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**A Leap of Faith: Custaunce as a Marian Symbol**

Written in the Middle Ages, Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is filled to the brim with Biblical and classical allusions. The Catholic Church was a, if not the, major institution in medieval Europe, so it is therefore not surprising that saints played a major role in Chaucer’s works. Of particular importance was Saint Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus Christ. Because she “saw thy child yslain bifore thine eyen,” Mary is seen as an empathetic saint, “to whom alle woful cryen,” especially mothers in distress (Man of Law’s Tale (MT), 848, 850). She is a person of worship for her innocence, as a virgin, and her motherly role, as the mother of Christ. Of the works we’ve read so far, *The Man of Law’s Tale* and *The Prioress’s Tale* fall under the classification of Marian tale, as the characters invoke Mary during prayer and depict her as the source of miracles. For the purpose of this essay, I will focus on *The Man of Law’s Tale*, because with its juxtaposition of Mariology and extensive violence, the clarity of its Christian message diminishes. Through characterizing Custaunce as a symbol of Mary, I will work to clarify the Christian message of the tale, and thus show that the violence is merely an accessory used to differentiate Custaunce from the non-Christian mother figures.

The Man of Law, in narrating his tale, depicts Custaunce as a pious figure from the very beginning. The Syrian merchants, upon seeing Custaunce while travelling to Rome, almost idealize her in their description:

‘In hire is heigh beautee withoute pride,

Youth, withouten grenehede or folye;

To alle hir werkes vertu is hir gide;

Humblesse hath slain in hir al tyrannye.

She is mirour of alle curteisye’

Hir herte is verray chamber of holinesse,

Hir hand, minister of fredam for almesse.’ (MT 162-168)

In such a situation, where the wealthy merchants are describing the beautiful Custaunce to their Sultan, it is completely plausible that they exaggerate her good qualities and fail to mention her flaws, as doing so improves their presentation to their leader. However, the Man of Law interjects into his own tale to clarify, saying “And al this vois was sooth, as God is trewe,” confirming that all of the Syrian’s descriptions of her holiness are true (MT 169).

In showing Custaunce’s actions when faced with hardship, on top on his descriptions, the Man of Law further demonstrates her piety. After her father, the Emperor, agrees to marry her to the newly Christened Sultan of Syria, Custaunce “was with sorwe al overcome, / Ful pale arist, and dresseth hire to wende, / For wel she seeth ther is noon oother ende” (MT 264-266). She acknowledges that it is not her place to protest, and complacently accepts the role that has been thrust upon her. However, she does not invoke the Emperor’s might or some other secular reason for her compliance, but instead turns to Christ as the source of her passivity: “But Crist, that starf for oure redempcioun, / So yeve me grace his hestes to fulfille. / I, wrechhe womman, no fors thogh I spille. / Wommen are born to thralldom and penaunce, / And to been under mannes governaunce” (MT 283-287). By invoking Christ, she acts as though her sacrifice is a religious act, seeing her marriage in a foreign land as an edict from God rather than her father. Furthermore, she puts her complete faith in Christ to lead her through to safety, so in effect her complacency is means of showing her devotion to God.

Custaunce’s initial departure from Rome to Syria is important because it is the first time she invokes Mary, setting up the theme of Custaunce as a symbol of Marian piety. In a moment of sadness, cries out:

‘Fader,’ seide she, ‘thy wrecched child Custaunce,

Thy yonge doghter fostred up so softe,

And ye, my moder, my soverein plesaunce

Over alle thing, out-taken Crist on-lofte,

Custaunce youre child hir recomaundeth ofte

Unto youre grace, for I shal to Surrye, (MT 274-279)

Custaunce appears to cry out to her parents, exclaiming her sadness that she will never see them again. However, the Man of Law gives never introduces Custaunce’s mother, nor is there ever any indication that she even exists. The language she uses in her exclamation differs greatly depending on whom she is addressing. When addressing her father, she tone is nostalgic, as though she is attempting to evoke an emotional response from her father. Her tone when addressing her mother, however, is more reverent, as she “recomandeth ofte unto youre grace,” hinting that the latter half of the exclamation is in fact a prayer to Mary rather than her own mother. Furthermore, at the end of the tale, after the death of Alla, Custaunce returns to Rome and with her father “Til deeth depareth hem this lif they lede,” further implying that Custaunce’s mother figure is not present (MT 1158). Custaunce, through her reputation and her actions, demonstrates her holiness and piety. Even her name, translated to Constance, shows that her faith is unwavering no matter the difficulty. Her faithful nature, along with her final prayer to Mary before departing for Syria, indicate that Custaunce is symbolic of Marian piety and the innocence that it implies.

Custaunce, after the birth of her child, comes to fully represent Mary as an innocent mother figure. Through her constant faith, Custaunce survives the Sultaness’s massacre at her wedding party, the years-long voyage to Northumbria on open sea, the Devil-instilled tyrannical libido of a Northumbrian knight, and finally the rage that accompanies rejection of said knight’s sexual advances. Custaunce, sent again to sea after Donegild’s duplicity, “with a dedly pale face, / The ferthe day toward hir ship she wente. / But natheless she taketh in good entente / The wil of Crist,” saying “In im triste I, and in his moder deere, / That is to me my sail and eek my steere” (MT 823-825, 832-833). Time and time again, Custaunce accepts her fate without questioning the iniquity of her situation because of her resolute belief that her faith will guide her through all adversity. Her prayer to Mary is especially important in this instance because she appeals to Mary as a saint, as before, but also for the first time as a mother, saying “Thow saw thy child yslain bifore thine eyen, / And yet now liveth my litel child, parfay” (MT 848-849). She likens herself to Mary through their shared experience of motherhood and love for her child. Custaunce shows her love for child by not only praying to Mary for herself, but for her child as well: “Rewe on my child, that of thy gentillesse / Rewest on every rewful in distresse” (MT 853-854). She, with both her pious innocence and maternal love, is finally fully symbolic of the Virgin Mary.

While her literal virginity is no longer intact, the innocence that Mary’s virginity symbolizes still is. Traditionally sexual intercourse is an action with irreversible consequences, as virginity cannot be reattained. However, in his narration, the Man of Law explains that “They goon to bedde, as it was skile and right, / For though that wives been ful holy thinges, / They moste take in pacience at night / … And leye a lite hir holiness aside” (MT 708-710, 713). Because she merely has to temporarily lay her holiness aside, the Man of Law implies that she can just as easily reacquire it, so while her virginity is gone forever, the innocence and piety that accompany it are not. In fact, as the symbol of Mary, Custaunce’s innocence is still in need of protection. When faced with the unsolicited sexual advances of the heathen thief on her voyage back to Rome, “The theef fil overbord al sodeinly, / And in the see he dreinte for vengeaunce. / And thus hath Crist unwemmed kept Custaunce” (MT 922-925). Despite her loss of virginity, there is still a divine intervention to protect Custuance from defilement, implying a purity beyond the literal definition of virginity. The Man of Law, in his interjection where he disparages Custaunce’s misfortune, compares her strength to fend off her attacker to the strength of David in fighting Goliath and Judith in beheading Holofernes. The Man of Law compares Custaunce to heroic defenders of the Hebrew people, demonstrating the importance of Custaunce’s innocence and piety to Christendom as a whole. Custaunce, with her maternal love and pious innocence, is a clear depiction of Mary.

In clear contrast to Custaunce’s Marian piety is the Sultaness, who lacks both the faith and love for her son that characterize Mary. Clearly, according to the Man of Law, the Sultaness is the antagonist of his tale. He describes her in only negative terms, as a “welle of vices,” as the “roote of iniquitee,” and as a “serpent under femininitee” (MT 323, 358, 360). However, her early actions, in our modern reading, do not necessarily align with such an evil description: she is merely trying to prevent her son from converting to what she believes to be an inferior faith. However, in contrast to Custaunce, she is still definitively the antagonist because she so exactly forms Custaunce’s antithesis.

The Sultaness’s aggression is a clear contrast to Custaunce’s complacency, and therefore implies the Sultaness’s lack of piety. Custaunce’s compliance with unjust demands, as argued earlier, is indicative of her faith, as she accepts such demands because she knows God will lead her through unfazed. The Sultaness, on the other hand, is scheming from the beginning, unwilling to accept actions that are unfavorable: “What sholde us tiden of this newe lawe / But thraldom to oure bodies and penaunce?” (MT 337-338). The Sultaness, in even questioning her son, the Sultan, exhibits an assertiveness that is simply incompatible with Custaunce’s passive innocence. Her objection to her son’s decision clearly shows that she is in fact the opposite of Custaunce, who accepted that “Wommen are born to thraldom and penaunce, / And to been under mannes governaunce” (MT 286-287). In terms of innocence, the Sultaness is lacking, and therefore does not fit the role of a Marian figure.

More important in demonstrating that the Sultaness is antithetical to the Marian Custaunce is her massacre of Christians, her son included, at her son’s wedding party. This is the ultimate denunciation of Mariology, because in witnessing the death of her son, Mary suffered to the point that “Thanne is ther no comparison bitwene / Thy wo, and any wo man may sustene” (MT 846-847). The pain that Mary felt while witnessing the death of her son was enormous, while the Sultaness has no qualms with killing her son “For she hirself wolde al the contree lede” (MT 434). For the mere purpose of gaining power, the Sultaness breaks the maternal bond that is so sacred to Custaunce, and by extension, Christianity. The extensive violence against the Christian converts does not in fact detract from the Man of Law’s message of the holiness of Mary, but affirms it because it is only through devotion to Christ that Custaunce is saved. The Sultaness’s violence is an indictment Islam because, through her violence, the Man of Law is saying that Islam lacks even the most inherent, biological bond of maternal love.

Like the Sultaness, Donegild represents an anti-Marian figure. Her actions parallel those of the Sultaness, but with a key variation. Like the Sultaness, she is immediately wary of her son’s marriage proposal with Custaunce, for “She wolde noght hir sone had doon so. / Hir thoughte a despit that he sholde take / So straunge a creature unto his make” (MT 698-700). As noted earlier, this aggression, or lack of complacency, is indicative of a lack of faith. Once again, following the Sultaness’s footsteps, Donegild schemes to break up the marriage between Custaunce and her son. However, unlike the Sultaness, her trickery is peaceful. While her actions still betray her son and break the maternal bond, they are not nearly as treacherous as those of the Sultaness, who kills her son without remorse. For this reason, Donegild, while still wholly un-Marian, is relatively more acceptable than the Sultaness, according to the Man of Law.

Custaunce, with her unwavering faith, innocent nature and maternal love, is symbolic of the Virgin Mary. As the ideal Christian woman, the Man of Law contrasts her with the Sultaness and Donegild to make the claim that violence and hatred are associated with non-Christian religions. However, because ideal women demonstrate their faith through complacency, there exists a causality dilemma. Custaunce’s constant faith through complacency is made possible because she knows that no matter what she does, she will, through her faith, survive. For the Sultaness and Donegild, on the other hand, they are not compliant with unjust demands, and therefore not Christian, because they lack the safety net of faith, which then in turn indicates they are not faithful to Christianity. In order to enter Christendom, women, according to the Man of Law, must simply make a leap of faith, and hope that their actions are rewarded.