such an ancient display of multiculturalism? Many modern readers would be encouraged to read such examples because it indicates that there were people pursuing a pluriversal<sup>13</sup> international community in what is commonly referred to as a “dark” age. Lastly we can deduce that, while Chosroes himself remained loyal to his culture and faith, he did not prevent those closest to him from following their own path—his wife believed differently from him, but this did not prevent them from being married.

With Said’s work in view, what can be said is that the Constance tale is a robust intellectual work that obscured the distinct images of Zoroastrian, Muslim, and Pagan faith—which is different from atheism—and that it covered up Zoroastrian/Christian relationships that were, in reality, quite harmonious. From our postcolonial vantage point, the history of Chosroes II presents a precedent for harmony between world religions prior to the crusades—a point that Wynn fails to mention. The fact that this event occurred during the period of church growth could aid our own Western minds to be delinked from the Christian mythmakers who sought to sever Muslims from their/our shared world. This is the kind of delinking from false histories that has the power to decolonize the Western mind in order for us to see, hear, and appreciate differences that share the spaces all around us.

The history that Wynn uncovered is actual proof of ancient orientalism that was going on long before Trevet: while this Eutychius maintained that Chosroes II converted, he is the only source from that time to say so. Eutychius’ peers report that in fact the Sassanid king did not convert (and it wasn’t from Islam, but from Zoroastrianism), though

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<sup>13</sup> By way of reminder, this decolonial term confronts “uni-versalism”—a one-world dominant system of governance. Pluriversality is a one word descriptor for the global emergence of localism, a decolonial project, and confronts the existence/development of a master-global design.



he was preached to and the offer was made. So there really was no conversion. Chosroes wanted to marry but would not change his religion for the daughter of Maurice, whose name was not Constance. The “conversion story” should more accurately be called, “the almost conversion story” or “the not-quite conversion story.” Moreover, it should actually be titled as a positive history like “harmonious Zoroastrian and Christian diplomacy,” to begin dispelling the myth that these cultures were always fighting each other. Unfortunately, dispelling myth is not what orientalism accomplishes; in fact, its goal over time is to make the myth of difference and perpetual discord an accepted fact.

Not surprisingly, if Trevet did use the Chosroes II story for motivation, he went in a direction that further distorts history toward what we recognize as orientalism. For in his tale, once Constance’s wedding party lands (on a nameless shore), the Sultan’s evil mother carries out her plot to murder her own son, destroy all the Christians, and prevent a cultural conversion. Constance’s would-be mother-in-law then exiles her to a rudderless boat set adrift in the sea.

#### Trevet’s (Mis)Use of Folklore

After Constance is betrothed to the Sultan (65) and subsequently exiled, Trevet takes on the codification of folklore to display the evangelistic and miraculous power of his heroine’s religion. Specifically, Trevet creates a series of miracles, shifts Constance’s evangelical focus from Muslims to Pagans, and employs a pair of evil mothers-in-law as agents of exile and relocation—first to Northumbria then back to Italy. As for the folklore he manipulates, the most prominent sources are *La Belle Hélèn de Constantinople*, the *Vitae duorum Offarum* (also called the Offa-Constance Saga), and the *King of Tars* legend. From *La Belle Hélèn* Trevet borrows the two calumniated queens; from *Offa* he borrows the drunk messenger motif and the mendicant Bishop; and from the *King of*

*Tars*, Trevet uses the Muslim/Christian marriage and the deformed baby motif. In her book on *The King of Tars*, Judith Perryman suggests this story was a probable source for Trevet because both of the main elements (the mixed-religion-marriage and the deformed birth) are found in it. While Perryman confirms that all six of the extent thirteenth-century tales have the marriage and birth events happen together—which Trevet splits apart—she mentions that the female character is never named. Taken together, the reworking of all these stories presents strong evidence of Trevet’s orientalist skill in altering the tales of his day to tell safer, Christianized stories. What he leaves out includes events such as father-daughter incest, dismemberment, and miscegenation.

So it seems that Trevet was concerned for his audience and wanted to protect them from reading things that would have challenged “the perfect instruction.” For instance, Constance’s marriage with a Saracen never actually happens, and thus the Italian born Constance bears an Anglo-Saxon son, keeping him white-skinned. Trevet uses the deformed baby motif later in his tale, which is actually only a rumor made up by Alla’s mother Domild, which she sent to the king: “Et escript en le nouns les ditz seignurs (...) ‘A quoi tesmoigne l’enfaunt de lui nee, qe ne ressemble pas a fourme de homme, mes a une maudite fourme hidouse et dolerouse” (“in the names of said lords, she wrote (...) ‘whereto witness the child born unto her, which does not resemble a human form, but a cursed form, hideous and woeful”) (290-94). This action created the altercation between Domild and Constance, but from an orientalist point of view, there is another very specific reason for this maneuver: the desire to make the heir of the Emperor’s throne Anglo-Saxon, instead of either Muslim (from the *King of Tars*), Zoroastrian (from *Annales Eutychiei*), or the product of incest (from *Offa*). There is also a religious reason. From the *King of Tars* narrative, Trevet leaves off the part where the black Tartar/Armenian baby is miraculously transformed from a hairy lump into a perfect white baby, via baptism,

because one supposes the child would have been a hybrid, denoting religious and ethnic miscegenation. After converting and being baptized, the King of Tars himself is miraculously transformed from black to white (Hornstein, *King of Tars*), which demonstrates that, as with Euty chius, orientalism was already working before Trevet, which both Krappe and Said verified.

The result of all these orientalist changes of folklore creates possible disaster for Constance, but not quite. She almost marries a Saracen but doesn't, and she has sex with an Anglo-Saxon Pagan, but only after he converts to Christianity. "Et pur les miracles par Dieux moustrez, le roi Alla lui fist / baptizer de l'evesqe Lucius avantnomé, et esposa la pucele qe conceut del roi un enfant madle" ("due to the miracles shown by God, King Alla made himself baptized by the afore-named Lucius, and he married the maiden, who by the king had a son") (256-58). Before this religiously sanctioned wedding occurs, we are offered a prolonged look at Constance's evangelistic power in England, which is verified by the presence of another pseudo-historical character Trevet pulls into his fictive history: Lucius, "a Bishop of Bangor."

#### Constance in Northumbria

The true orientalist nature of Trevet's tale is perhaps best highlighted in the description of *Constance's act of converting Hermegild*. It is deliberately depicted, the emphasis is not on the person being taught, and the focus of this section is on the repetition of doctrine and a conversion experience that is accompanied by a miracle, which subsequently prompts a mass baptism of pagans into Christians. As Said discloses, "(T)he Orientalist makes it his work to be always converting from something into something else" (67). My point here is to show how similar the conversion tactics of Christians are to the orientalists.

Once again Trevet elevates his heroine in comparison to the heathen. Constance, weary from exile, quickly returns to her predestined form, after being refreshed. Lines 145-50 depict her beauty and note that her inner virtues were an example of God's grace. Hermegild, the wife of Olda, the lord of the castle, pledges to do whatever Constance wants because she is peerless. After Constance expresses that she should become a Christian, we are told "Et Hermegild houmblement et devouement escota la doctrine de la foi par la bouche Constance" ("Hermegild listened humbly and devoutly to the teaching of the faith from the mouth of Constance") (160-1). Thus, right away, after meeting someone of another culture and religion, Trevet's orientalist practice is to convert, no questions asked.

In his chapter "The Scope of Orientalism," Said indicates that the process of orientalism is a didactic one that mirrors the conversion practices of Christianity. "For the Orient is corrected, even penalized, for lying outside the boundaries of European society" (67); hence the need for the pagan to be taught and warned of pending doom. In the description of the teaching Hermegild received, rather than accepting hell as her punishment, we hear that Hermegild "devouement pria d'estre baptize," ("devoutly begged to be baptized") (173). The next day Hermegild is given the chance to demonstrate the power of God publicly by restoring the sight of a blind man who somehow knows to call out to her; this happens in front of her husband, who is also a constable of the area, and has his retinue with him. It is in the words of Hermegild, now identified by Trevet as Constance's disciple, where we see Said's insight into the intrinsically similar activities of converting and "Orientalizing." For after Hermegild cures the blind man, "Quant Olda avoit ceo veu, mult's enmerveilla ou sa femme avoit apprise sa bele mestrie" (187) Trevet writes that Olda wondered where his wife had learned her admirable skill. Rather than credit the power to God or even Constance, Hermegild

responded: “qe si il escotast son conseil, tiel merveil freit et plus grande” (“if he would listen to her advice he should perform such a marvel and even greater ones”) (188-89). The power of conversion is passed from human to human like a skill, something that can be practiced and simply duplicated—and the credit for “salvation” or miracles is then passed to the one who does the converting. To this Said would respond that, “Truth becomes a function of learned judgment (...) which in time seems to owe even its existence to the Orientalist” (67). We can see this in Trevet’s account of how recent converts immediately begin to admire “their” supernatural power. Then, when someone else desires that “skill”—Said’s “learned judgment”—to lure the uninitiated, the convert sells a self-benefitting message. When the orientalist converts, continues Said, “he does this for himself, and for the sake of his culture.” Said indicates that from time to time the orientalist/Christian may desire what he believes is the best for the oriental/unbeliever, but that in the end,

The process of conversion is a disciplined one: it is taught, it has its own societies, periodicals, traditions, vocabulary, rhetoric, all in basic ways connected to and supplied by the prevailing cultural and political norms of the West (...) it always tends to become more rather than less. (67-68)

By the end of the scene, Olda and “four score and eleven” members of his household are converted, baptized, and subjected to the tests of a bishop. This as well is an orientalist action that works, historically, as some sort of ethos claim that this event happened. At that time one of the only established churches around was the now famous Bangor Bishopric, in Wales, where Trevet reports Lucius was. This bishop then had them “après q’il avoit assae et esprove qi Olda ove sa femme at sa meine estoient solom droite fourme de la foi Cristiene enforme,” (“tested to prove that Olda and his household were taught according to the true form of the Christian faith”) (200-01). The orientalizing project

eventually leads to Constance's ascension to Queen of Northumbria. Trevet brings in a second jealous mother-in-law, Domild, who employs a drunken messenger, and uses the deformed baby motif previously mentioned, to set Constance with her child back in the rudderless boat for the final scene in Italy. Once there Constance's whole life is pieced back together and readers learn of the demise of the Saracens, which leaves the Holy Land in the hands of Constance's son Maurice, who becomes the Anglo-Saxon Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

#### Maurice and the Holy Land

To make the final point, we must go back to the beginning to hear what Trevet's Sultan promises to give the Western Emperor in exchange for his daughter. The Sultan works a deal with the Emperor, in which: "qe si lui Soudan se voleit assenter de reneer ses maumetz et sa mescreantz et resceivre baptesme et la ley Jhesu Crist," in other words, "that the Sultan must deny his idols, deny false beliefs, receive baptism, and receive the religion of Jesus Christ" (41-43). But Trevet has this Sultan give the Emperor even more: twelve Saracen noble youths as hostages, full consent of conversion for his entire court, peace with all Saracens for Christians, free passage for Christians to travel and trade throughout the land, free visitation of any holy places, surrenders Jerusalem for Christian habitation and ownership, and gives liberty to Christian bishops to preach, baptize, build churches, and destroy temples and idols (39-62). What this projects is a complete medieval orientalist fantasy: every person Constance has met has either converted to Christianity or been killed (or both, in the case of the original merchants); and the Holy Land is not only under Christian rule, Muslim temples are destroyed and thousands of Saracens are dead.

The orientalism in this section is particularly strong. We learn of the aftermath of Constance's failed betrothal once Constance returns to Italy. She connects with a Senator who is on his way back from the nameless land of the Saracens. Trevet says that Senator Arsenius "disoit qe de totes partz Dieux lour avoit done errours exploite de leur enemis, qar la soudane fu arse, et de Sarazins estoient plus de unze mil tuez, mes unqes un Christien n'estoit perdu ne naufre en son ost." In other words, "he told her that on all sides God had given them happy results over their enemies: for the Sultanness was burnt and more than eleven thousand Saracens slain, but not one Christian in his army was lost or wounded" (466-69). This orientalist image certifies the strength of the Christians over the Saracens, in war and religion. After Maurice and Constance are subsequently restored to the Emperor and Alla, Tiberius makes Maurice his heir to the Roman Empire, which had recently gained control over its most coveted possession: the Holy Land.

### Conclusion

Certain historians and medievalists may disagree with this reading of Trevet. Some may say that Trevet never meant the tale to be considered history. Indeed, it would seem more reasonable to me that the Constance tale was merely an attempt at entertainment for Trevet's audience. Yet the fact that historians and literary experts have been searching for "Trevet's source" for over one hundred years indicates that Trevet's Constance, placed within a chronicle, was taken to be historical. Because it is now clear that the tale fails as such, one asks, "What does the tale accomplish?" The tale's orientalism, and the dazzling finish Trevet lays out, creates an image that answers this final question above. By combining the histories, folklore, and other sources I have uncovered and detailed, what can be clearly seen is that Trevet, in the words of Said,

“Orientalized” his eastern neighbors and northern Pagans. This complex orientalist fiction satisfied a crusade-era-Christian’s wish list of crusader treasure: the total annihilation of Islamic/Arabic culture by Christianity and the total socio-economic takeover of the Holy Land by a white Anglo-Saxon Christian heir. The conclusion is that Trevet’s Constance tale certified a victorious Christian European image and justified its intention to convert or kill the “others” of medieval Europe who resisted. This is just how critics have read the narrative until now, and it is how many will keep reading it—that is, unless a reader will ask the kind of questions that reveal orientalist histories and call them what they are: propaganda that advocated the complete removal of Muslims from world history and the establishment of an Anglo-Saxon Emperor to make Jerusalem white and to further justify the crusades. It is these types of fictions, designed to keep severing all-things-Eastern from the West, that foster the same kind of colonized thinking, racism, and religious intolerance, which are the behavioral social ills that our society still struggles with. Compared to this kind of orientalist standard setting story, any narrative that moves in different directions and ends with more positive views of all the people of this world could be considered subversive of the medieval institutions that propagated colonialism.



## Chapter 3

### Chaucer's De-Colonized Custance

*Chaucer's poems both invite and, I believe, finally resist exegetical processing; and his characteristic poetic strategies are designed not only to evade but to explore the hegemonic power of institutionalized modes of medieval interpretation. Exegesis, in short, is itself one of Chaucer's subjects (...) a fully responsive criticism must accommodate both this interest and the skepticism with which it is regarded.*  
Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* 6

The goal of deseverting Trevet's Constance tale from its imbricated historical, geographical, and literary sources is not solely to prove that it is fiction as well as an effective orientalist exemplum. Chapter Two is also designed to enable modern readers of Chaucer to see and hear what establishes his work as one step delinked from Trevet's orientalism. The purpose for the remainder of this study and its major components—the reception history of Chaucer's *MLT* and responses to that scholarship, and demonstrating the distance Chaucer created between his story and his source—is to establish that the narrative and meta-narrative of the *MLT* are less orientalist than Trevet's and therefore enable a multiplicity of meaning. Chapter Three will establish that Chaucer's work was already decolonial because the presence of “multiple meanings” suggests a pluriversal, rather than a universal perspective. To be clear, I will not be reading decoloniality *onto* the text; rather, it is my argument that within Chaucer's text we will find pluriversal elements that have not been recognized as such by most earlier scholars. This is not to say that Chaucer was a decolonial. But as Patterson indicates, because Chaucer's story explores institutionalized modes of hegemonic power and resists dehumanizing the presence and silencing the voices of those who have typically been marginalized, I will argue that Chaucer's tale is not as orientalist as Trevet's. For us today then, and not for the readers of his own time, Chaucer's Custance can be read as de-colonized—that is,

that Chaucer wrote his character as much more delinked from the orientalist practices of Trevet's Constance. My first goal in this chapter is to outline my use of theory and respond to the reception history of the *MLT*. The second is to show how and why Chaucer and his narrator posited their story as fiction—that is, not a history. The third is to illustrate the importance of the pilgrim Chaucer assigned this tale to, the Man of Law (ML). It is through these elements I suggest Chaucer resists the degree of orientalism found in Trevet's Constance.

#### Custance's Differences Summarized

Because all the major elements of Trevet's tale can be found in Chaucer, this brief summary will simply focus on how Chaucer's version differs from Trevet's. The story begins as a merchant's tale of fiction told to the ML. Custance is the princess of an unnamed Roman Emperor. Syrian merchants hear of Custance, and although not converted by her, they carry news of her to the Sultan of Syria. By the Sultan's counsel the Emperor agrees to the marriage with the two conditions that the Sultan abandon idol worship and increase the law of Christ. After the Sultan's death at the hands of his evil mother and the rudderless ship scene, Custance finds Northumberland. Olda's wife, Hermengyld, quickly cares for Custance like a sister, is converted (not confrontationally), and demonstrates miraculous powers that convince her husband (Chaucer does not include a bishop character). The elements in the King Alla and Custance relationship are so similar they need no discussion here. After a five-year float and twelve years in Rome, during which Custance does not commit murder, she is finally reunited with her father and husband. Her son becomes the heir, but neither Syria nor the Holy Land are taken over by either Rome or Christians. These differences all indicate a cultural, religious, and historical perception that is much more harmonious with non-European non-Christians.

As such the *MLT* resists the orientalizing projects within Trevet's version. Such projects sought to colonize all non-European non-Christians, convert them, or eliminate them. Because we see much less of these elements in Chaucer's *MLT*, it can be read as de-colonized.

#### Postcolonial Theory in a Decolonial Project

Because the terms "postcolonial" and "decolonial" are connected, it will be advantageous to briefly outline how I intend to draw upon two main texts written by Homi Bhabha and Walter D. Mignolo. From Bhabha's seminal postcolonial text, *Location of Culture*, I will draw upon the concepts of colonial discourse, discursive ambivalence, and hybridity. Specifically, due to her hybrid nature, because the Custance text is not ambivalent, and because Custance's communication can be read as decolonially discursive, compared to Trevet's Constance, Custance can be read as de-colonized.

I will show how both Chaucer's narrator and central character do not repeat Trevet's labeling of non-Christian non-Europeans with antagonistic, dehumanizing, and subjugating discourse. This labeling, according to Bhabha, is "a familiar maneuver of theoretical knowledge, where having opened up the chasm of cultural difference, a mediator or metaphor of otherness must be found to contain the effects of difference." Trevet's use of the word 'Saracen' is a perfect example of such a metaphor of otherness. This label not only contained the effects of difference—by collating three distinctly different cultures—it also constitutes a theoretical maneuver because the word 'Saracen' is not found in the real history of the 600s: Trevet wrote it there. Therefore, by drawing on more of Bhabha's postcolonial critiques of colonial elements that one can find in Trevet's Constance, I will show how Chaucer's work can be seen as delinked from his source to demonstrate a decolonially discursive tale. More specifically, because Custance is a

character who exhibits balance between opposing elements instead of constantly pursuing the conversion and/or separation strategies of orientalist/colonial discourse, Custance can be read as employing a decolonial discourse.

Showing how ambivalence is deployed in Trevet's 'history' will elucidate major differences between his text and the narrators and characters of Chaucer's tale. Here I wish to point out that the postcolonial usage of "ambivalence" is not the same as the general meaning. With Bhabha as the guide, I will show how colonizers employ discursive ambivalence. For example, Trevet exemplifies the colonial discourse of ambivalence by his frequent diminutions of all non-European non-Christians. Though they are humans just like him (and Constance), Trevet repeatedly stereotypes the characters his heroine encounters as less-than her, as weak, and as different, which maintains his orientalist/colonial discourse. As Bhabha says, "the productivity of colonial power" is found by the construction of "its regime of truth" (96). In order to prevent diverse people from being viewed as equals, orientalists (the pre-colonial colonizers) enunciate cultural supremacy (though there really is none) by the articulation of a fantasy of origin and identity (51, 96). This construction of false truth—a stereotyping discourse—says Bhabha, is the productive ambivalence that depicts a character like Constance as both desiring to save the 'others' in her presence while she also visibly cannot tolerate them. This causes Constance to racially and religiously discriminate and disrespect those who generously aid her. In the same scene in Chaucer's version, this discursive ambivalence in the character is absent. Thus, Custance can be seen as a character delinked from Trevet's more colonized mode of viewing people. Contrariwise, the ML's discourse lacks this racial and cultural ambivalence; Chaucer's text prevents him from speaking derogatorily about Muslims and Pagans—he simply reserves his judgment for their actions. The presence of respect for multiple cultures is evidence too of absent

ambivalence in the ML's discourse (when compared to Trevet—in other words, Chaucer did not carry it over). The point here is that, although he is clearly a “Christian” judge—institutionalized, as it were—as a narrator he does not repeat certain medieval Christian stereotypes; so he has been de-institutionalized. Though he is white, because he does not repeat derogatory racial stereotypes—the kind that orientalists and colonizers used—he can be read as de-colonized. And since the narrator was written to transgress several traditional narratorial conventions that Trevet used to enunciate the false truth of difference—that is, to use colonial discourse—the ML and his character can be read as speaking a discourse of decoloniality. What this means is that neither the ML nor Custance are portrayed as ambivalent because they are not depicted as having internal/external struggles with the difference of the non-European non-Christians they speak of and encounter—I call this absent ambivalence because it was in Trevet and Chaucer refused to include it.

The final key element from Bhabha is hybridity. One way this complex term functions in colonial texts is to maintain the ‘other’ as “almost the same but not quite” (127-128). Through mimicry, the colonized who try to become full participants in the dominate culture become “*almost the same but not white*” (128) and are thus hybrid. However, hybridity has more than one meaning/function. Speaking figuratively, Bhabha relates how the language of critique can become effective because it can “overcome the grounds of opposition and open a space of translation” (37). I will show how this space of translation relates to Chaucer's text, which, as other critics have argued, can be read as challenging medieval institutions and as counter-hegemonic. Additionally, I will argue that because the poet utilized vastly different narratorial strategies, the tale can be read as capable of stimulating a reader's imagination and that the presence of diverse views of diverse people points to the kind of hybridity Bhabha identifies as belonging to texts and

practices that seek to change and challenge colonial discourse (37). I will demonstrate how both of these hybridity definitions can be found in multiple places in the *MLT*, such as: in the narrator's character and law; in the characters of Custance and Maurice; and in the *MLT*'s overall message. In fact, with all of the above in view, the tale can be seen as an exemplum of hybridity rather than one that merely exhibits the benefits awarded exclusively to Christians for their 'constancy.'

Lastly, I will draw on several of Mignolo's works to illuminate the process of delinking from the control of Coloniality—this is what is referred to as decoloniality. I cannot say that this delinking process was in effect during Chaucer's day because modern colonialism did not exist until 1492. But simply put, because Chaucer's central figure is less orientalist than Trevet's, I view the *MLT* as a text that has been delinked from the oppression of an orientalist objective. Mignolo (much like Said) excels at pointing out how Christianity and Western literature have constantly worked together in the mission to "civilize and save" the rest of the world, whether the local people of foreign spaces wanted them to or not—we saw this in Trevet, but Chaucer distances his tale from this type of evangelizing mission. I also claim that Chaucer's Custance can be seen as a hybrid image because her actions and words engender a more harmonious approach to international conviviality through a pluriversal way of knowing, especially when she is compared to Trevet's Constance. That is, because the *MLT* proclaims itself a fiction, not a history, and its narrator and protagonist each resist orientalist practices to offer pluriversal options that activate a decolonizing of the mind, the tale can enable Western readers in seeing, hearing, and valuing both the differences that were present but hidden in our past, as well as those within our present reality. I do not contend that Chaucer's medieval audiences were necessarily aware of this alternate reading, but I want to argue that part of our ethical academic responsibility today is to uncover the

histories that have been hidden, to put an end to orientalist practices and new forms of coloniality, and to re-legitimize all those who have been colonized (or subalternized) into a less-than-equal state of existence. We in the humanities must confront that which has dehumanized the coeval, equally valuable presences and voices of our fellow women and men, therefore, revealing hidden histories, ending coloniality, and re-legitimizing subalternized knowledges formulate this study's decolonial objective.

### *MLT'S Reception History*

*"If we were to put together all the narrative voice readings of the Canterbury Tales published since Kittredge, we would find that almost every tale in the collection (...) had been seen as bad in itself and justified only by satire directed against its teller—a sad pointer to the fact that many Chaucer critics do not much like Chaucer."*  
A. C. Spearing, *Narrative Voice* 726

The reception of Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* is genuinely lopsided. Even since Spearing's bold, and honestly quite generous, rescuing of the *MLT* from the hands of a hostile academic medieval tradition, there have been only a few select critics who have taken the charge that he put forth: "it may be necessary to ask different questions" (726). The body of work seems to have gone through four general phases: readings that take the poem as exemplum, to critiques based on narrator issues, then scholarly applications of new theory investigating narrative or main character flaws, to the current scholarship that seems to be focusing on smaller cultural and societal research interests because of the tale's unusual concentration of non-white non-Christians.

Early criticism seemed to have been incapable of seeing anything unusual. From Skeat (1900) to Kittredge (1903) to Tolkien (1934), most early scholars found that the *MLT* is unquestionably an exemplum of Christian behavior amidst crisis and an exposition of God's inexplicable use of power. As Kolve posited in 1984, Custance is simply Christ-like and the rudderless ship is perhaps among the oldest biblical

iconography that could have been chosen for the heroine to be transported by. Benson, in *The Riverside Chaucer* (1985), also asserts that this had been the unanimous reading in the historicist and new critical readings of the *MLT* up until recent times.

Criticism on the values and narration of the ML began to sour in the 1970s. First Wood condemned the man as a “short-sided” and “morbid determinalist,” and then Delasanta accused the narrator of “pharisaical schizophrenia” (2). In the 80s, Carolyn Dinshaw’s *Chaucer’s Sexual Politics* read the ML as a promise breaker who said he would not tell a tale of incest but, according to Dinshaw, did just that. In the 90s, though not writing specifically about the *MLT*, Kathryn Lynch’s “East Meets West in Chaucer’s *Squire’s* and *Franklin’s Tales*” demonstrated how Chaucer’s eroticized subjects show “an excess of female sexual power connected ... with the exotic east” (530). But then in 1991, around the time when Lee Patterson wrote that Chaucer narration “evades and explores the hegemonic power of institutionalized modes of medieval interpretation” (6), it seems that some critics began to ask deeper questions, such as, if Chaucer was indeed anti-hegemonic how can he also be anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, anti-Feminist, and anti-“Other”? Thus a gap seemed to open up for new readings.

In 2000, Spearing broke the stigma of the enigmatic narrator, as well as a good many “absurd” renderings offered as “historical interpretations” of Chaucer’s intended meaning (725). From a decolonial’s perspective, the tale’s views and voices of subalternized people and their cultures is exactly what was being missed. Spearing hypothesizes that “only ideological preconceptions can prevent competent readers from recognizing Chaucer’s ironic expressions of a pessimistic view of the cosmos, the tormented and magnificent darkness of the poem, and that there can be no clear distinction between narratorial and nonnarratorial elements” either in the *MLT* or in any of



the *Canterbury Tales*” (731). These elements, Spearing continues, “belong to Chaucer’s normal narrative manner” (733).

Picking up on this notion of criticisms/misreadings prompted by “ideological preconceptions,” the 2000s produced a wealth of alternate readings of the *MLT*, including enough postcolonial articles to fill three anthologies. Sheila Delany, in her compilation *Chaucer and the Jews* (2002), posits that the *MLT* “polarizes East and West” (50), and presents insightful research to lay the foundation for the decolonial view, positing how current and knowledgeable Chaucer must have been with both the Jewish and Muslim culture and religion of his era. Likewise, Sylvia Tomasch’s chapter, “Postcolonial Chaucer and the Virtual Jew,” presents a wealth of discipline-diverse sources to express why England (among perhaps many more nations) can be viewed as a colonial space, which anticipates the materialization of colonialism, especially in view of the infamous 1290 Jewish expulsion. While Keiko Hamaguchi’s title indicates her emphasis upon *Non-European Women in Chaucer* (2006), her book furthered the postcolonial reading by positing Chaucer as a proto-decolonial. She positions Chaucer’s vernacular English pilgrimage as a project of the decolonization of English, from the Anglo-Norman authorities, which helped to establish the status of English (15). This reminds Chaucerians used to conceiving England as “the center” that Chaucer’s English language was still in the shadows of Norman French, and that England was on the margins of Europe rather than at the center of the (pre) colonizing Western Society. Hamaguchi is also one of the few critics of the *MLT* who has thoroughly reviewed and contested Trevet’s historicity (23). Many may disagree with Lynch’s interpretation of Chaucer’s narrator’s characters as excessively sexually powerful, while others, like Susan Schibanoff, claim Custance has no voice (69). Likewise, Angela Florschuetz finds the *ML* prescribing male dominance while Brenda Deen Schildgen offers evidence within the

*MLT* of hybridity, using “discourse ethics” (influenced by Jürgen Habermas), in her book *Pagans, Tartars, Moslems, and Jews in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales*. Francine McGregor’s “Abstraction and Particularity in Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*” (2011) resists cornering Chaucer’s conscience, noting that Chaucer inscribed Christian elements out of Trevet’s piece (demonstrated below), thus making his characters and represented cultures less vilified.

In recent studies, the questions seem to have become more complex while simultaneously shrinking in terms of what is focused on within the tale. Much as Spearing rescued the *MLT*, Gerald Morgan adds that, apart from Spearing, because most critics have misunderstood the nature of the ML, their renderings have been “unsoundly approached” (2). Morgan’s thorough research, into the figure of the “Sergeant of the Lawe” (described in the General Prologue, 309), certifies that the ML is the exact narrator Chaucer meant to tell the tale. When he says, “We must conclude Chaucer’s choice of name posits Custance as something more or other than ‘constancy’” (12), Morgan also argues persuasively that the judge’s training and sense of moral justice positions Custance as a “doer of good” and that her actions follow “the law of good” (which will be expanded upon below). Although Morgan himself finds “nothing unorthodox in Chaucer’s religious beliefs” (33), he agrees with Spearing that “only the combination of brilliant lawyer and master poet would be sufficient to explain” the “extraordinary power and magnificent darkness” of the *MLT* (31). These authors since Spearing, such as Delany, Hamaguchi, Morgan, McGregor, Schildgen, and Tomasch,<sup>14</sup> can be viewed as those who have “asked different questions,” which have helped steer research away from the

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<sup>14</sup> I do not include Patterson here simply because the work I draw from is not specifically a critique of the *MLT*.

traditional view of Chaucer and his ML as bigoted, incestuous, untrustworthy, Christianizing propagandists.

I intend to further this project. I believe that Chaucer offers “a different view” of the world and proposes a radical cultural return to an ancient ethical law of communal behavior, the law of good. More bluntly, I will show how, as Gerald Morgan puts it, “Custance is no Christian missionary” (14). I also suggest, as Schildgen points out, that “totalizing readings that see the *CT* through the lens of Augustinianism, a mercantile ethic, gender studies, or even as the work of a happy-go-lucky entertainer (...) tend to restrict the work’s possibilities to a single ethos.” We can appreciate the tale if we practice more ethically based discourses, refuse to read over the presence of hidden histories, and take seriously the suggestive divergent material within the text that has been waiting to be explored and released.

#### Chaucer’s *MLT* as (Not)History

*In the olde Romayn geestes may men fynde  
Maurices lyf; I bere it noght in mynde.  
The Man of Law, MLT 1126-27*

In several ways, Chaucer indicates that his tale is a work of fiction, and/or something that has been embellished from its original source. As I have shown in Chapter Two, finding any real Maurice who spent time in England during the time of Alla is a goose chase. As Chaucer tells us outright in the quote above: “I am not bearing in mind the history of a character named Maurice, you can find that in the old Roman *Gests*,” which Benson, and Fisher and Allen confirm are supposed to be histories and chronicles written by authors such as Bede, St. Gildas, and possibly Geoffrey of Monmouth. However, as both Benson and Correale maintain, no such life story appears

in any of the Roman *Gests* connected to Great Britain or Saxons. Interestingly, Monmouth contains a description of a Maurice, but it does not give his biography (Reve & Wright 81.211). Regardless of whether Trevet had a source (which no one has found), Chaucer distances his version of the story right from the start by labeling it a tale, by giving data not in Trevet to tell a truer version (in a sense), by rehumanizing the non-Christian characters the readers encounter, and by not giving certain data that Trevet did.

What often classifies a work into one genre or another are the terms authors use. Some clarification of popular medieval terms such as chronicle, *gest*, history, story, and tale will be helpful to see this. In his article, "Storie, Spelle, Geste, Romaunce, Tragedie: Generic Distinctions in the Middle English Troy Narratives," Paul Strohm discusses how Middle English writers classify their narratives as: relationship to actual events (*storie*, *fable*); mode of narration (*spelle*, *tale*); language/literary tradition (*romaunce*, *legend*, *lyf*); proportion of represented action to argument (*geste*, *treatise*); and movement of the fortunes of the protagonist (*tragedie*, *comedie*) (348). Strohm first covers those authors/works who introduce themselves as faithfully giving historical accounts by referencing eyewitnesses and older sources to support their authenticity. These writers predominantly labeled their productions *stories*, *histories*, and *chronicles*, such as the material by Trevet. The next genre mentioned by Strohm is the *spelle*, which he says,

(C)ould be applied to any narrative delivered orally, and in the process it gained a loose classificatory—if not actually generic—significance.

Concurrently Middle English offered another word for oral narrative in *tale* (from OE *talū* or 'speech'). Of the two, *tale* was certainly the more general, comfortably including all the narratives of Chaucer's pilgrims whether or not they possessed such supplementary generic identification as *storie*, *treatise*, or *lyf*. (353)

Thus, though a history, legend, or romance could be a *tale*, the term indicates that it was also something spoken and therefore not necessarily something authoritative to be preserved as an historical document. Strohm confirms this by saying the general sense of *spelle* and *tale* as ‘speech’, the general sense of *gestes* as ‘deeds’ or ‘actions’, and the general sense of *historie* or *chronicle* as ‘account of real events’, determined each work’s more specific literary use (354). The *MED* also lists that a ‘tale’ could be “an event, purporting to be true,” as it’s first description, but then each subsequent entry is distanced from ‘history’ by entries such as: “an unsubstantiated story; a story known to be untrue—a fabrication; a frivolous story; or, a proverb.” With this in mind, it would seem that our understanding of the medieval form of narration known as *tale* leans toward fiction rather than fact.

Whereas Trevet’s piece has all the marks of something that is pretending to pass for fact, even before the *MLT* begins we can understand it is going to be a fiction. Thus Chaucer’s first departure comes from his pilgrim’s prologue, in lines 131-3, “I were right now of tales desolaat / Nere that a marchant, goon is many a yeere, / Me taughte a tale which that ye shal heere.” I argue this kind of beginning moves readers away from literally expecting to hear something historical. To a scholar or historian this tale would look very distorted indeed when compared to a source like Trevet, who begins with “En le tempis cist emperor Tyberie, come dient les auciens croniques des Sessouns,” (“In the time of this Emperor Tiberius, as the ancient Saxon Chronicles report.”). Trevet’s tale is located in a *Cronicles*, begins with a genealogy, and attempts to establish its historical legitimacy throughout the tale by frequently reminding the reader of historical data previously mentioned. Chaucer delinks his narrative from a very specific ‘chronicle’ and he gives it a very general origin: from a merchant. In other words, the veracity of the tale is immediately assumed to contrast his source.

Many critics may disagree with the above observation and could even point to certain components of the tale that might be seen as attempts at authenticity. One such example is Chaucer's use of *De Miseria Conditionis Humane*, by Pope Innocent III, which editors of *The Riverside Chaucer* confirm was written in the late twelfth century. In their notes on the prologue, Fisher and Allen confirm the difficulty many critics have had in knowing what to do with the enigmatic prologue when they say that, "it is hard to see how the 'poverty prologue' is an appropriate introduction to the *MLT*" (87). Yet this remark gives us insight: creating confusion in an audience is not an ethos appeal. Rather than working to authenticate this tale, the *Riverside* editors postulate that one reason Chaucer may have added Innocent's work was to date the Prologue and Tale in the late thirteenth century (856); they add too that it was likely the poet was contemporaneously translating *De Miseria* while working on the *MLT*. After my own close reading of Chaucer's inclusion of Innocent's work, it seems that one function *De Miseria* serves is to further establish the character and manner of the Man of Law pilgrim. While I treat the importance of this specific narrator in the next section, there are two points here worth making that connect the prologue to the idea of Custance being distanced from Constance.

As the *General Prologue* tells us, the ML could quote English laws and statutes (I, 327) and, by quoting a pope, we learn he was able also to quote important Christian figureheads. I argue that this marks him as a very institutional man. Yet when we look at the content of the first three of the five prologue stanzas, what we see contains warnings: to pray in difficult circumstances (99-105); to be wary of blaming Christ for one's plight or to compare one's life to a neighbor (106-112); and to be careful not to fall into the wicked life that accompanies indigence (113-119). These warnings work to tell readers that this character understood life's vicissitudes and that sometimes all a person can do is call out for help. However, in the presence of such unpredictable change, there is also another

constant source of good and protection—this is what the ML will offer via his tale: the law of good. With these warnings in mind, the last two stanzas of the prologue serve as a suitable transition, though perhaps they are not as seamless as a poet might write. Thus, the narrator's lack of grace fits his manner—he can quote laws and important people, but his storytelling transitions need help (as do his narration skills, which we will see). Fisher and Allen's quote therefore makes sense, for the presence of Innocent's work before this specific tale is actually disorienting, which serves the poet to distance himself from his narrator and his source (who had a reputation as an historicist). Likewise, disorientation is what a Man of Law might very well feel in a tale-telling competition on the way to Canterbury. He can readily quote Justinus or Pope Innocent but he says, "I were right now of tales desolate" (131). In this quote we see the character of the ML—he's sticking to the rules of the game—he is trying to make a connection between the tale he has in mind and the kind of people he heard the tale from: merchants. He describes these as prudent noble merchants, just like the kind he begins his tale with. But this also confirms the tale's oral origin, which creates more distance from Trevet's "based on *Roman Gestes*" rhetoric.

When thinking of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, writers have been tempted to transpose this or that character as being "based on" some real figure or event. "Did this really happen," or "was this a real person?" Spearing touches on this notion regarding the *MLT*: "We cannot even know that the events of the story "really" followed the course he recounts ... most readers probably assume that narrative events (the *histoire*) and the direct speech of the characters are reliable" (729). This quote indirectly confirms the thought 'as with Trevet so with Chaucer' and that the reception history of the *MLT* shows that many people have thought this tale to have a real reliable source. But I maintain that while Chaucer may gesture to a source (as a way of undermining his narrator's

credibility), because he also distances his poem from being viewed as historical, the poet can be read as giving his readers a different perspective. This is a practice of delinking that suggests he is not as orientalist as Trevet. Decolonial scholar Rolando Vazquez clarifies that “a decolonial thinker’s task is to listen, from a position of humility, first to the geographic and cultural history of their own location.” This listening, Vazquez suggests, creates an awareness of one’s own location that, in the case of colonized spaces, can open a person’s consciousness to what has formed their global perspectives in social constructions like race and religion. In this regard the *MLT* demonstrates Chaucer’s awareness of his geographic and cultural history while he simultaneously distances his version from being considered *historical*.

As it turns out, race and religion are two aspects immediately treated very differently in Chaucer, and in ways that ironically are more historically accurate than how Trevet employed them. In the very first line, Chaucer names the specific country of origin of the merchants who visited Rome and heard of Custance: “In Surrye whilom dwelte a compaignye / Of chapmen riche, and thereto sadde and trewe” (134-5). One may think that seeing how Chaucer’s tale is in a sense more accurate works against my argument here. I grant that if the tale started here, I might agree. However, in his first of three subject changes (the history, the Syrians, and the Emperor), we can see and hear that Chaucer is not solely trying to distance himself from Trevet’s piece in terms of genre. The way the poet crafts his opening scene actually rehumanizes the merchants, especially when compared to Trevet’s opening. Because Chaucer removes the presence of Saracens and gives the merchants a real country, his text may appear to be more historically accurate. But because the narrator has already told us the origin of his tale, and because Chaucer has removed any visible connection of the story from an actual history (like Trevet’s reported ‘chronicle’ or *Roman Geste* connection), the tale remains



fixed as a fiction while it works to rehumanize the presence of non-European non-Christians.

As the narrative continues, Chaucer continues to distance his tale from Trevet's. A good example is in his treatment of the Emperor. Naming a key historical Christian political figure would certainly work to place this story into a firm history—especially an Emperor of Rome whose place in the macro-narrative of Western history would be irrefutable. It cannot be unimportant that Chaucer leaves this monarch nameless—all seventeen times the character is referred to without a name—while he names the nation of origin of the merchants. This move does several things at once: it does not allow the reader to give too much attention to this figure; it resists placing the narrative in an identifiable year; and it refocuses the narrative on the important elements of Custance and the Syrians.

While there are many other differences, the most striking is the inclusion of Mohammed and the presence of the Koran in this blatantly Christian tale (224, 332). These are not present in Trevet. Trevet does offer the name of the Pope who condoned the wedding—this too Chaucer leaves silent. Actually Trevet made it impossible for his tale to be historically accurate by including a non-specific synonym for Muslims, such as Saracens, and then placing them prior to Mohammed's time. Chaucer cleverly avoids this by refusing to name his Emperor or his pope, and because he is naming and giving a much more palpable presence of Islam within his tale, I argue this tale can be read as being more tolerant and respectful of the non-European non-Christians of the day. This is an example of pluriversality—the presence of multiple ways of knowing, or, the refusal to maintain that all cultures should follow the same universal way.

Just as Chaucer withholds personal names, he also withholds place names. In lines 507-8, when Dame Custance arrives on the shores of Northumberland, the ML

says, “Under an hold that nempnen I ne kan / Fer in Northumberlond the wawe hire caste.” The Sargeant tells us here that the waves cast her far up Northumberland’s coast, under a castle that he cannot name, “nempnen I ne kan.” In the notes of *The Riverside Chaucer*, Benson quotes Smith and Block, who suggest respectively that Chaucer avoids using all the data Trevet included to possibly protect his sponsor, John of Gaunt (861), or to continue his poetic pattern of eliding circumstantial data. Chaucer does this once again during Custance’s second voyage, when the boat touches the coast of Spain: “Under an hethen castel, atte laste, / Of which the name in my text noght I fynde” (904-6). Again, Chaucer leaves out that Trevet mentioned this shore was on the eastern side of Spain, the Mediterranean Side, where the Moors ruled from the early 700s to the late 1400s. Consequently, since Trevet’s version gives these geographical details and Chaucer withholds them, the claim that the author deliberately delinked his tale from Trevet’s is incontrovertible.

One effect of these absences is to provoke questioning—the “imaginative engagement” that Spearing mentions creates room for different interpretations—“I wonder what castle it might have been?” It is as if the ML is saying, “My poet Chaucer knows more about the source of my tale, but he’s chosen not to reveal what he knows.” In *The Disenchanted Self*, Marshal Leicester describes this exact activity as *discursive consciousness*, “the kind of reflexive awareness that monitors the ongoing flow of activity so as to be able to give an account or an interpretation of it in so many words” (18).<sup>15</sup> It is also an example of deixis, as Spearing points out, a poetic device that creates the effect of the speaker being in the same time and space of the characters of his narrative. For him, this technique prevents there being any clear distinction between poet and narrator

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<sup>15</sup> I hasten to add here that Leicester’s use of ‘discursive’ is only used here in relation to the act of speaking/using a discourse—it is not connected to the postcolonial usage of maintaining a colonized image.

(731), yet another key distancing from Trevet, who maintained himself as the voice of his tale.

### The Importance of the Narrator and Law

Chaucer's election of the ML as the narrator of this tale is crucial, has been grossly misinterpreted, yet needs to be kept in mind. Additionally, Chaucer's main point, his poem's central theme, is that following the law of good is a better model for a Christian to set than an evangelizing one. First I will address the importance of the narrator because it is key to seeing the central message of the tale, the law of good. The reason these two items are kept together is intentional: they are interconnected.

That Chaucer gave his tale a narrator, and Trevet didn't, is a crucial difference. Following Spearing's call to give an "attentive reading" (733) to the text of the *MLT*, I suggest that Chaucer assigned his retelling of the Constance tale to his pilgrim character the ML for the following specific reasons: his authority in law is unquestioned; his historical and geographical location make the audience presume to know him as legal and Christian; and as a seasoned judge, deeply familiar with human misery, he prescribes the most effective law: the law of good.

In his critique of scholarship on the ML, Spearing says most critics attribute the presence of contradiction within the *MLT* to either 1) poetic error or 2) an erroneous understanding of Chaucer's intent and personal beliefs. Spearing criticizes other critics' use of the word "dislike" in reference to Chaucer disliking the ML. Yet when Spearing goes on to say, "it has nothing to do with not liking the narrator, it has to do with disliking the effects of institutionalized religion" (721), it is important to stop. Studies in decoloniality reveal that much of coloniality's oppressive nature is due to its marriage with highly institutionalized versions of Christianity, just as Said associates orientalism and

conversion. The connection here is what most critics miss: while many of Chaucer poems contain anti-institutional material, in the *MLT*, he wrote through an institutionalized character. It may never be clear what Chaucer believed, but he spoke through a judge, “A Sergeant of the Law,” who Gerald Morgan’s research confirms was a knight in late 1300’s English culture—in other words, a member of the institution. Who better to speak through, for a poet who “explored the hegemonic power of the institution” (Patterson 6), than an accepted, proven, respected, and almost incontestable voice: a Man of Law? One may ask how the ML can be viewed as anything but hostile toward others when he refers to them as the “hethenesse,” “barbre” and “pagans” whom Custance encounters? He does so by focusing on the actions of those involved and by pointing out who was using institutionalized religion—as a cover, shield, or weapon—and who was not using institutionalized religion, namely Custance. Few critics have considered that Chaucer was not painting these foreign peoples, cultures, and religions in a bad light.

Articulating these departures can enable readers to see the *MLT* as the kind of counter-hegemonic engine that writers such as Hamaguchi, Patterson, and Spearing agree is possible. As discussed above and in Chapter Two, the gap in Spearing’s argument was due to his assumption that the *historical events* in Chaucer’s sources were “reliable.” I have shown that this is unlikely and that Chaucer took very specific measures to distance himself from the idea of his narrator’s tale being read as ‘a history.’ I now intend to show that Chaucer’s central message in the tale is different from Trevet’s and that the narrator aids a pluriversal perception of the world. The result is a more accepting, multiculturally embracing, and theologically non-excluding story made possible by poetic strategies like the untrustworthy narrator. These strategic devices work to fashion a story of hybridization that arguably would have touched Chaucer’s readers on a multiplicity of cultural, philosophical and societal, religious, and cosmological levels. The laws

elucidated below seem to reveal a different side to Chaucer's, or the ML's view of the three cultures amply<sup>16</sup> present in Custance's tale—and let it be remembered, the ML received this tale from a merchant: one who would have had access to and would have been accepted in both Pagan, Muslim, and Christian circles.

#### The Law of Good

*For swich lawe as a man yeveth another wight,  
He sholde hymselfen usen it, by right /  
Thus wole oure text.*

The Man of Law, *MLT* 43-45

In order to address the importance of law in the *MLT*, which I find to be pluriversal in nature rather than institutionalized (universal), I will break this section into the following three points: the importance of the biographical data on Chaucer; the importance of the lawyer's words and laws within this tale; and the importance of the law of good. These important points continue to solidify my overall thesis that Custance can be read as delinked from her orientalist precursor.

Though many scholars seem to miss it, Chaucer's *MLT* is "an alternative to Trevet" in ways that make it an alternative to orientalism. Through Custance and the complexity of her tale and taleteller, today the *MLT* can be read as prescribing the opposite of orientalism, which is a decolonial practice that decoloniality studies. In his article, "The Many Face of Cosmo-polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism," Mignolo theorizes that Coloniality is the rhetoric of Modernity, a rhetoric of "saving people" through total societal and environmental domination that was constructed as "a mission of Christian evangelism" with concealed economic and nationalistic motivations of a darker nature (725-28). This is exactly what we see with Trevet and his orientalist

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<sup>16</sup> I say 'amply present' because there are several more cultures listed or referred to.

*Constance*. The work of decoloniality is to create alternatives, or as they put it “decolonial options,” to enable the colonized to delink from the colonization they’ve suffered, as well as to enable former colonizers from (re)enacting colonialism, or its current relative, neo-liberal capitalist development.

Some biographical points of Chaucer’s life and some history of Chaucer’s role in the development of the English language will provide a richer medieval context for this alternative line of thought. Ruth Evans, in the *Idea of the Vernacular*, brings to the reader’s mind the fact that “English did not occupy a position of privilege, let alone have global status, in the later Middle Ages” (Wogan-Browne et al, 366). As one of his king’s delegates, as a scholar, an international traveler, and a welcomed diplomat in foreign spaces (Cuttino 100), it seems possible that Chaucer would have had a broad appreciation for multiple cultures. Anyone with this background could find the practice of treating minorities, people of color, and other nations contradictory to the law of good, all the while maintaining an identity as “a Christian nation,” to be repulsive. I posit, as a possible explanation for why Chaucer’s version is so distanced from Trevet’s, that English medieval culture was practicing behavior that undermined a nation of “followers of the law of Christ.” It is to this glaring contradiction that Chaucer and his ML could conceivably be pointing to. This indeed would be a clear departure from the conversion tactics of Trevet’s heroine narrative, which function more as an orientalist law for institutionalized Christians.

The connection here, going back to Trevet’s biography, is how Chaucer and Trevet differ on the subject of religion. In Trevet the law is orientalist and very religious: convert or die. Gerald Morgan demonstrates in five pages that the *MLT* would have been an expert lawyer, judge, knight of the court, as well as incontestably well educated (1-6). Per his epigraph, the ML basically introduces himself by identifying with a very specific

law—perhaps an alternate construction of the Royal Law—that one ought to treat another man by the same law he uses. The lawyer finishes his proverb with “thus wole oure text.” I would like to look very closely at this line, specifically at the words “wole” and “oure text,” for in it I see two important issues that bring clarity to my reading of the *MLT*. It will become clear why I proceed in reverse order of appearance. Lawyers are supposed to be attentive to their words and texts. Editors of *The Riverside Chaucer* suggest that the “text” here referred to could be the *Digesta* of Justinian (Benson et al. 855)—they say the law mentioned above comes from Justinian, a view that Fisher and Allen confirm. But it is just as likely that the ML, who immediately comments on Chaucer’s work, actually uses “oure text” to refer to the *Canterbury Tales* themselves. This reading gains more credibility when one considers the ML’s use of the word “wole.” The Riverside glosses the word simply as “says.” However, Fisher and Allen render their gloss “asserts.” The online *MED* lists this form of the word “will” in two ways: “(a) **wole** to intend (to do sth.), plan; and (b) *ppl. willinge as quasi-adv.*: intentionally.” Fisher and Allen’s gloss “asserts” makes sense because the ML later demonstrates through his tale of Custance that the law he has just given—the law he follows and is responsible to administer publically—has a power unto itself. In essence, it is not just any law he has quoted. In his vast experience as both lawyer and judge, what he shares serves his story as his epigraph and as a model that answers exactly what happens to Custance and all those who interact with this most liminal being.

The third and final point of this section is also the main point of Chaucer’s *MLT* and will be carried forward through the end of this chapter. This is the principle that, if Custance does good to others, good is done to her. Likewise, if one is kind to Custance, they are kindly treated. Or perhaps it is better said, however awkwardly it sounds, “If one does good to Custance, good is done back.” On the contrary, if anyone does evil to

Custance, they receive a commensurate amount of evil in return. Those who mean to kill her die, those who mean to dismiss her suffer to some degree, and those who do harm to her unintentionally suffer for it but are eventually restored to her (with the exception of Hermengyld, who is an innocent victim and the catalyst for the tale's largest demonstration of divine intervention). Based on the law the ML gives as his epigraph, Chaucer meant to give his readers a story that does not dehumanize the people Christianity typically and historically abused and constantly mistreated, despite its religious principle to "be at peace with all men" (Romans 12:18). Chaucer portrays Custance as more than a theological allegory: she is an exemplum of international empathy whose harmonious actions (which are always good) speak for themselves. This is the law the ML uses as his foundation: the law of good.

The law of good is largely concerned with what we can control, namely our words and actions. And while the narrator and characters frequently appeal to what we can't control—the sun, moon, and stars<sup>17</sup>—we humans are responsible only to control our actions and words. This essay is concerned chiefly with what we humans can control. In the following sections then, it is the way Custance interacts with people (actions/words), according to the law of good, that defines her and sets her apart from her predecessor, Trevet's Constance, whom the historian used as an image of domineering Christianity. It is because of the way Chaucer situated his Custance, in comparison with Trevet's Constance, that I maintain readers today should be able to see Custance embrace other cultures, other non-Europeans, and other knowledges, even if the main outline of these tales is similar. Chaucer's Custance is not an agent for an orientalist Christian mission

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<sup>17</sup> I will leave the sun, moon, and stars to more competent researchers—if readers are interested in studying the Man of Law's use of the stars, Gerald Morgan's article, "Chaucer's Man of Law and the Argument for Providence," makes an excellent starting point.



but a counter-cultural force of international and interpersonal acceptance. She can be read as hybridized and decolonially discursive because Chaucer refused to write her as an ambivalent character who oppressed her neighbors with false stereotypes.

### The Decolonially Discursive Custance

As Gerald Morgan points out, the name change of the main character in Chaucer's version of Trevet's Constance tale is a bigger decision than most previous scholarship emphasizes. 'Constance' is an allegorical saint-like human who all readers agree stands for the model of a "Christ-like" believer—with the quotation marks emphasizing a kind of behavior that matches Trevet's form of institutionalized orientalist Christianity that belittles, mocks, severs, and constantly seeks to keep subjugated the others within its sphere of influence. Much like the name, Custance as a character not-so-subtly resists this reputation, and in three ways: 1) not being labeled a missionary; 2) resisting patriarchy and institutional religion; and 3) demonstrating balance between opposing elements, rather than religious fixity. For these reasons, when compared to Trevet's discursive orientalism, the protagonist and discourse in the ML's tale of Custance is noticeably decolonial.

Most *MLT* scholarship in regard to the three points above argues the opposite. But Patterson, Leicester, Spearing, and Morgan not only go against traditional criticism, they also suggest Chaucer's poetic strategies *can* decolonize a reader's imagination *because* said strategies beg the reader to question both narrator and author, character, and overall meaning. In his groundbreaking article on the Coloniality of Power,

“Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” Anibal Quijano<sup>18</sup> writes of decolonial projects versus Coloniality, “It is not only a matter of the *subordination* of the other cultures to the European,” which is what Said’s *Orientalism* is all about, as seen in texts like Trevet’s. “We have also to do with a colonization of the other cultures (...) the relationship consists, in the first place, of a colonization of the imagination of the dominated; that is, it acts in the interior of that imagination” (23). I would like to connect this idea of the role of the colonized/decolonized imagination with the importance of decision-making. Morgan is worth quoting at length here, not only in regard to Custance’s name, but also regarding free will, and the law of good. First he cites how Trevet and Gower use ‘Constance,’ exclusively; then he says of ‘Custance’:

This usage has to be deliberate and indeed Chaucer characteristically marks his independence of his sources in minute details. Strangely enough such an alteration has seemed of little interest or significance to Chaucer’s modern commentators (...) But the name a poet attaches to the heroine of his story cannot be so unimportant or so unworthy of respect (...) We must surely conclude, therefore, that Chaucer signifies in his choice of the heroine’s name that she is something more than or other than a personification of the moral virtue of constancy. The importance of individual identity here is related to the strong emphasis in the tale on the reality of human free will and in consequence on choices good and bad about which judgments can properly be made. (...) It is a mark of her human ordinariness (she is not a scholar) and of her self-communicating goodness. (12)

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<sup>18</sup> Quijano was the first to articulate the structure of Western Modernity as formulating a “patròn colonial de poder” or a “colonial matrix of power,” says Walter Mignolo (*Western Modernity* 8).

This argument stands in direct opposition to those who have argued, from a feminist view, that Custance is a typical medieval missionary female character, abused and objectified. Though I agree with many of their points, when Schibanoff recurrently tells us that the *MLT* was Chaucer's call to gather Christian men to arms against heresy, or when Florschuetz develops her claim for patristic patriarchal primogeniture that borders on incest, I must disagree. The "something different" I see Chaucer doing, right from the start, can delink a reader's imagination from colonial stereotyping and suggests a different process for making decisions and making judgments. While it is true the context of the story is still patriarchal, by changing Trevet's character from Constance to Custance, the author begins with a less-Christianized version of the original: that is, a more globally accepting and acceptable heroine who can simply be seen as good, not necessarily as a constantly evangelizing Christian object.

A clarification of theological stances demonstrates the point, as does an understanding of how a colonialist discursive image functions—that is, as something that maintains a false discourse of foreigners as inferior. When we remember how Trevet's Constance disrespects people's origins, refuses hospitality based on discrimination, and chooses to kill when there is no immediate danger, I would not say that Trevet's Constance behaves in ways that reflect Jesus' self-sacrificing actions/teachings—although I acknowledge people may read Jesus' teachings differently. Rather, Trevet's heroine demonstrates an orientalist Christian's view of what an "institutionalized-Christian-like" person should do, which is to immediately judge and condemn what is 'non-Christian' and attempt hostile confrontational conversion whenever possible. With Constance, even her name is a signifier of her personification of Christian doctrine. Delinked from her previous critics' views and Trevet's fictional mission-oriented character, Custance can be read as a decolonially discursive character whose non-institutionalized

Christian mind (focused on doing good) is constantly reacting to the varied topics, situations, and the presence of wildly diverse belief systems. These characteristics match up with Vazquez's description of the decolonial's task to listen with humility. Custance is able to accomplish this, with unusual grace and acceptance, because she is mindful of her location and the history of the geography she is in. A good example of this is when Custance first arrives in Northumberland, in lines 505-525. The exile arrives on shore, is picked up by a constable, understood by her "Latin corrupt," but the first thing we are told of her discourse with her rescuer is that, "what she was she wolde no man seye, / For foul ne fair, though that she sholde deye" (524-25). In other words, under no circumstances would she tell anyone her complete identity. This is a very distorted "Christian heroine" compared to Trevet's Constance, who we are told answered the constable in Saxon by telling him first that she was of the Christian faith, and second, that she was of rich, noble lineage (129-134). On the one hand, Trevet's Constance immediately establishes her faith, class, and blood. On the other hand, Chaucer's Custance conceals her outward appearance, fits in with the locals, and is soon known primarily for her good deeds. These are attributes that decolonials recognize as pluriversal, because they resist the discourse of Coloniality, which seeks to discriminate, classify, and convert. I conclude with Morgan that while Custance is Christian, she's no missionary bent on confrontational evangelism (14). I also substantiate Schildgen's point that when we totalize the *Canterbury Tales* through patristic lenses we run the risk of limiting the poet's work to a single ethos, and one that I have posited would be exclusively orientalist/Western. Likewise, by saying that Custance and the ML's tale demonstrate a discourse that is decolonial, I am not limiting it to a single ethos or global perspective, I am practically applying pluriversality—the opposite of a 'uni'-versal view.

While I do argue that it is hard to view Trevet's Constance as anything but orientalist, the above reasons seem to delink the *MLT* and Custance from the scores of scholars who have prevented alternative readings. In fact, it seems inaccurate to label Chaucer, or his *ML*, as typically Christian, and I think critics should resist cornering Chaucer's conscience in this way, since he re-interpreted the overtly Christian elements out of Trevet's piece (demonstrated above and below), thus making his characters and represented cultures less vilified. In Trevet's introduction, we recall that the first time we meet non-Europeans, they are called Saracens and "heathens" and are forcefully converted by a thirteen-year-old. This is how Chaucer's narrator introduces his foreign merchants:

In Surrye whilom dwelte a compaignye  
Of chapmen riche, and therto sadde and trewe (...)  
Clothes of gold, and satyns rich of hewe.  
Hir chaffare was so thrifty and so newe  
That every wight hath deyntee to chaffare  
With hem (...) (133-140)

There is nothing in this text that can be read as a slander against these Syrian merchants, whose reputation is "sadde and trewe" or steady and trustworthy, whose goods "Hir Chaffare" are sought after by everyone, "That every wight hath deyntee to chaffare / with hem." These merchants in Syria go to Rome, "for chapmanhode or for disport," or business and pleasure, and there hear about Custance from "the commune voys of every man" (142, 143, 155). After they see her they gather their things and leave Rome.

Home to Surrye been they went full fayn,  
And liven in wele; I kan sey yow namoore.

Now fil it that thise marchantz stode in grace  
Of hym that was the Sowdan of Surrye,  
For when they cam from any strange place  
He wolde, of his benigne curteisye,  
Make hem good chiere, and bisily espye  
Tidynges of sondry regnes for to leere (173-181)

In this section we are told that when they returned home, they lived in prosperity, and the narrator says “I kan sey yow namoore.” Then we receive another description of the Sultan of Syria that cannot be translated as anything more than positive. This sultan would demonstrate “benigne curteisye” (kind and courteous) and have a reception for merchants that traveled to “sondry” (different) places in order to “bisily espye” (eagerly seek) to learn from them. Notice that, in both the sections above, this first description elides derogatory discourse of Islamic culture—in fact, we learn of the religion of the merchants later. This indicates that what was more important was the character of both the merchants and their sultan, not their religion. Therefore, Chaucer’s treatment of Muslims and Trevet’s treatment of Saracens are completely different; the former is much more diplomatic and much more delinked from the orientalist view of the latter, who sought to always maintain the orient as inferior.

There are a few scholars who agree with me on this point. Schildgen quotes Habermas’ statement that “a consensus on principles of justice that is neutral with respect to worldviews, and hence inclusive, is required in view of religious and cultural pluralism” (3). Then she says, regarding Chaucer, “In this context, we might see the frame of the *CT* as an imaginary political environment in which the telling of multiple tales by multiple voices supports this neutrality of worldviews.” The *MLT* can hence be read as

not maligning Muslims or Pagans, or femininity for that matter (as I show below). In her article, “Abstraction and Particularity in Chaucer’s *Man of Law’s Tale*,” Francine McGregor substantiates my reading when she observes,

(D)isjunction encapsulates one of the poem’s fundamental modes—(it represents) Custance as a discrete being even as it partially overwrites that particularity with universal qualities. By placing Custance’s embodiment of abstractions such as faith, constancy, virtue, and beauty in perpetual tension with her singularity and with contingent history, *the tale situates her at a nexus of realist and nominalist epistemologies*, suggesting as it does so that abstraction is an intrinsic but also austere hyperopic mode of human perception. (61, italics and parenthesis mine)

Abstraction is hyperopic—the farther something abstract is, the clearer it looks. This principle might explain why traditional close readings of Chaucer fail so miserably to convert his abstract images into clear meanings of what his poetics portray.

Consequently, the idea of Custance being *situated at a nexus of realist and nominalist epistemologies* can help us clearly see how, as a liminal being, Custance serves as a good bridge between two entities; especially when her most defining quality is her practice of the ML’s law of good. In fact, Morgan points out what I mentioned above, when in Northumberland, “her human ordinariness (...) and her self-communicating goodness are revealed (...) they speak for themselves” (12).

I would like to share one more example before moving to ambivalence and hybridity. As is often the case when comparing Trevet with Chaucer, the most obvious evidence of difference is found in what Chaucer did not carry over or in what he added. In the passage above, where readers are introduced to noble merchants from Syria, Trevet’s Constance immediately converts the “Saracen” merchants in her father’s court—

Chaucer removes this scene entirely. However, almost 300 lines in, when he gives the audience their first look and sound of Custance, Chaucer adds a scene that presents his protagonist as humbly accepting her parents' choice. Accompanied by the presence of her real spiritual faith, yet with words of resistance as she prepares to leave for Syria (ostensibly never to return), the lady says:

Custance youre child hire recomandeth ofte  
Unto youre grace, for I shal to Surrye,  
Ne shal I nevere seen yow moore with eye (...)  
I moste goon, syn that it is youre wille;  
But Christ (...) / So yeve me grace his heestes to fulfille!  
I, wrecche woman, no fors though I spille!  
Wommen are born to thraldom and penance,  
And to been under mannes governance. (278-287)

With infinitely more pathos than the whole of Trevet's work, Chaucer has Custance entreat her parents to recall her to their memory as she reluctantly follows their will for her to go to Syria. She exclaims that through Christ she will have the grace to follow and that she sees this as a calling she must fulfill. But she finishes the scene very un-stereotypically with an exclamation of resistance at how women are viewed: as wretched and of little value even in death. She then laments and identifies the very patriarchal system that prevents her from making her own choices: women are born into servitude and penance and to be under man's authority—this is a discourse of decoloniality.

Diverse scholars have criticized diversely. Some have viewed these very lines as evidence of Custance's agency as a willing missionary, and some critics have emphasized Custance's role as an objectified female with no voice. A decolonial reading, however, might argue that this young woman demonstrates a decolonized spirituality



because, while she accepts her parents decision as God's will she is not hesitant to make her voice heard in the court of the Emperor. It is a powerful moment of faith in harmony with both her emotions and her mind. What one could gather is that she knows, cognitively, that what she understands as divine power will accompany her and enable her to survive this test. But what we see and hear, which is absent in Trevet, is an upset woman who has every right to be so and every right not to hide it. Accordingly, she asks her parents not to forget about her (which generates an abundance of sympathy) and finishes by making an astute observation that many medieval people know but perhaps few are willing to verbalize: that women are subjugated and colonized by the power of men from the time they are born. By presenting a woman who knows how and when to speak her mind with force and politeness, a woman who also is not converting everyone she meets regardless of the situation, Chaucer's Custance is distanced from Trevet's colonialist discursive precursor as a character that maintains a decolonial discourse.

#### Absent Ambivalence in *MLT*

Ambivalence is a key strategy in colonial discourse. Homi Bhabha describes the postcolonial term *discursive ambivalence* as what is produced in colonial texts by stereotyping that which is paradoxically known yet must be repeated. In other words, ambivalence is a process of stereotyping, placing into fixity, that which is constantly changing, with anxious repetition (94): the other's otherness, which is made up, must be constantly repeated both physically (through acts of oppression) and discursively (through speech and writing). As I mentioned earlier, we can see Bhabha's "familiar maneuver of theoretical knowledge" (45) in the previous chapter. For fear that the 'other' might simply be viewed as 'people from a distinct culture,' Trevet accomplished the orientalist practice of stereotyping by collating stories from Zoroastrian, Arab, and Muslim

cultures (across seven centuries) and portraying them all with a discursive orientalist image—of enemized Saracens—inferior to anything or anyone western and/or Christian. It is this dual process of calling everything different by the same name—other—and maintaining anything ‘other’ as physically (or spiritually, emotionally) weak—inferior—that Bhabha says makes up “the function of ambivalence as one of the most significant discursive and physical strategies of discriminatory power” (95).

In this section we will look at examples of the above process. We will see where Trevet set his character up to maintain orientalist discourse,<sup>19</sup> which will demonstrate how the text deploys ambivalence, when Custance kills a person she naturally desires to save. We will then see how Chaucer’s character, in the same scene, is not put in the same situation. In Chaucer’s text, because Custance was not written to repeat what Constance did, there is a lack of ambivalence, from a postcolonial vantage point. Additionally, because Chaucer chose to leave out negative descriptions of non-Christians where he could have inserted them, or simply followed Trevet’s lead, we will see evidence of how this lack of ambivalence, in regards to religion and culture, leads to very positive effects that maintain and reciprocate the law of good. Because Trevet’s Constance is upheld as a ‘christ-like’ heroine (someone who would, like Christ, sacrifice himself for everyone), and because she both desires to save inferior ‘others,’ yet is practically derisive of anything non-Christian, she exemplifies colonial discursive ambivalence. Bhabha captures this moment between desire and derision.

In order to understand the productivity of colonial power it is crucial to construct its regime of truth (...) the *productive* ambivalence of the object

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<sup>19</sup> While there are differences between *orientalism* and *coloniality* connected to origin of the word, history, academic discipline, and scope, for the intents and purposes of this decolonial project, I use these terms as synonyms because they both have as their function the denigration and oppression of all non-white, non-Christian, non-Europeans.

of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained with the fantasy of origin and identity. What such a reading reveals are the boundaries of colonial discourse and it enables a transgression of these limits from the space of that otherness. (96)

Recalling how Trevet's Constance greets, questions, and immediately moves to proselytize her father's 'Saracen' guests is a perfect example of how the Christian heroine was written to articulate "difference contained with the fantasy of origin and identity." At first the girl is excited to meet new foreign people (desire) but when she learns of their identity—which, as I proved, was a false history (fantasy) that hid what would have been a real, Zoroastrian origin—her opinion of the guests crumbles (derision) and she immediately employs the conversion mission. This is how ambivalence is deployed in Trevet. In Chaucer's *MLT* we do not find such moments of derision in Custance because she has been delinked from that type of institutionalized religion that, Said would say, actually orientalizes a person's spirituality through the orientalist mission. In other words, Custance can be read as decolonized because she is not shown to see the other as "lesser than" because of origin or skin color. Chaucer also does not have Custance use colonial discourse in her descriptions, responses, or interactions with those people from different cultures. More specifically, because readers do not see Custance mistreat or judge people based on their origin or skin color or faith—that is, because she does not stereotype or maintain the fantasy of their 'otherness'—she does not exhibit an institutionalized orientalist Christianity, nor does she maintain colonial discursive ambivalence. Another aspect activated by this lack of ambivalence is, as Mignolo would put it, "the spiritual decolonial option," which he asserts, "advocates decolonizing religion to liberate spirituality. The common ground for the reinscription of spirituality is the desire to find ways of life beyond (...) the belief in the superiority of Western Civilization" with its

inherent religious affiliation with an institutionalized Christianity (*Western Modernity* 62). That Chaucer's Custance is religiously liberated from the belief that the Occident is superior to the Orient presents another stark distortion compared with Trevet, who, as I showed with Said's work, sought to either convert non-Christian non-Europeans, or kill them.

In the following text, we will see how Bhabha's discursive ambivalence functions, both physically and through discourse, to maintain the non-Christian as an enemized 'other' and to even enact physical oppression that establishes the supremacy of the Christian. Specifically, we see Constance discriminate and then kill a man. This takes place after Constance is exiled a second time. In this passage from Trevet's tale (which I did not cover in Chapter Two), Constance and Maurice run aground under a nameless castle. The "heathen emir" of the castle employs a Christian apostate named Telous as his seneschal. First the Emir receives Constance in the castle, feeds her, gives her drink, and then offers her shelter as his guest. Constance accepts hospitality and sustenance but refuses to stay the night under the roof "of an enemy of God" (368). This kind of language is nowhere in Chaucer's version; he only uses harsh words to describe those whose actions follow the law of evil. When Trevet's emir sends Telous to accompany Constance and keep her safe, as the latter reveals that he hopes he can return to God, Telous is immediately enticed by the devil to tempt Constance sexually. When Constance refuses, Telous threatens her with harsh words in front of Maurice. Constance uses the presence of the child to convince Telous not to try anything and then asks him to check all around to see if there is any land nearby.

Et taunt come fu plus curious, Constance, pur sa chastete sauver,  
priveement lui vient rere au dos et le trebuchu en la mere.

While Telous is anxiously checking, Constance, to save her chastity,  
sneaks up behind him and pushes him into the sea. (393-94)

Trevet later describes this action as Constance having “drowned Telous” (393-4). This passage says much about Constance’s faith as well as Trevet’s perspective. After having been rescued, fed, given drink, and offered shelter by total strangers—which ironically mirror the actions of Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan—the discourse of the text describes these charitable men as “enemies of God,” then Constance physically rejects them. The colonial ambivalence can be seen as she accepts their resources to meet her needs but then she refuses their hospitality because she sees people with different faiths as her enemies. Thus, returning generosity received from non-Christians can legitimately be transgressed. This is the opposite of Christ’s teachings: return good with evil—this type of behavior actually produces moral ambivalence, in the general usage of that word (not to be confused with the postcolonial usage of discursive ambivalence). The author created the situation for Constance to return good for good, but, because of his strict religious discrimination (fixity), actually has his character mistreat the very people she previously tried to save.

Trevet tells us himself why Telous and his emir have been treated this way: because their origin is potentially Muslim, they are enemies of God. This character was condemned from the start as a traitor, an apostate of the Christian faith, and under direct influence of the devil. Notice too, from the passage above, that this lack of respect is immediately glossed over by more unethical behavior. The strategic move by Trevet here—that Constance rather abruptly has to think of saving her chastity—frees the Christian evangelizing heroine from having to worry about Telous’s salvation. With rapidity of logical thought Constance tricks Telous and then causes his death. Is this killing for self-preservation? Was her life or Maurice’s in imminent danger? It really

doesn't matter, the orientalist point has been made: the Christian was physically superior to the non-Christian whose 'otherness' was repeated through discourse ('heathen,' 'apostate,' 'enemy,' 'tempted by Satan'). It is all the more striking that no one could really argue that Constance should not have pushed Telous; the scene literally does not allow us to make that judgment. We do not want Constance to commit murder, but we don't want her to be raped either. It seems all we are to keep in mind is that if one turns from following the Christian God one might be tossed into the sea by a Christian "heroine."

Now that we have seen discursive ambivalence in Trevet (and even general ambivalence toward ethical behavior), we will see the absence of these elements in Chaucer. While the ML uses the name "heathen" in connection with the castle, because the poet first removes the location of this event, it is impossible for any reader to slander any religious or ethnic other. The ML describes a totally different scene here from Trevet's, for Custance remained on board and did not receive anything by way of sustenance. Late one night, from the castle, an apostate steward thief came down and said he would "Hir lemmen be, wher so she wolde or nolde" (917). That is, willingly or not, he was going to make love to her. Maurice starts crying, Custance starts crying, there's a scuffle, and then, "blissful Marie help hire right anon, / For with hir struglyng wel and mightily / The thief fil overbord al sodeynly" (920-23). Aided by Virgin Mary, while mightily struggling, the thief suddenly falls into the sea. Chaucer then spends four stanzas in his rhyme royal to describe how God has spared other potential victims. This dramatically different version of Trevet's tale, which leaves out discrimination, discursive ambivalence, and murder, and adds what easily fits into the law of good, creates a distortion that I find hard to miss, when one understands how Chaucer's Custance has been distanced from Trevet's Constance. Rather than putting both Custance and the reader in demoralizing situations built by discursive ambivalence, these stanzas evade

and explore the hegemonic power of institutionalized medieval interpretations (Patterson 6). As Spearing asserts, the decision to tell the tale this way has nothing to do with the author “not liking the narrator,” or not liking the characters, “it has to do with disliking the effects of institutionalized religion” (721).

Perhaps some may not read Chaucer’s work as a critique of the hegemonic forces of his day—many medievalists may argue that we may never know what the average person in Chaucer’s audience thought of the poet’s work. But I argue that there is a latent decolonial critique within the *MLT* that coincides with finding those ways of life beyond the belief of the superiority of the colonizer, which Bhabha’s and Mignolo’s texts have helped me to reveal. And, as Bhabha would put it, “The language of critique is effective to the extent of which it overcomes the given grounds of opposition and opens up a space of translation: a space of hybridity” (37). Diverse scholars read Chaucer as diversely opening spaces for his readers to translate Custance’s faith—how one reads what he included or let his narrator describe depends upon the reader’s imaginative engagement. This is simply not possible with Trevet’s version, where both the characters and readers seem locked into reading the situation in the same way: strict Christianity is superior. Instead, what I see being advocated for in Chaucer’s *MLT* is finding ways of life that actually bring about the kind of “love your neighbor” attitude and self-sacrificing that the Good Samaritan parable engenders. That is, one member of one culture and faith helping out any member of any other faith or culture because it is the right thing to do. We see here Chaucer, through his ML, writing an opposite scene from his source, which follows his credo. “For swich lawe as a man yeveth another wight / he sholde hymselfen usen it” (83-84). Because Chaucer has freed his central character from the choice between saving herself and killing someone, she merely attempts to defend her life and that of her son’s because she is physically attacked. Notice that this is when the law of

good acts again, as it were, rescuing Custance and delivering justice to the guilty party apart from Custance.

Because colonially ambivalent elements are absent in Chaucer, readers can be led to a broader worldview. Compared to Trevet, there are fewer conversions, less religious tension, and only one instance of oral evangelization in the *MLT*. Roger Ellis states bluntly, “The pagan merchants arrive from Syria and she converts them” (120). Chaucer removes this scene altogether and leaves out Trevet’s account of what happens after Constance has been married and subsequently witnessed the assassination of her husband. Ellis tells us that the Muslims kept her alive, recognized her as the chief agent of Christian Imperialism, and subsequently put her to recantation tests, including punishment if she refused to become a Muslim (121). None of this is in Chaucer’s tale. And because he deletes the above opportunities to show Christian evangelism at work and instead includes the diverse views of non-European non-Christians—that bounce from Italy to Syria, from ‘the other’ back to a European family unit, and then back from West to East (which we will see below)—Chaucer’s version of the Constance tale is counter-hegemonic: it has respect for the non-European.

I find Chaucer’s tale promotes pluriversal perspectives—it’s about seeing the perspective of the other. His version resists the process of spiritual and cultural colonization through the process of stereotyping the imagined ‘otherness’ of people who were equals. At no time are either of the “views of the other” derogatory or racially slurring—in fact, unlike Trevet’s text, which at no time has a Muslim or any non-Christian speak, we see in Chaucer’s tale how both cultures view each other’s law. Chaucer puts the Muslim counsel first in this situation:

Diverse men diverse thynges seyden.



Thanne sawe they therinne swich difficultee  
By wey of reson, for to speke al playn,  
By cause that ther was swich diversitee  
Bitwene hir bothe laws, that they sayn  
They trowe, that no Cristen prince wolde fayn  
Wedden his child under oure lawes sweete  
That us were taught by Mahoun, oure prophete. (211, 218-224)

The religiously neutral nature of the ML (who speaks and seems to believe as most Christians do) is seen here: while there was opportunity to portray these men in numerable bad lights, the narrator actually speaks as a Muslim, he says the law of the Muslim is sweet, not a lie, error, or heresy. In fact, this council is not vilified in any way; quite the contrary. As we saw earlier of the Muslim merchants, the ML says, "Hir chaffare was so thrifty and so newe / That every wight hath deyntee to chaffare / With hem, and eek to sellen hem hire ware" (2, 138-140). And the Syrian's view of the Italian is equally favorable. The Sultan is so moved by love and "everyman's commune voys" (155) that he tried to marry the best woman he had ever heard of. Honestly, which lover doesn't try to pursue the greatest partner they've ever heard of? A pluriversal reading of this scenario recognizes that it is her character and beauty that the Sultan desires, and he demonstrates the ability to look past the obvious separating points (religion, culture, geography), neither afraid of her religion nor wanting her to change. Finally, a word must be said regarding the demise of the Sultaness. Needless-to-say, Trevet's version is rather less flattering than Chaucer's, in fact, Hamaguchi points out that, "the ML (though English) never takes the side of the English mother-in-law and the Syrian mother-in-law's resistance seems to be at least understandable because of her loyalty to her old tradition" (44). These aspects of the ML's narration, Hamaguchi concludes, point out that despite

the denial of Islam, both Chaucer and the ML show the Syrians as virtuous in many ways. But I would further argue that in both *Trevet* and Chaucer, the Muslim mother-in-law only uses her Islamic identity to rouse her fellow co-conspirators—she does not act upon the Law of Mohammed, or the Law of Moses. By secretly plotting the assassination of her own son, the ruler of the land, and his lieges, she reveals that her motivation has nothing to do with her religion, love, or the law of good—in fact, in light of her actions, it is actually unclear what she “believes in.” She actually asks, “But, lords, wol ye maken assurance, / As I shal seyn, assentyng to my lore, / And I shal make us sauf for everemoore?” (341-43). She asks that, if the lords make assurances, assenting to her advice, she can make them all safe forevermore. This seems to disagree with the Islamic tradition of each person being judged by his or her own works. But whereas *Trevet*’s history simply leaves this as the devil’s influence, Chaucer’s poetics are clearer on this point, because he has created a narrator familiar with law, who himself established the tale’s epigraph. Because she acts upon the evil inside her to cause her son’s death and mistreat Custance (2, 323-29, 358-64), as we learn later in the narrative, the Sultanesse is subsequently brought to as destructive an end as she initiated, proving the ML’s foundational law: whatever law you treat others by will be given back to you. The law of evil begets evil.

As mentioned before, what is stirring here is what is missing, as in *Trevet*’s dogmatic religious discrimination. As Bhabha clearly says, “The analytic of ambivalence questions dogmatic and moralistic positions on the meaning of oppression and discrimination” (95). The discursive ambivalence of Chaucer’s source is absent within his own tale’s center because Custance refuses to discriminate. The Sultan also refuses to discriminate. Even the narrator, though he most certainly is Christian, breaks the subjectification of the stereotypical discourse—the ready recognition of images (i.e. *Trevet*’s history making)—of oriental inferiority by positing Muslims, Pagans, and women,

in much more favorable light. Perhaps some might read Chaucer as portraying a type of de-conversion, in line with Heidegger's de-severing, Mignolo's delinking, and what Bhabha might call de-fixity. All of these tools of analysis help describe the process of de-colonizing an indoctrinated mind from its ambivalent nature to both desire to convert others while all along despising their very presence, knowing all along that there really is no difference between colonizer or colonized.

### Hybridity

*(T)his borderline existence inhabits a stillness of time  
and a strangeness of framing that creates the discursive image  
at the crossroads of history and literature, bridging the home and the world.*  
Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 13

What started as an attempt to draw out the many different perspectives has finally arrived at my fundamental point: Custance is a hybrid and is unlike Trevet's theologically fixed orientalist Constance, who like her name never changes. I break up this last section into five points to discuss how Chaucer created distance between his tale and his source. First I will elaborate on how Custance identifies herself in Northumbria as a hybrid. A discussion of the law of good as pluriversal will ensue to show that it is also decolonially discursive, hybrid, and therefore not bound by religion. Understanding this pluriversal law, and seeing it in Custance, enables diverse people to see diverse things, which is my third point. The fourth touches on liminality—occupying the space between—and how Custance's hybridity functions, which will lead to my last point. Custance's son Maurice, although certainly portrayed as a hybrid in Trevet, has an opportunity within Chaucer's narrative that is completely different, because of the presence of Muslims.

Hybridity, according to Bhabha, might never be able to be defined in one sentence. As a product of strategic mimicry, where the 'other' becomes 'almost the same but not quite/white,' hybrids rise to places of equality in colonial spaces, but, because

they are always identified by some external marker, can never achieve full acceptance within the discursive ambivalence, which constantly repeats that they are 'almost the same but not quite/white' (126-29). However, of characters who come from borderline cultural existences, Bhabha theorizes that, "Such cultures of a postcolonial contra-modernity may be contingent to modernity, discontinuous or in contention with it, resistant to it ... but they also deploy cultural hybridity of their borderline conditions to...reinscribe the social imaginary of both ..." (9). This quote obviously is not directed at medieval society, but to the extent his narrative and message are so different from, and even resistant to, his source, Chaucer can be read as demonstrating counter-cultural tactics that suggest alternative intercultural options for future readers. In contrast, much of Trevet's fiction leads to an orientalist mission. As Mignolo puts it, "The decolonial option does not mean decolonial "missions." Missions imply projects of conversion (...) Options are the antithesis of missions" (*Western Modernity* xxix). Thus, because Custance does not ever appear as or claim to be an evangelist, and because she hides her affiliation with Christianity when she arrives in England, her identity stands out as being nebulous, unconventional, or a non-institutionalized being bridging institutionalized spaces: in essence, hybrid.

How people identify themselves is usually important. Most Chaucerians have seemed to overlook this difference between Custance and Constance, but it seems at least one other scholar agrees with me where this nature is most acutely seen. As McGregor mentions in her article, when Custance arrives in Northumberland, she purposefully hides her identity (as I mentioned before in lines 524-25); thus her usefulness to the institution of Christianity and its global designs are foiled. Gerald Morgan observes that it is only her goodness and honest beliefs the heroine passes on through her example of diligence, love, and observable humility, over a protracted period

of time (12-14), as opposed to some institutional “perfect instruction” like Trevet’s Constance preaches. Granted the ML does not give a very favorable account of the status of Northumberland’s cultural openness, but one needs to remember the story is set in sixth-century England, not exactly a time of ecumenical harmony, historically speaking. This being said, it takes effort to encounter dehumanization in either the way the Northumberland folk lived or in the manner with which they are described—what this means is that, for one who sees discrimination, it can be found. But if one’s perspective is delinked from seeing discriminatorily, another reading is available, and this leads to my second point.

The law of good is not fixed to one religion. When it comes to people interacting with each other, we see the Constable searching the shore after hearing the wreck, being filled with pity at the sight of Custance, who then brought her up to the land to meet his wife. By all accounts, this is a very favorable description of pagans from a Christian narrator. It is in the very next lines that I believe we encounter the active agent that Schildgen and Habermas encourage, a discourse of ethics that “speaks for itself” (3).

She seyde she was so mazed in the see  
That she forgat hir mynde, by hir trouthe.  
The constable hath of hire so greet pitee,  
And eek his wyf, that they wepen for routhe.  
*She was so diligent, withouten slouthe,  
To serve and plesen everich in that place  
That alle hir loven that looken in hir face.* (526-532, italics mine)

Custance said she was so confused in the sea that she truly forgot herself. The Constable pitied her greatly and his wife too, to the point that they wept. Yet because Custance was so diligent to please and serve every person without any laziness, each

person that looked on her face loved her. Quite obviously, it is not an evangelizing mission that takes over here but the diligent service to please everyone that causes all to love her. This is the law of good, without words, communicating in its purest form: words and actions, not doctrine or an exclusive religion. Good begets good no matter where one is from or what one's skin color is.

This is the very heart of my argument and the reason many study literature: to find evidence of the power of love, unattached from any religious appropriation. It seems Chaucer and his analogous or real lawyer storyteller told a tale that spread the idea "to live virtuously, to injure no one, to give each man his right." This is the law Gerald Morgan says the ML would have epitomized, based on Bracton's *De legibus et consuetudinibus Angliae*, the code of the ideal judge (1). Morgan also says only a poet and a lawyer could have communicated such a complex message with such grace and eloquence (31).

This constable and dame Hermengyld, his wyf,  
Were payens, and that contree everywhere;  
But Hermengyld loved hire right as hir lyf,  
And Custance hath so longe sojourned there,  
In orisons, with many a bitter teere,  
Til Jhesu hath converted thurgh his grace  
Dame Hermengyld, constablesse of that place. (533-539)

Absent from these descriptions are derogatory or dehumanizing descriptors of 'the other' (colonial discourse). A hybridized few might see that these people were equally valued as pagans, and a few (not whole households or the whole country) converted to Custance's way of life. They were not evil, wanton, sinister, or even untrustworthy. In fact, Hermengyld loved Custance, the foreigner with amnesia, "as hir lyf." Thus, love and good beget the same. Another popular exemplum element missing: Christian jargon between

Custance and Hermengyld. There is no mention of evangelical persuasion; the actions speak for themselves.

This speaks to the very logic of the law of good. If everyone follows Bracton's three rules for the ideal judge, "to live virtuously, to injure no one, to give each man his right," then everyone's needs are inevitably going to be met. Many will disagree with this view and miss the non-dehumanizing elements, and this is fine; the goal is not to say one way is the only way the *MLT* should be read. Many might point to the fact that when the Muslims reject Custance, they kill all the Christians—as I have shown, this could alternatively be viewed as just a propitious power exchange carried out by a manifestation of evil. But still some may point out that the Emperor of Rome kills all the Muslims that followed the Sultaness. But the difference in number is huge: in Trevet 11,000 people were slaughtered, while in Chaucer only those loyal to the traitor Sultaness were killed, to avenge the princess's death. Additionally I ask in what time, in what space on earth, would the powerful father of a murdered daughter not seek revenge upon the guilty? And if a Muslim ML were telling this tale, would not all the roles simply be reversed? And the hypothetical critics within his culture would say, "My, what a dehumanizing story he's told. See how his character is objectified and the "Others" (in this case, the Christians) are dehumanized?" Likewise then we Westerners would say, "See how they hate us?"

The fact of the matter is that it is a tricky accomplishment to see 'the other' through the eyes of the subaltern party in a narrative. But this is what Chaucer's poem so skillfully allows us to see. My third point touches on what many have seen within the *MLT* but have not been able to fully articulate: diverse views of diverse people. What might be said is that the stereotypical Christian's perspective of the non-Christian world is turned upside down when the Muslim's perspective of *his other* is shown. But this isn't all, for

then we see the Christian's view of the pagan's view of the good woman (a willfully non-verbal Christian), which is not to say a passive human—it takes great effort to control one's words.

The constable hath of hire so greet pitee,  
And eek his wyf, that they wepen for routhe.

This constable and dame Hermengyld, his wyf,  
Were payens, and that contree everywhere;  
But Hermengyld loved hire right as hir lyf. (520-536)

These “views” are even more complicated when one considers the narrator behind the heroine. Custance, a Western princess, is first forced to marry an Eastern sultan and later marries a pagan king. This tale is told by a Christian lawyer narrator written by the enigmatic Chaucer. He stripped an approved Christianized fable of its overtly Christianized missionizing main character and finished with a tale that never once ridiculed the other, but instead shows the just and right consequences for observing or breaking the law of good. Even when Hermengyld is killed, the culprit is not described as barbarous, uncivilized, or exotic. Rather, because his infatuation with Custance is steadfastly not allowed to mature, in that Custance refused to obey the law of evil, the bad that the knight intends only reaps destruction for a short season, while the good Custance sticks to prevails, though challenged fiercely.

To be honest, if I stopped here with the five themes I've presented as decolonized examples of a medieval text, I would be only relating a fraction of the examples waiting to be harvested in Chaucer's anti-dehumanizing narrative. I have yet to speak of Donegild, King Alla's romance with Custance, the reunion with the Emperor, pluriversal cosmologies from around the world, and many more examples where the ML's



law of good speaks for itself, rather than some institutional will dominating all the scenes, spaces, and 'other people.' As Patterson, Morgan, Ellis, and others suggest, there is insurmountable evidence that Chaucer's *MLT* can be read to function upon a harmonious (rather than dysfunctional) cultural poetics. All that is left to demonstrate is how Custance and her son function as liminal beings. Not only are they themselves held together by the hybridity of multiculturalism, they serve their cultures (home and second), and those around them from the borderlines, as bridges, holding the sides together.

Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity is useful for describing Custance because she is constantly moving from space to space, as a nexus in between two entities, to become something new altogether. Thus, it might be said, Custance's liminality, aided by her discourse decolonized from the institutionalized stereotypes of Chaucer's day, serves as a bonding agent in the space between. As for Maurice, he not only is the son of two cultures embarking on the creation of a third (*his* culture as Emperor of a group of distinct nations), but also has the strongest potential for emulating the narrative's original exemplum: the power of goodness in the example of the closest person to him, his mother Custance. I would argue that what Chaucer leaves his audience to conceive through the voice of his (un)trustworthy narrator is the formation of a new culture, built on justice and the power of good, which has the power to restore balance, no matter how bad personal or national circumstances unfold. What some might rightly question is why Trevet's Constance does not also suggest the same outcome, since the end of his tale ends so similarly to Chaucer's? While it may be possible to abstractly view Trevet's Maurice as the hybrid son of two cultures, the slaughter of 11,000 Saracens suggests instead that Trevet's narrative is in fact intent on judging and even expunging the non-Christian. In Chaucer's world the Muslims are still there and Maurice has the opportunity

of interacting with them, positioned in the liminal space between borders and countries with real names by the power of good that has been role modeled for him by his mother.

### Conclusion

Chaucer's *MLT* resists repeating the orientalism found in Trevet's Constance tale in a multiplicity of ways. Through her hybrid nature, as her tale is not an ambivalent text, and through her decolonially discursive nature, Custance can be said to be de-colonized in comparison to Trevet's Constance. Likewise, because she frequently exhibits concern for doing good, rather than a preoccupation for simply evangelizing, even the central message of Chaucer's tale is vastly different from Trevet's because the *MLT* engenders pluriversal responses to the presences and voices of non-Western non-Christians. We have heard these voices and seen these presences specifically because Chaucer crafted a pilgrim, who, though an institutionalized ML, could see and appreciate the differences of people, religion, and cultures with non-European origins. And because Chaucer took such great pains to prevent his tale from being perceived as a history that maintains the dominance of Western superiority—which is the exact opposite of what we saw Trevet do in his tale—though we can't claim to know where Chaucer himself stood, what we can say with certainty is that Chaucer's *Man of Law's Tale* prompts questions and stirs the imagination. And asking imaginative questions can enable readers today to think of options that will help us decolonize our ethnic, religious, and cultural biases. Chaucer's challenge to us modern readers is to live out the law of good that enables all who practice it to accept the differences of others. Furthermore, Chaucer's *MLT* offers modern readers a view of our liminality—that is, our own position between multiple ethnicities, religions, and cultures—which holds great importance for the new directions humanity needs both culturally and societally. This law of good is a powerful, culture-embracing glue for

mankind and is one way readers can delink themselves from viewing other people as inferior; this may even help us rehumanize our cultural and societal forms of governing ourselves through law. In closing, I will simply say, with the Man of Law, that I only wish I had more time and space to keep listing the multitudinous ways Chaucer decolonized Custance, but "*I may nat tellen every circumstance*" (MLT 1011).

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