

CUSTANCE AS GOD'S MERCHANT IN THE MAN OF LAW'S TALE

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The Man of Law presents himself as a man of taste, a well-read man whose catalogue of women "of olde tyme" martyred for love seems an exhaustive list. What kind of story will this wordy, pretentious man tell?¹ Since he recounts Chaucer's list of martyrs for love, it is likely that his own tale will be in this vein. He also says Chaucer would never write "unkynde" abominations like the tale of King Antiochus and his daughter, so (knowing Chaucer) we suspect that the theme of incest will arise.² His formal prologue, an encomium on the wisdom of merchants who lay up riches against "hateful" poverty, seems to predict a tale about the virtues of "providence."

In fact the tale reverses each of these themes. It is indeed a love story, but it is *divine* love that changes the woe of Custance and her family to a brief earthly joy that looks toward eternal joy in heaven. The incest theme is transformed when Custance loses her husband and dwells "in vertu" with her father, in anticipation of joining her heavenly father. The Man of Law's celebration of merchants, however, prepares the way for the tale's central reversal, the conversion of woe to joy through a sort of divine merchantry. Merchants are "wise folk" who know "al th'estaat of regnes" and convert that knowledge into riches; the wisdom of Custance is to accept the world-wanderings God sends her, and by this recurrent and often painful self-investment, convert empty exile into the fullness of joy. Custance is a mediator like Christ and His mother, but her good works as well as her own gradual transformation of self from pathetic princess to maternal exemplar are contextualized and given a mundane concreteness through a master trope of commercial exchange: as God's "merchant," she represents men's humble power to transform their private, and even their public world through an investment of self, just as the Man of Law's merchants—in their lesser way—exchange goods and

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tales, swelling commerce between kingdoms and enabling such politic conversions as the marriage of Custance to the Sowdan of Surrye.³

The larger, providential sense of Custance's chapmanhood derives from the contrast between Rome, the Christian center, and the barbarian waste that stretches east to Syria and west beyond Gibraltar, toward Northumbria. In this empty, outer world, Custance meets force and fraud, and the moral tyrants—maternal figures, in this female-oriented narrative—who embody those vices. She engenders Christian faith and Christian governance in this barren world neither as a Roman princess nor as a Northumbrian queen, but by embracing the *loss* of these identities. Progressively stripped of every worldly possession, she accepts the world's emptiness as God's will and is fulfilled by divine strength and bounty. In a human, experiential sense—faint yet preceptible in her role—Custance loses home, family, name, wealth, and freedom of choice, all the conceptual and emotional structures that identify the self. But her intent, like Emelye's, remains constant, intangible yet more real than an earthly treasure; in poverty and isolation this "unwemmed" intent is revealed as an irreducible core self, manifested finally through the various features of Custance's motherhood.

The Man of Law's Tale is thus an allegory of will, a metamorphic fable of identity that provides a sentimental, often melodramatic Christian answer to the Boethian stoicism of the Knight's Tale, and sheds an ironic crosslight on the increasingly mercantile self-assertion that characterizes the later tales in Fragment I.⁴ But instead of condemning such a commercialized morality, this tale demonstrates that the mercantile formula of exchange, empty of spiritual or even social values can, through the investment of self, become an expression of God's "purveiaunce."⁵

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I

The Man of Law's Tale has an elemental rhythm of exile and return, a pattern of division and union.⁶ In the first two sections, both of Custance's marriages begin joyfully but end in the woe of exile and bereavement. This movement from joy to woe is reversed in the third section, where Custance defeats a potential rapist and then drifts back into the Mediterranean to be reunited with uncle, husband Alla, and father. In the brief aftermath, Alla dies, yet this woeful fortune brings the plot full circle, reuniting Custance with father and friends in a communal joy that prefigures heaven.

The first half of Custance's story moves from joy to woe, then, and the second, from woe to joy. As in the Knight's Tale, such formal symmetries imply an absolutist world view (here moral, rather than philosophical) that is projected by the "firste moevyng" described in Part I:

O firste moevyng! Cruel firmament,
With thy diurnal sweigh that crowdest ay
And hurlest al from est til occident
That naturelly wolde holde another way. . . . (295-98)⁷

This "moving" refers not to creation, but to the outermost celestial sphere, the "primum mobile" that draws all the other spheres along with it as it spins from east to west. The other eight spheres are naturally inclined to spin from west to east—toward the origin of light—but they are spun backward (east to west) by the force of this highest, or fated sphere.⁸ The push of fate is terribly strong, then, accounting for the configurations of the planets and the vagaries of earthly fortune. Yet the greater pull of God's grace invites the turning of men's wills toward the east, toward enlightenment, and away from the westward ("deathward") rush of the heavens and all that blindly follows them.⁹ Custance, too, drifting on the tide, is

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borne away from Syria, into the western sea beyond Gibraltar. The passion of pagan kings and the aggression of their mothers are thus fated forces, currents of fate that sweep Custance ever farther from home until God's will rewards the clear sight of her faith, guiding her exilic boat eastward, toward safe harbor.

The Man of Law begins this allegorical tale by describing a company of Syrian merchants who have taken lodging in Rome. Their journey to Rome and back—a mirror (i.e., reversed) image of Custance's exile and return to Rome—works like Theseus's early adventures in the Knight's Tale: his campaigns introduce Emelye to her long confinement in civilized Athens, while the merchant's visit to Rome introduces Custance to years of barbarian exile. But like Palamon and Arcite, Emelye and Custance must endure prison or exile because these conditions sum up the constraints that life places upon the human will. Emelye, longing for a Scythian maiden's freedom, finds a cloistered freedom of will by exercising the only choice available to her. Custance grieves for the protection of home, but in accepting her barbarous husbands, makes the hostile world her kingdom by providing it with a future Christian Emperor.

The merchants supply the controlling metaphor for Custance's commerce with the world because they imply a worldly standard of success. They are "chapmen riche" because they are dependable: "sadde and trewe" (135). Custance was born rich, yet her real wealth is not her possessions and privilege. As a merchant of faith, she too will be unfailingly "sadde and trewe"; her "goods" are her purity of intent and her virtuous acts, which are forever as "thrifty and newe" as the merchants' satins and spices. But here at the beginning of the tale, Custance's emblematic virtues represent the human ideal in both its outer (beauty, youth) and inner perfection (virtue, humility, courtesy, holiness, charity). These seven virtues remind one of Gawain's pentangle in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Such ideal qualities are appropriate to moral allegory, but they are not adequate to express the force of will

behind Gawain's or Custance's hard choices. Just as Gawain's fear, shame, and anger temper his resolve to accept a mortal blow, this Christian maiden must "dwindle into a wife" to conceive her son Mauricius. Yet he will turn out to be the mirror of her virtue, the best of all her Christian good works.

But at the beginning, virtuous Custance is herself the goods of trade. It is her promising "figure" (187)—the image conveyed by her reported virtues—that causes the Sowdan of Surrye to fall in love, initiating the politically expedient exchange of a Roman bride for Islamic converts. The Sowdan is almost equally a piece of goods in this exchange, having blindly surrendered his will to love, and thus to fate. But trading Custance and "certein gold" for a conversion of souls is equally blind, because it assumes that the necessarily short-sighted goals of politics and religion accord with the infinite and unforeseeable providence of God. The sad irony of the Roman Emperor's "purveiaunce" for his daughter is sustained throughout the remainder of Part I, helping us to identify with Custance's plight and increasing its pathos.

The human helplessness of these great proceedings is framed by terms of cause and effect, which remind us of the vast difference in perspective that separates mortal purposes ("cause" 252, "ende" 255) from final causes and actual results ("ende" 266). But for Custance, an apparently helpless, even faceless sacrifice to a marriage of state, there is no question of purpose. Her pale passivity reflects a purity, or transparency of intention, but it also suggests youth and tenderness—qualities which humanize her, increasing the pathos of her isolation. Her departure unfolds in nine stanzas that convey this pathetic inevitability: her three-stanza complaint (267-87); the narrator's three-stanza apostrophe (295-315); and three narrative stanzas that introduce, divide, and follow the complaint and apostrophe.

In Custance's complaint, "straunge nacioun" (268) darkens into "Barbre nacioun" (281); the kindness of friends who kept her "tenderly" (269) gives way to the agony of her demise ("no fors

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though I spille" (285); and subjection to a husband (270) descends into "thraldom and penance" (286). From her victim's point of view, the opposed threats of exile and prison bracket the refuge of family in the middle stanza, where "fader" (274) and "my mooder, my soverayn plesance" (276) surround, as if protecting "Thy yonge doghter, fostered up so softe" (275).

The narrator's three stanzas of apostrophe describe the marriage at the level of stellar influence, the higher cause of her misfortune. In the first stanza, the "cruel" primum mobile spins the lower heavens westward, counter to their normal course, enhancing the influence of Mars, with a malign effect on the Cupid-inspired marriage. In the third stanza, by contrast, the Emperor and his philosophers are unable or unwilling to choose a more favorable date. Mediating between these stanzas of cosmic moving and human blindness is a sad allegory of marriage, in which macrocosmic and microcosmic misfortune are united:

Infortunat ascendant tortuous,
Of which the lord is helplees falle, allas,
Out of his angle into the derkeste hous!
O Mars, O atazir, as in this cas!
O fieble moone, unhappy been thy paas!
Thou knyttest thee ther thou art nat receyved;
Ther thou were weel, from thennes artow weyved. (302-08)

Mars, Custance's birth sign ("atazir"), has fallen from a favorable position in the first house above the horizon (the "ascendent" house) to the least favorable one in the twelfth (the "derkeste" house, because below the celestial horizon). Worse, this "cruel" Mars is in conjunction with the "feeble" moon (an icon for the "goddess of maidens," in the Knight's Tale), in a cosmic prefiguration of misfortune in marriage.

The complaint and apostrophe work as paired passages. In the

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complaint, descriptions of exile (268) and "thraldom" (286) bracket lines about Custance's initial safety at home. This shows how Custance sees the marriage. In the narrator's apostrophe, impelling stars and passive men enclose lines about the "fall" of parental influence and the surrender of maidenly freedom in a bad marriage: that is the narrator's "cosmic" and sentimental amplification of Custance's lament. The three narrative stanzas that introduce, separate, and follow the complaint and apostrophe tell the story of Custance's reluctance to marry, the sadness of her household (weeping, like fallen Trojans), and her solemn woe at taking ship—in other words, these stanzas describe the family bond that resists separation. But the paired complaint and apostrophe—both of them envelope passages that encapsulate, as if nullifying the bride's wishes—imply the domestic and cosmic necessities that dominate that narrative of reluctance. Like the "firste moevyng" of the primum mobile, these grand necessities "push" against Custance's natural resistance to her foreign marriage, making it seem inevitable—fated at the level of higher causes—that this young daughter, "fostered up so softē," must descend to "mannes governance" in a foreign marriage which must seem to her a kind of death in life—a "derkeste hous" indeed. In experiential terms, these opposing narratives convey the felt experience of Custance's "fall" from the family nest. Their images of descent describe her loss of self upon separation from the world of her youth, and they represent the inner, or subjective dimension that critics have so often found lacking in her role. Custance's progress from sad princess to fearless mother appears most clearly in the contrast between this imagery of loss and later images of union with divine strength, which demonstrate the endurance of her will and suggest her recovery, or better, reconstitution of self.

The logical solution to Custance's fears is the mother of the Sowdan, "welle of vices" (323). Her objections to the marriage, voiced in paired passages that are similar in structure to Custance's complaint and the narrator's apostrophe, reveal a possessive love

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that makes change equivalent with death. She plans to murder her son and all the other new converts at the marriage banquet. Thus the baptism becomes a blood bath, and the communal wedding feast, a sacrifice. For the Sowdanesse is herself inverted: her decisive acts derive not from "femynnytee," but from the serpent within her, her kinship with Satan. As an anti-mother, she defines by contrast the more powerful motherhood Custance will eventually represent in Part II.

II

Following the murder of her son, the Sowdanesse puts Custance to sea in a rudderless boat. This marks the beginning of the "steerless" voyages in which she expresses only the enduring resolve to let God be her guide. Thus she displays a perfectly transparent will unclouded by self-interest, and an absolute investment of self. Custance lacks a profit motive and has no resources for making her way in the world (none, at least, from a merchant's point of view), yet because she puts her faith in a heavenly reward and is not poor in spirit, her bounty is infinite—she is "ful of benignytee" (446). This unlikely strength appears in her prayer to the cross as she continues to drift:

"O cleere, O welful auter, hooly croys,
Reed of the Lambes blood ful of pitee,
That wessh the world fro the olde iniquitee,
Me fro the feend and fro his clawes kepe,
That day that I shal drenchen in the deepe." (451-55)

The Sowdanesse vowed to drench Custance's baptismal purity in blood, but of course it was Christ's blood, shed in self-sacrifice, that *cleansed* the world:

"Flemere of feendes out of hym and here

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On which thy lymes feithfully extenden,
Me kepe, and yif me myght my lyf t'amenden." (460-62)

Custance accepts her hardships as Christ accepted His; the limbs of the cross will extend over her (as if protecting her) because in the investment, indeed the sacrifice of her own will, she becomes co-extensive with Christ's great example, embodying its power.

Committed through prayer, Custance drifts for "[y]eres and dayes" (463), finally passing the straits of Gibraltar—a symbolic death. Yet amid these wastes of time and space, she retains her freedom of intent, and thus her identity. In the Knight's Tale, unenlightened Palamon and Arcite find themselves in prison or exile. Here, the infinite possibilities of mortal bondage, implied by the paired stories of cave-prison (Daniel) and exile at sea (Jonah) are transformed by Christ: the stanzas on cave and sea are divided by a stanza describing divine purveiaunce, which, in effect, grants freedom to man. Despite the world's buffeting (here, storms) or its constraints (caves or deserts), God provides "his foyson," a bounty or fullness that denies the emptiness of prison, exile, or the loss of self.

Having crossed "oure" (English) ocean, Custance is stranded in Northumbria, and here especially (close to home) we are meant to notice her isolation. She begs for mercy in "hir [not our] langage," and this "Latyn corrupt" (519), which reminds us of the enfeebled late-Roman empire, distances her as well. In worldly terms, Custance is now entirely without substance, identified not by her royal birth, language, or name, but only by will and act:

She was so diligent, withouten slouthe,
To serve and plesen everich in that place
That alle hir loven that looken in her face. (530-32)

Revealed initially as a mirror of divine will, Custance is now a mirror of good will. People see their own goodness reflected in

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her, and are converted by that selfless vision into better versions of themselves. This is a triangular relationship, an Augustinian trinity: their goodness is also God's, and so they are reacquainted, through Custance, with God's over-arching love.

Yet Custance's holy works—her “goods”—can only bind men together if she evokes an emotional response. That is one reason why the overblown apostrophes voiced (one feels) by the Man of Law's persona are useful for this tale. Custance's tearful prayers, for example, create an empathy that enables Hermengyld to accept God's grace; later, the warmth of her friendship enables Hermengyld to heal the blind man, leading in turn to her husband the constable's conversion. This chain of good works culminates in Custance's conversion of and marriage to King Alla. Earlier, word of her beauty and goodness captured the Sowdan's heart; this time, the pathos of her own efforts calls forth Alla's “pitee.” Like Emelye, Custance has become an active agency for change through the pathos of self-sacrifice. While Emelye enabled both love and natural change (death), Custance reflects God's love as well as divine providence. In each case, the woman's ability to call forth an emotional response, and thus a willed act, is gradually revealed as essential to the concatenation of men and fate. And this is precisely where the profitable sympathetic magic of commercial exchange is crucial to understanding the powerfully affective miracle of self-sacrifice. Custance yields to powers greater than herself (the “profit motive”), and in a profoundly affective self-investment, or “exchange,” transcends her subordinate role (achieves a “yield” for one and all).

Custance's emotional agency stands out by contrast with the inappropriate passions she attracts—for example, the young Northumbrian knight's Satan-inspired affection. This debased echo of Palamon's and Arcite's “hoote love” for Emelye is joined by other motifs reminiscent of Fragment I:

[Satan] made a yong knyght that dwelte in that toun

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Love hire so hooete, of foul affeccioun,
That verrailly hym thoughte he sholde spille,
But he of hire myghte ones have his wille. (585-88)

These lines also recall the Miller's Tale, where Nicholas courts Alysoun, using the "wille/spille" argument with apparent good effect (3277-78). The adversative wille/spille is a trope for the pairing of love/death, a central theme in Fragments I and II. Love draws men into the mortal cycle, yet transcends death through generation, and in a higher sense, through self-sacrifice and divine grace. In the Man of Law's Tale, this opposition recurs at progressively higher levels of signification. When "wille/spille" appears at the end of Part I, for example, Custance is no longer merely a love-object; in this scene the Constable is questioning divine love and will, not mortal desire:

"O myghty God, if that it be thy wille,
Sith thou art rightful juge, how may it be
That thou wolt suffren innocentz to spille . . . ?" (813-15)

The motif appears last in Part III, when Custance is nearly raped (she is thus "In point to spille," "wher-so she wolde or nolde" [910, 917]), and this time God empowers Custance's humble will, keeping it, and her, inviolate, "unwemmed" (924).

But Custance's definitive opponents, in this tale of a woman's freedom of will and recovery of selfhood, are evil mothers-in-law. The Sowdanesse and Alla's mother Donegild are like Creon and the Minotaur in the Knight's Tale because they embody the apparent power of moral tyranny. Creon left his dead enemies unburied, recreating the land of the living as a moral underworld; the Sowdanesse transforms a wedding feast into a massacre. The Minotaur suggests human reason made monstrous by animal passions; Donegild, the false mother, misrepresents Custance as a "strange" creature because she herself is strange, a moral

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deformity whose “mannysh . . . feendlych spirit” (782-83) must already (like the worst of Dante’s damned) be “in hell,” while her body still walks the earth (784). But Custance behaves increasingly like a mortal woman whose spirit is already dwelling in heaven—like the Virgin Mary, as we discover in Part III.

These dark and bright mother figures create a dialectic of opposed loves and faiths, contextualizing and analyzing Custance’s maternal intent in somewhat the same way that Emelye’s role was framed and thus amplified by the powers of love (Venus) and war (Mars) and by natural change (Diana) and chaotic misfortune (Saturn). In childbearing, Custance defines the maternal self-investment, the divinely inspired maternal “chapmanhood” that lies between the Virgin Mary, a God-chosen mother, and Donegild, the fallen monster-mother. Donegild is associated with maternal possessiveness, which is akin to cupidity, a turning away from heaven’s light. Her icons—the corruption of language, drunkenness, counterfeit letters, lies, and monstrous births—are motifs of the loss of identity. The Virgin, on the other hand, is associated with motifs of union: God’s will (“the sonde of Christ” 760), clear sight (830, etc.), stars (to steer by, 831-32), safe haven (852), and of course motherhood (844, etc.).

Donegild and Custance are both agents of transformation. Donegild intercepts Custance’s letter carrier and substitutes her own counterfeit “sonde,” initiating a chain of divisions and other motifs of missed communication. The messenger salutes Donegild “fair in his langage” (730), which of course is not the language of Custance. He drinks ale and wine “sadly” (steadily) that night (here is a “merchant” who is “sadde” but false). Donegild’s forged letter says to put Custance aboard ship and “croude hire fro the lond” (801), aligning her own corrupted will with the sweep and drag of the “[c]rueel firmament” that

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And hurlest al from est til occident

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That naturelly wolde holde another way. . . . (295, 296-98)

Donegild's xenophobic refusal to "invest" in new brides, ideas, and babies implies the exilic undertow of worldly events, and more profoundly, the stellar fate that flows counter to God's will as it is expressed through man. But Custance's deep acceptance of "Goddess sonde" unites the divisions created by Donegild. Back at sea—a second symbolic death—her "deedly pale face" (822) is again an empty mirror filled with the purpose of God. But here, an investment of self brings God's bounty to her child. Like the Virgin, she mediates, covering the child's eyes but casting her own eyes "into heaven" (840). Quiet in the face of death, Custance contrasts with Eve, through whose "eggement" (egging, instigation, pushiness) mankind was lost, but also with the willful "male" busyness of Donegild, and the mindless "crowding" of the stars.

Yet Custance's sublime maternity at sea also reflects her mundane self-investment in marriage. Her profound prayer to the Virgin is not a contradiction but the fulfillment of the narrator's bathetic lines about wives as "hooly thynges" who must endure the necessities of marriage:

They goon to bedde, as it was skile and right;
For thogh that wyves be ful hooly thynges,
They moste take in pacience at nyght
Swiche manere necessities as been plesynges
To folk that han ywedded hem with rynges,
And leye a lite hir hoolynesse aside,
As for the tyme—it may no bet bitide. (708-14)

The whims of husbands are a sort of natural necessity—"it may no bet bitide"—in this domestic kingdom.¹⁰ Yet by investing herself in such ordinary things, Custance conceives a Christian Emperor. The sly irony of this passage echoes a similar tone in the lines about Emelye's bathing in the Knight's Tale. In each case, a

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woman yields to male desire, implicitly accepting her own sexuality and mortality and projecting the consequences forward as a kind of fate for everyone involved.¹¹

III

In Part III, Custance's boat runs aground and a steward from a nearby castle tries to rob and rape her, but the balance of power has shifted. In Surrye, Custance had to accept the Sowdan's love and his mother's deadly force, in Northumbria, the knight's lust and Donegild's fraud. Here, with the love of "Blisful Marie" and God's myght and vigour," Custance struggles "myghtily" (921) and the thief drowns.¹² With this apparently random victory, Custance's maternal identity and purpose emerge as dominant. In the tale's first two series of events, male desire leads to marriages rendered sterile and void by female aggression. The men—even the lustful knight—act under the sign of Venus, as it were, weeping and bleeding for love, while the Sowdanesse and Donegild—"Viragos," committing typically masculine crimes of force and fraud—seem influenced by Mars. In Part III, this sequence is chiasmatically reversed, and so are the gender roles. Here, male force briefly dominates, but each time female strength is empowered by divine love, the male dies (is voided, like the false hero at the end of folktales), and the "unwemmed" female vessel enters a safe harbor of familial relations, maternal values, and the divine "potency," which Custance has been mediating ever since she left home. After Custance overcomes the rapist, for instance, her ship drifts back through the "narwe mouth" of Gibraltar into the sheltered, one might almost say womb-like Mediterranean, toward mother Rome. Later, Alla's death in far-off Northumbria eliminates even his benign governance, allowing Custance to live out her days in a "family" of Christian Romans, while her son grows toward emperorhood.¹³ In effect, both male and female roles are transformed in Part III, where male desire is displaced by God's

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love, and the viragos' willful attempts to exterminate strange women and rival faiths give way to Custance's sheltering maternity. One key to understanding this transformation is Custance's identification with Mary. In her first voyage, she accepted and was strengthened by her own martyrdom; in this second voyage, like Christ's mother she transcends herself by sacrificing herself for her child.¹⁴

The result of Custance's self-transcendence, and her ultimate recovery of selfhood is her delivery into the Mediterranean and return to Rome, where a chain of recognitions enabled by her little son unites her with husband and father. In Rome, Custance is again a wife, later a (widowed) daughter, but her moral authority is motherhood.¹⁵ This achieved identity is revealed, fittingly, at banquets. The marriage feasts managed by the Sowdanesse and Donegild, rituals of failed exchange, are countered by feasts where Alla and later the Emperor see Custance in her son's face, seek her out, and pay her the recognition she has earned by her "exchange of virtue." Each time, Mauricius' little face is a pure (selfless) mirror of his mother, uniting the family and creating the same wealth of human relationships that Custance, God's mirror-mediator, had created earlier in Northumbria.

But hitherto, Custance's pale face appeared at climactic moments of separation: embarking for Surrye (265); her trial in Northumbria (645); and her exile from Northumbria (872). Pure as the sacrificial lamb, her empty face reflected her absolute investment in the divine will.¹⁶ In these reunion scenes, her ship has come in, so to speak, and her yield is identity—being recognized in the mirror of her child. This identity has been paid for by an exchange—a sacrifice of self—as difficult and painful as death. That is why, meeting the husband who, she must suppose, sent her and the child to their deaths, Custance swoons twice (we think of her two long "death" voyages), and then stands before him, "doubt . . . as a tree" (1055)—as dead to him as she is to every worldly authority. What brings her to life, uniting the family, is Alla's

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identifying with and deferring to her innocence, as it is reflected in their son Maurice: “ [O]f youre harm as gilteless am I / As is Maurice my sone, so lyk youre face” (1059-62). In the fourth and final feast, Custance is revealed to her father, redeeming an earlier time when the Sowdanesse’s feast of blood dissolved family ties, matrimony, political alliances, and religious conversions—the larger, social matrix of Custance’s identity. That is why it is here that she speaks her own name for the first time in the tale (1105).

The joy of reunion with husband and father is ultimately made empire-wide in a third trinity scene that incarnates a higher, spiritual identity. Describing the dinner, the narrator says Maurice will be made Emperor by the Pope, then buries this footnote immediately: “I bere it noght in mynde” (1127). Yet this narrative seed bears the future of Rome, and the larger significance of Custance’s adventure in the world. As a boy, Mauricius unites Custance with her family; as Emperor, he will mediate between God and His church. Custance, like Mary, has given the world her son, and he will make God’s law his gift to the world. Concealing this crucial relationship in a side comment, like Custance’s quiet submission to marriage and Emelye’s apparently insignificant choice in the Knight’s Tale, suggests (in a peculiarly Chaucerian way) how great causes work through humble intents.

Custance’s ninth year away from Rome ends with Alla’s death, a mortal necessity amplified (as in Theseus’s chain of love speech) by metaphors of fleeting joy, time’s impatience, the day’s journey into night, but most pertinently, the changing of the tide (1134). For a total of eight years, the cyclic “lifetime” of Palamon’s and Arcite’s courtships, Custance drifted at the mercy of wind and wave, and that outer weather corresponding to inner “movings”:

Who lyved euere in swich delit o day
That hym ne moeved outhur conscience,
Or ire, or talent, or some kynnes affray,
Envye, or pride, or passion, or offence? (1135-38)

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These are the inner tides that move the will, which is truly free only if one can, like Custance, accept God's "sonde" and be lifted on the greater tide of divine love. But the central figure for death as a part of life is Custance herself. This "hooly wyf so sweete" (1130) is a Christian version of Arcite's Emelye, "my sweete foo." Emelye represented the promise and threat of mortal life as a natural cycle; Custance represents the promise of a virtuous life, but also—and here too she is God's chapman—the mortal exchange of this present world for the "hooly" company in the next.¹⁷

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Notes

¹ Duffey, Sheps, David, and Clogan have argued convincingly that the narrative persona suggested by the General Prologue portrait and the headlink and prologue to the *Man of Law's Tale* justifies the type of tale told, and may have provided the reason for what some consider its rhetorical excesses. Finnigan and Weatherbee go farther, arguing, in effect, that the tale should be read as if it were a projection of the narrator's character. But as Harty implies, such a reading lends a psychological motivation to every major feature and is ultimately a reductive strategy. My own reading accepts the rhetorical coloring as persona-related, but argues that its purpose is both to heighten the pathos of Custance's situation(s) and to misrepresent (and thus screen) the significance of her story, thereby placing the burden of interpretation on the reader.

² Archibald shows that the "flight from incest" motif appears in Greek romances that were "available and popular in the Middle Ages," and argues that by referring to Apollonius in the Introduction to the *Man of Law's Tale*, Chaucer "made sure that his audience did not forget this ancient and widespread . . . plot" (269).

³ Raybin has noted the connection between Custance's story and the merchants of prologue and tale: she too travels land and sea, and carries a treasure—her virginity—which she gives up in conceiving Mauricius, "the most substantial earthly 'fruyt' of [her] existence" (77). Raybin's line of inquiry differs considerably from mine, but our interpretations seem complementary. Dinshaw also brings attention to the mercantile overtones of the tale, and to the centrality of its incest theme, but our conclusions seem essentially opposed. Dinshaw sees Custance as woman "commodified," playing a part in a "system of patriarchal constraint" (141), while I read her as a different kind of Everywoman (Delany's term), an

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active agent of her own and others' salvation—not “goods” but “merchant.”

⁴ As a tale of reversal in which a female character seems devalued but in fact valorizes herself and others through plot devices reminiscent of commercial transactions, the Man of Law's Tale also demonstrates a kinship with what one would assume to be its generic opposite, the Shipman's Tale. It has been argued the the Shipman's Tale was originally intended for the position that the Man of Law's Tale now has in the Ellesmere order. Either tale would have been adequate preparation for the Wife of Bath's carefully observed series of mercantile marriages.

⁵ In describing this thematic reversal, I address one aspect of what Johnson has called the “‘conscious sentimentalism’ in the Man of Law's Tale, in which Christianity, individualism, and woman converge” (217).

⁶ Roddy suggests that the structure of the Man of Law's Tale is shaped by four “supernatural interventions” that correspond to four stages in the Christian history of salvation: “the fall brought about by Satan, Christ's passion, his subsequent redemption, [and] the Virgin's continual intercession”—“moments [at which] Custance's agon achieves immense significance” (3). The general correspondence between these four salvation events and the four major references to Satan, Christ, and the Virgin helps to explain Custance's increasingly active participation in her own salvation and suggests the larger significance of her sea perils. But Roddy's parallels to salvation history do not account for the poem's weddings, mothers-in-law, and dead males. Cf. also Paull, who sees the tale as a series of “narrative frames” which, taken symbolically, “are a typological paradigm of what was considered the central event of fourteenth-century Christianity, the Passion of Christ” (185).

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⁷ All Chaucer quotations are drawn from Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*.

⁸ Loomis cites passages in Dante (*Convivio*, 2.15) and Bernardus Sylvestris (*Experimentarius*) that indicate that “the daily motion of the heavens signifies the corruptible things of nature, while the west-to-east motion signifies the incorruptible things of God” (217). Loomis argues that Chaucer knew both works.

⁹ See Bloomfield’s elegant exposition of this theme (384-90, esp. 387-88).

¹⁰ Delany provides a succinct and, to my mind, accurate analysis of this and two similar passages:

Chaucer urges us to be aware of the marital relation in all its dimensions because it is precisely in her sexual role that Custance’s main virtue is best seen: the acceptance of fate and authority. (66)

¹¹ Cf. Delany’s conclusion: “In the Man of Law’s Tale, then, the delineation of female character conveys the moral dialectic of the poem” (70). See also Raybin: “But in return for ‘lite’ of ‘patience,’ in return for her virginity and one tiny instant, Custance enters nobly into the male realms of political and spiritual history” (78).

¹² Cf. Manning: “In the course of the poem, . . . Custance descends from the more cosmic to the more human: Part I is more cosmic than human, Part II presents her as both, and Part III is more human than cosmic” (14).

¹³ In this ultimate sense of *contemptu mundi* (reading the “other” as the world), I agree with Shoaf that “incest, the avoidance and abjuration of the other, is the crux of the work for Chaucer” (295). See also Raybin, who develops Custance’s “outsiderhood” in a

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particularly useful way, showing how her separation from earthly events and masculine values signifies her strength.

¹⁴ Cf. Clasby's conclusion: "Custance, as woman, is neither a model of submission nor an emblem of pious self-degradation. She is a transformative figure, representing that human *vertu* which fashions from the elements of life, including powerlessness and suffering, both meaning and life itself" (232).

¹⁵ Cf. Raybin: "Indeed, it is Custance's motherhood, the most powerful symbol of her femininity, that lies at the center of the Man of Law's Tale, providing the key to the tale's statements concerning time and the individual soul" (82-83).

¹⁶ Bestul rightly notes the rhetorical (pathetic) force of the two passages of *descriptio* (645, 822), both of which use Custance's pale face as the key detail.

¹⁷ Manning argues that Custance is, among other things, an Anima figure that possesses a quality of self-sufficiency or "one-in-itself," a quality that also has a destructive side: Her destructive side, her "coldness," brings death to the Sultan, but her destructive aspect is only suggested in her own characterization; it is seen largely in the Sultaness as Custance's alter ego (17).

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