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The Legend of the ‘Martyr King’: Political Representation in *The Man of Law’s Tale*

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I

Recent critics have worked on socio-political interpretations of Geoffrey Chaucer’s poetry. *The Man of Law’s Tale*, especially in the late 1990s, claimed contemporary critical attention with regard to genre, orientalism and gender. Its mixture of history, religion and romance produces the problem of genre. *The Man of Law’s Tale* is based on an episode of Nicholas Trivet’s *Chronicle*, written by a monk for a nunnery in the late thirteenth century. The story develops with repetitions of her trials and miraculous adventures. In addition, its setting in Syria has provided useful material for a study of medieval orientalism.¹ The representation of the heroine is, at the same time, dealt with by many critics.

A brief look at the story will be useful. *The Man of Law’s Tale* centers on the heroine’s adventures. Constance, daughter of the Roman Emperor, is at first sent to Syria to marry the Sultan — who converts from Islam to Christianity. However, his deceitful mother, the Sultanness, murders all the Christians, including her own son. Constance, alone in a small boat, floats all the way to the coast of Northumberland. There, she introduces Christianity to the natives, and marries the king of Northumberland. Unfortunately, she is once again set adrift with her little child through the guile of Donegild (King Alla’s sinful mother). She meets the Roman Army and finally discovers her husband again at Rome, where she understands his guiltlessness. The tale ends with her final return from Britain to Rome after King Alla’s death.

Constance’s repeated adventures are held to follow the motif of the ‘innocent calumniated queen’, which is often found in medieval romances (Schlauch 156–58). The more important point to notice is that the pious heroine’s passage has been generally taken as hagiogra-

phy. Michael R. Paull, for example, argues that the conventions of female saints' legends are elsewhere found in *The Man of Law's Tale* (184–87). As for her Christian aspect, V. A. Kolve minutely analyzes the iconographic history of the ship and regards Constance's voyage as a metaphor of the Roman Church (302–56). Some scholars compare Constance's passion with that of Griselda in *The Clerk's Tale* (Baldwin 183–89; C. Benson 160–63). Helen Cooney, on the contrary, maintaining that divine manifestations and miracles were important for medieval historians, lays emphasis on its sharing with the conventions of historical writings (266–68). Although interpretations vary according to which genre critics attach most importance to, it is generally remarked that *The Man of Law's Tale* concerns a mixture of religion and history. These critics have in general paid attention only to the main plot of the heroine's adventures; the other characters, especially King Alla and the Sultan, have remained overlooked.

The figure of the Man of Law and his relationship to his tale have also been important subjects of debate. He seems to be an improper person to be telling such a religious story, for in the *General Prologue* and the *Introduction* to *The Man of Law's Tale* Chaucer describes him as a layman rather than an ecclesiastical figure like the Parson or the Clerk. To explain such an ambiguous relationship, some have detected economic and materialistic elements in *The Man of Law's Tale* which make it appear more suitable for its narrator. Laurel L. Hendrix considers the exchange of the heroine as a form of metaphorical coin (151–62). Yet their articles are in the main concerned only with the heroine. Few critics have given any special heed to her husbands, King Alla of Northumberland and the Sultan.

However, it seems to me that the Sultan of Syria and King Alla of Northumberland play more important roles in the story than scholars have previously thought. Their characterizations are clues for an understanding of the intertwining of religion and history in *The Man of Law's Tale* and, furthermore, of the narrator's own political position. From a larger historical viewpoint, the Sultan's death is of no less importance, while the Man of Law's emphasis on the King of Northumberland is meaningful. If we consider the cultural and the political background of the Sultan's tragedy, what relationship it has to the narrator and what attitude Chaucer adopts toward him will become clear. To clarify the characterization of the Man of Law, I would like to engage with his handling of the Sultan's death in the following sections. First, I will define the Man of Law's political position with ref-

erence to his emphasis on the successful conversion of King Alla. Next, the representation of the Sultan will be compared with that of the ‘martyr kings’ in the English religious and historical writings. Finally, the relationship of the image of the ‘martyr king’ to contemporary politics will be discussed so as to decipher the political implications complexly compressed by Chaucer into *The Man of Law’s Tale*.

II

It is hardly possible to neglect the characterization of the Man of Law when we explore the tales. The Man of Law’s livelihood concerns only worldly business, while the mixture of religion and history is peculiar to *The Man of Law’s Tale*. Why does Chaucer appoint him to tell such a tale? We can perhaps explain the reason clearly if we look at the Man of Law’s own profession. In this section, I will treat the problem of the Man of Law’s characterization with reference to King Alla.

Critics generally agree on the point that the narrator tends only to be involved in secular affairs. What is more, they question the Man of Law’s morality. Some scholar even find some satiric points in the description of the Man of Law. Concerning his morality, there is Chaucer’s implication of his desire for wealth. In the *General Prologue*, the poet describes the Man of Law as:

So greet a purchasour was nowher noon:
 Al was fee symple to hym in effect;
 His purchasyng myghte nat been infect.
 Nowher so bisy a man as he ther nas,
 And yet he semed bisier than he was. (A 318–22)

The fact that he is so “greet a purchasour” shows that he is materialistic. As for his “purchasyng”, Richard Firth Green notices Chaucer’s satire on the lawyer’s shrewdness concerning family inheritance (304–5).

Similarly, Ann W. Astell, in “Apostrophe, Prayer and the Structure of Satire in *The Man of Law’s Tale*”, argues that the Man of Law’s frequent apostrophes suggest he understands only the superficial results of the divine interventions, while Constance never doubts God’s mercy:

The Man of Law is incapable of understanding providence as God’s plan for man’s eternal salvation, a loving plan that stands behind all events, even the most painful ones.
 (“Apostrophe” 94; italics mine)

Astell's point is worth noticing because the Man of Law's peculiarity is his sagacity. In the *General Prologue* he is depicted as the lawyer who understands all the cases:

In termes hadde he caas and doomes alle
 That from the tyme of kyng William were falle.
 Therto he koude endite and make a thyng,
 Ther koude no wight pynche at his writyng;
 And every statut koude he pleyn by rote. (A 323–27)

Chaucer's point about the Man of Law is to represent him as a professional lawyer with much knowledge of the cases back to the Norman Conquest. Astell demonstrates that Chaucer successfully makes an insinuation about the narrator's partially limited view. However, along with other explicators, Astell mainly puts emphasis on Constance and seldom refers to her husbands.

Whether he is regarded positively or not, the Man of Law is generally held to be a lawyer of the common law though what position he holds is unclear.² Joseph Hornsby recently examined the relationship of the teller to the tale in terms of the origins of the common law in relation to King Alla's marriage to Constance. He convincingly casts a light on the tale as a possible strategy for authorizing the Man of Law's profession:

Notably, the law of the "Man of Law's Tale" is the common law. Its divinity is insisted on not just in the way God works through it, but also in the law's central role in ensuring that Britain was Christianized. . . . Even while in the safekeeping of heathen rulers, the law remained God's instrument. In this way, the "Man of Law's Tale" dramatically attests to the divine origins of the common law, and perhaps as well to that of his profession. (132)

According to Hornsby the marriage between King Alla and Constance is a symbol of the unification between English common law and the divine law. His argument provides a starting point for surveying the religious and historical viewpoints in the narrator. His seeking the origin of the common law provides a historical basis for *The Man of Law's Tale*, and its divine authorization results in his treatment of the Christianization of England.

Let us consider the King Alla and the Sultan. They have some aspects in common, for both convert from paganism to Christianity and as a result suffer from their sinful mothers' wickedness. The important point is, however, the difference in their lots. The Sultan is

murdered by a trick of the Sultanness, while King Alla lives happily with his wife and his son. What does their difference derive from? What explanation does the Man of Law give for it? It seems to me that he demonstrates a deep concern for the combination of political and religious elements in the two kings.

The first thing to notice is that the Man of Law delineates the strong kingship of King Alla. The king first appears in the narrative when Constance is falsely accused by a villainous knight³:

This constable was nothyng lord of this place
Of which I speke, ther he Custance fond,
But kepte it strongly many a wyntres space
Under Alla, kyng of al Northumbrelond,
That was ful wys, and worthy of his hond
Agayn the Scottes, as men may wel heere;
But turne I wole agayn to my mateere. (B¹ 575–81)

Here the teller illuminates Alla's political authority. Alla not only establishes his supremacy in his own region, but also has ascendancy over the neighboring tribes in Scotland.⁴ It is suggested that his power derives from his own virtue because he was "ful wys and worthy". Needless to say, King Alla is a pagan just as are the others in Northumberland. He is similar in this point to Theseus in *The Knight's Tale* as being a good pagan ruler. In other words, the Man of Law appreciates King Alla's political ability even though he is a pagan at this stage.

It is worth noticing that as Alla becomes more mature as a Christian after he marries Constance, his authority gains in strength. The punishment of his sinful mother is a conspicuous example of his power when united with religion. After he returns from the expedition to Scotland, the king realizes all the stages of the wicked plot concocted by Donegild, who succeeds in compelling Constance and Maurice to relinquish Northumberland. King Alla vehemently denounces and punishes her (B¹ 893–96). Donegild is condemned to death as a traitor to her "ligeance" which means "allegiance". The narrator addresses her:

O Donegild, I ne have noon Englissh digne
Unto thy malice and thy tyrannye!
And therefore to the feend I thee resigne;
Lat hym enditen of thy traitorie! (B¹ 778–81)

The narrator's apostrophe claims that Donegild is to be blamed for her

political and religious plotting. The fate Donegild is forced to accept is "meshance". This word is also used in the Roman expedition to Syria:

For which this Emperour hath sent anon
 His senatour, with roial ordinance,
 And othere lordes, God woot, many oon,
 On Surryens to taken heigh vengeance.
 They brennen, sleen, and brynge hem to meschance
 Ful many a day; but shortly — this is th'ende —
 Homward to Rome they shapen hem to wende. (B¹ 960–66)

The Roman expedition is in an allegorical sense similar to Alla's slaying of his sinful mother, for both of them destroy the enemies of Christianity as an expression of God's ire. It may be concluded from this evidence that Christianity and political power are united in the figure of King Alla.

Such an authorization of King Alla's kingship is meaningful if we take its historical background into consideration. Its unification forms a basis for the Man of Law's political position. Paul A. Olson offers more political views about the Man of Law's relationship to his narrative. He analyzes the figures of two kings in relation to medieval theories of kingship. The Man of Law represents the absolute kingship of King Alla while Theseus' Athenian parliament in *The Knight's Tale* can be construed as a consultative kingship (Olson 85–92). King Alla's marriage to Constance is a metaphor for the inviolable absolutism which Richard II, Chaucer's monarch, vociferously claimed to wield over the magnates and the upper nobles, who instead hailed the latter type of kingship (Olson 86–89). He also surmises that Chaucer makes the Man of Law reveal this royalistic view in his tale:

In the *Canterbury Tales*, the Sergeant at Law—eligible by role to be a justice of the King's bench or of the common bench but presently representing royal justice in the assize courts—presents the royalist, theocratic position. He does so in his Man of Law's tale . . . through a narrative account, purporting to be history, of a model monarch married to the saint who converts England. (90)

According to Olson, the relationship between the teller and the tale depends on this legal controversy about what good kingship should be. Although it may be possible to assume that the Man of Law is a royalist, does his tale fully support Olson's argument? In other words, can the teller achieve the divine authorization of kingship?

As for King Alla, the Man of Law's claim is fully acceptable. Alla

unifies political ability and religious authority into his own person. His figure may be regarded as a personification of ideal kingship. The narrator seems to address the king (as an imagined reader) and to embody the wished-for sovereignty. In fact, the narrator tells how the happiness that King Alla and Constance welcome does not last long.

For Deeth, that taketh of heigh and logh his rente,
 Whan passed was a yeer, evene as I gesse,
 Out of this world this kyng Alla he hente,
 For whom Custance hath ful greet hevynesse. (B¹ 1142–45)

These most blissful days for the king of Northumberland last for no more than one year because his death prevents him from enjoying the happy life. Constance returns to Rome. If Constance is an allegory of the Roman Church, King Alla's death and Constance's departure may bode ill for Northumberland. The narrator, however, refers to the sequel of his tale, for he mentions Alla and Constance's child:

This child Maurice was sithen Emperour
 Maad by the Pope, and lyved cristenly;
 To Cristes chirche he dide greet honour. (B¹ 1121–23)

Here, the narrator ends by removing any ominous atmosphere which had begun to prevail at the end of his tale. The royal succession indeed brings England both Christianity and at last some political advancement.

Such a story might have been a panegyric to Richard. As Olson notes, the monarch himself tried to claim a divine authority. Indeed, as Constance is the Roman Emperor's daughter, Anne of Bohemia, Richard's well-beloved queen, was the sister of the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Richard's love for his queen was so deep that at her death he became a tyrant with his mind in despair (Thomson 160). The Man of Law's tale of King Alla and Constance then can be seen as a eulogy for the benevolent marriage life of Richard and Anne.

It seems possible from these descriptions to assume that the Man of Law was an established royalist who is quite faithful to his supreme sovereign. The narrator thus emphasizes King Alla as an ideal Christian monarch with religious piety and political authority. As far as he is concerned, there seems no flaw in Hornsby's or Olson's interpretations. Chaucer here lets the teller describe a personified idealistic king. However, the Man of Law's position, I think, will become problematic when we turn our eyes to the Sultan.

III

Many scholars have referred to Constance as a female saint. On the other hand, the Sultan has been seldom regarded as a Christian although some admits that Chaucer shows sympathy towards him. Morton W. Bloomfield puts emphasis on Chaucer's tolerant descriptions of the impending Saracen conversion (309–10). Recently, the Sultan and Syria in *The Man of Law's Tale* have attracted critical attention concerning orientalist representation. Susan Schibanoff, maintaining Chaucer's treatment of the Sultan as the 'Other', argues that the narrator represents the Saracen and women not as heathens but as heresies inside the orthodoxy, which were more detestable to orthodox Catholic beliefs in the Middle Ages (61–62). Kathryn L. Lynch keeps an eye on Chaucer's using of the cultural difference of East and West as a "way of talking about larger issues of freedom and constraint in storytelling" (410). My standpoint is near to Bloomfield or Lynch, though I agree that the Man of Law and his tale are definitely part of medieval orientalism. Nevertheless, the tragedy of the Sultan does not mean only Chaucer's cultural liberalism. I would rather demonstrate how the Sultan has elements of a Christian monarch. If we compare the Sultan's death with royal figures in the religious and historical writings, it will be clear Chaucer implies that the Sultan follows the example of the 'martyr kings' in medieval England.

The Man of Law obviously portrays the Sultan as a meek and mild man. The story begins with the Syrian merchants' journey to Rome. There they hear about the beauty and chastity of Constance. When the merchants come back to Syria, the Sultan invites them to his court "of his benigne curteisye" (B¹ 179). The narrator refers to the Sultan's being wounded to the heart by imagining Constance's beauty (B¹ 183–89). If we contrast such a conspicuous feature of the Sultan with the emphasis on King Alla's personal strength, the Man of Law's representation unmistakably conveys the impression that the Sultan, though courteous, is intensely introverted and weak. His infatuation with Constance leads to his political fragility, for he heavily depends on parliament to settle his marriage:

And he answerde, "Rather than I lese
Custance, I wol be cristned, doutelees.
I moot been hires; I may noon oother chese.
I prey yow hoold youre argumentz in pees;
Saveth my lyf, and beth noght recchelees
To geten hire that hath my lyf in cure,

For in this wo I may nat longe endure.” (B¹ 225–31)

Here he clearly declares that he accepts Christianity. The Sultan describes himself as in a state of ‘wo’ and in need of urgent remedy for his lovesickness. His dependance on his parliament consequently implies that his kingship is not absolute. The Sultan, in this sense, is like the lover in a Petrarchan poem. If we compare King Alla to The-seus, it is also possible to regard the Sultan as a lover like Troilus. The Sultan is thus represented as an amorous, meek and, even more, politically weak man by the narrator.

Different from the case of King Alla, the Sultan’s conversion contributes to his kingship in no respect. The Syrian parliament, approving of the Sultan’s request, finally decides to accept Christianity (B¹ 233–38). The narrator speaks about the condition of the agreement (B¹ 239–243). The conversion adds no authority to the Sultan since the Sultaness easily succeeds in sabotaging the conversion in Syria. The teller likens his tragedy to those of Greek mythology and Roman history:

In sterres, many a wynter therbiforn,
 Was writen the deeth of Ector, Achilles,
 Of Pompei, Julius, er they were born;
 The strif of Thebes; and of Ercules,
 Of Sampson, Turnus, and of Socrates
 The deeth; but mennes wittes ben so dulle
 That no wight kan wel rede it atte fulle. (B¹ 197–203)

The figures that he mentions here are in the main pagan heroes in the Trojan War or great Roman rulers. This is interesting enough when we consider the description of the Sultaness, who is compared to Biblical figures like the serpent (B¹ 360–61). While the Man of Law characterizes the Sultaness absolutely as the enemy of Christ, he sheds light only on the unfortunate pagan aspect of the Sultan.

The Sultan, however, though described by the Man of Law as a pagan, is obscurely provided with a Christian aspect at the same time. This will be explained when we analyze the religious and historical writings. Medieval legends of saints often include worshipful kings, who died holy deaths as martyrs for Christianity mainly in the Anglo-Saxon period. Such ‘martyr kings’ had importance for political ideology especially in Chaucer’s age. To examine the ‘martyr king’ will be to clarify what attitude the Man of Law adopts toward his contemporary monarch. When we locate the Sultan’s death in this context, the Man of Law’s royalism becomes problematic. However, before we

discuss these political implications in *The Man of Law's Tale*, it will be necessary to deliberate upon the saint's legends and an English chronicle concerning the 'martyr king' in order to evince the similarities between them and *The Man of Law's Tale*.

There were kings who were eminent for their sacred lives, pious behaviour, or, particularly, their martyrdoms in the early Middle Ages. Some kings were even canonized. *South English Legendary*, the anthology of saints' lives which is thought to have been written at the end of thirteenth century, provides exemplars of the 'martyr king'. Notable instances are the legends of King Oswald and of King Edward the Martyr. Both legends focus on the cruel destinies of reverent kings. King Oswald was the King of Northumberland in the six century and was renowned for his faith.⁵ He perished by the sword of the pagan Saxons:

. . . •hy [pagan Saxons] smite togadere faste
 Ac seint Oswold þis Holyman • aslawe was attelaste
 And imartired of þis luþer men • for oure Louerdes loue
 ("St. Oswald" 33–35)

Here it is stressed that Oswald is killed for the love of God by the heathens. In other words, Oswald is described as a martyr. Also in *The Man of Law's Tale*, the narrator describes the Sultaness's insistence on Islam: "Makometes lawe" (B¹ 336). The Man of Law deftly depicts her as an obstinate heathen. So the Sultan is equivalent to King Oswald in being slaughtered by the pagans.

Edward the Martyr's fate is more strikingly parallel to the Sultan's. Edward was the young king of England in the tenth century and a descendant of Alfred the Great. He came to a violent end by his stepmother, when he stayed at the castle of his half brother, Aethelred. Aelfthryth, Edward's stepmother, to make her own son the king, had him murdered by her maleficent servants. The situation has much in common with the Sultaness and her parties. In *The Man of Law's Tale* the Sultaness conspires against the Sultan with her sympathizers. The Man of Law graphically narrates their riotous gathering. The Sultaness appeals the trick to deceive the Christian party:

"We shul first feyne us cristendom to take —
 Coud water shal nat greve us but a lite! —
 And I shal swich a feeste and revel make
 That, as I trowe, I shal the Sowdan quite. (B¹ 351–54)

The Sultaness suggests to the Sultan that he should hold a great feast

to celebrate his marriage to Constance and the conversion of all his people. Just as the Sultanness colludes with her rascals, Edward's step-mother feigns to entertain the victim king at their castle:

Pe luþer men he[o] clupede sone • þat were at hure rede
 And bispeke bi wuch felonie • do þis luþer dede
 Po þis holyman was ney icome • þe quene aȝen him ȝeode
 Wiþ fair manie & gret honor • & gret loue him gan beode
 Pe feste þat he[o] wiþ him made • no tonge telle ne may
 And swor þat he ssolde alizte • & wiþ hure bileue alday
 (“St. Edward the Elder” 61–66)

The feasts in both texts form the occasions for bloodshed. The fact that the ruthless murderers are their mother (or mother-like figures) also emphasizes the similarity between the fates of the Sultan and Edward the Martyr. The next quotation is about how the regicide takes place:

. . . • þo me is wombe rende
 As luþer he was as Iudas • þat so fellich him custe
 And wiþ tricherie is wombe rente • ar he it euere weste
 Po þis holyman ymartred was • . . .
 (“St. Edward the Elder” 84–87)

Here his death is patently described as a martyrdom. The death of King Edward sufficiently reminds us of the Sultan's fate:

This olde Sowdanesse, cursed krone,
 Hath with hir freendes doon this cursed dede,
 For she hirsself wolde al the contree lede.

 Ne ther was Surryen noon that was converted,
 That of the conseil of the Sowdan woot,
 That he nas al tohewe er he asterted. (B¹ 432–37)

The massacre of the Christians is as disastrous as Edward's martyrdom since both of them are murdered without the least resistances. In both cases, the assassinated kings are worshipped devoutly in the later period as saints. In this sense, to be martyred is a way to produce religious value for a king at the cost of his own death. This is a constant pattern that can be readily found both in the hagiographies and in the chronicles. Such similarities between the 'martyr kings' and the Sultan, though not apparently represented by the narrator, suggest that without doubt he is to have the aspect of a martyr.

Examples parallel to the Sultan's disastrous death are also found in

the English chronicles. Robert of Gloucester's *The Metrical Chronicle*, which is thought to have been completed by the monk in the later thirteenth century, treats the history of England from the settlement of Brut, the legendary founder of Britain, to Henry III, his contemporary monarch. Robert of Gloucester also narrates the martyrdoms of King Oswald of Northumberland and King Edward the Martyr. King Oswald was unfortunately slain in the battle against Penda, king of Mercia:

Seint oswald & þe duc penda • an bataile nome •
 Penda þere þe luper duc • in batayle slou •
 & Martred seint oswald • & al is body to drou •
 & mony a pousend of is men • aslawe ek þer were • (4973–76)

King Oswald's misadventure as king of the Saxons contributes to the rightful succession of England by his tribe since the medieval chronicles had the idea that Christianization was inevitable for the authorization of the ruler of Britain. Turville-Petre proposes that the chroniclers regarded highly a religious approval for the succession of kingship (85–91). For example, in Robert of Gloucester's chronicle, "[i]t is the progress of Christianity that represents the unifying principle in the transition from British to English history" (Turville-Petre 89). King Oswald's agonizing death can then be evidence of an English right to inherit Britain from the Britons, since "[t]he martyrdom of the 'holimon' Oswald seals the fate of the Britons" (Turville-Petre 90). Oswald's martyrdom can be construed as a self-sacrificial behavior meant to assure his race of the inheritance as well as to attach a religious value to his sad end.

The effect of such a martyrdom is not limited to the martyr king's own body. Its significances are reversely cast upon the murderers. King Edward, who had a half brother, became king as a boy and was eventually killed by his stepmother (*The Metrical Chronicle* 5850–66). Edward's martyrdom is followed by Aethelred's accession to the throne, but during his reign England suffered the armed invasion from the North (6086–96). So Edward's fate consequently implies the ensuing political disturbance and disorder. Robert of Gloucester here indicates that to kill a 'holy king' may produce a bad result. These baptisms of blood are motifs which the chronicles and hagiographies shared in the fourteenth century, but in the chronicle their political implication is placed more clearly in the foreground.

The important point, however, is that although these elements could

be enough to frame the hagiography of the Sultan, the narrator does not intend to tell it like this since he evidently represents the Sultan as a non-Christian. As for martyrdom and the Sultan, it is noteworthy that the teller indeed alludes to the 'saint's legend' of Love in the *Introduction* to his own tale. Here he names the heroines in *The Legend of Good Women*:

"In youthe he [Chaucer] made of Ceys and Alcione,
 And sitthen hath he spoken of everichone,
 These noble wyves and these loveris eke.
 Whoso that wole his large volume seke,
 Cleped the Seintes Legende of Cupide,
 Ther may he seen the large woundes wyde
 Of Lucesse, and of Babilan Tesbee;

(B¹ 57–63)

These women are paragons of morality for the Man of Law while he condemns a story of incest like Canacee or Apollonius of Tyre (B¹ 77–85).⁶ Yet it is impossible to neglect that these martyrs for Love, like Lucretia or Thisbe, have a similarity with the tragedy of the Sultan. As I have argued, the Sultan is characterized as a gloomy lover like Troilus. Considering such a preoccupation in his love for Constance, the Sultan's death may be construed as a case like Thisbe's or Lucretia's, but not, it seems, like those of the Christian 'martyr kings'. The Sultanness's slaughter of the Sultan has in common the killing by the heathens and the royal relatives. The Man of Law disregards the Sultan's Christianity. Such an attitude in the teller will prove problematic when we consider the relation between the 'martyr king' and the contemporary political scene. The connections, which will be discussed in the next section, are important for our reexamination of the Man of Law's position as a royalist.

IV

The image of the 'martyr king' was not confined to the field of religious literature or chronicle. This emblem was not only presented as a literal icon, but also as material for a more practical political strategy in late fourteenth-century England. The Man of Law's narrative unconsciously reveals an ambiguous implication in the 'martyr king' as it describes the Sultan's death. If we survey the image as used in royal policy, Chaucer's implied comment on the Man of Law's political position will be clarified.

Although the controversy about the date of *The Man of Law's Tale*

has not been completely settled, the probable date can be confined to the earlier half of the 1390s. Helen Cooper, for instance, suggests that around 1390 would be a possible date (125). These years were significant for the political crisis in the court (Thomson 151–58; Tuck, *Crown and Nobility* 186–99). The struggle between the king, Richard II, and the magnates so intensified that the latter, described as the Lord Appellants (Thomas of Gloucester, the earl of Arundel, Henry of Derby, the earl of Warwick and the earl of Nottingham) even intended to dethrone the king (Tuck, *Crown and Nobility* 186–87). Their hostility rose because of the taxation and the king's partial patronage for his favorite courtiers (Thomson 152–54). It is interesting that, as Anthony Tuck points out, the king's and the Appellants' discourses were both based on the political past of England during the tumult:

The king's approach to government in the 1380s, and especially in 1385 and 1386, is notable for its resemblance to the methods adopted by Edward II in the last decade of his reign. *The resemblance was in all probability intentional. . . .* In both the methods of government and the rhetoric of political argument the first half of Richard's reign was characterized by a recalling of the events of Edward II's reign. (Tuck, *Richard II* 71; italics mine)

The reign of Edward II, Richard's great-grandfather, shared many similarities with that of Richard, such as "his use of the chamber, its close connection with the secret seal, and his realization of the ability and administrative potential of the clerks of the chapel royal" (Tuck, *Richard II* 71). Edward II was also in conflict with the magnates, especially Thomas of Lancaster (Tuck, *Crown and Nobility* 70–72). So Richard and the Appellants consciously played out the drama of the conflict between Edward II and the magnates. According to Tuck, at the king's refusal to hold parliament, the nobilities went to meet Richard at Eltham in October 1386 and told him of the necessity for a parliament:

The final and most telling point of their speech was their assertion that the community had the right to depose a king . . . , an oblique but unmistakable reference to the deposition of Edward II. (Tuck, *Richard II* 103)

The magnates, implying that they had the same idea for Richard, here alluded to the fate of Edward.

It is in this political milieu that the 'martyr king' was deployed as an image for the king. Richard intentionally played the role of Edward II, as if he had taken part in the drama of the disturbance at court. The

‘martyr king’, the conventional symbol in hagiographies and chronicles, was practically promoted by Richard, for through his worship of Edward II he attempted to have him canonized (Tuck, *Richard II* 71). To patronize Edward II as his royal saint was in a sense a religious strategy for Richard to authorize his own policy. Edward II was dethroned (and may have been killed) by his queen, Isabella and his magnate in 1327 (especially Roger Mortimer, the earl of March). If we turn our minds to Edward’s last days, it is possible to see that Richard might have regarded him as a ‘martyr king’ like King Oswald or King Edward the Martyr. As I have pointed out in the previous section, their deaths not only produce religious value via martyr’s holiness, but also imply the following subsequent calamities for the country and even the murderers themselves. As well as a divinely authorized kingship, the martyrdom could undeniably have provided Richard with a means of resistance. Ann W. Astell rightly comments:

Indeed, Richard must have been conscious early in his reign that his fate might well be a “martyrdom” like Edward’s, should he insist, in theory and practice, on the royal prerogative of the king as God’s anointed. (*Political Allegory* 106)

To put it differently, Astell interprets Richard’s life as the story of a ‘martyr king’, one which Richard himself played out for his own purposes. Such a worship of the ‘martyr king’ by Richard II is indispensable to an interpretation of the political meaning in *The Man of Law’s Tale*. If to behave like Edward II — namely, to be a ‘martyr king’ — was Richard’s passive defense against the magnates’ threatening, the Sultan’s death could equally count as the political performance of the ‘martyr king’ role.

Chaucer might well have grasped the political situation. Astell also claims that Richard worshipped not the brave and militaristic kings like Richard I, Edward I or Edward III, but the more meek and contemplative kings like Edward II or Edward the Confessor.⁷ The king entertained a deep veneration for Edward the Confessor and added a new section to Westminster Abbey which was originally founded by the Confessor (Astell, *Political Allegory* 103–5). Chaucer himself was linked to this royal policy. The poet was appointed as a clerk of works at Westminster Abbey, the Tower of London and other castles in 1389 and 1390 after Richard re-established his authority (Crow and Olson 402–13). Chaucer’s own political position is not clear, but it is possible to assume that he had knowledge of the conflict between the king

and the magnates in 1386, since he attended the parliament in October (Crow and Olson 364–69). So it may not be inconceivable that Chaucer could have used this political disturbance as one of the sources for his character's tale.

If the 'martyr king' was an important image for the present monarch, what does the tragic death of the Sultan mean? The Sultan shares features with Richard II. The Sultan, like King Alla, marries the daughter of the Roman Emperor while Richard's queen came from the family of the Holy Roman Empire. That the Sultan is finally killed by his mother reminds us of the tragic death of Edward the Martyr and Richard's coming fate. It is true that in the earlier 1390s Richard II had not yet been murdered, but there was a strong possibility of his being dethroned and even worse, his death at the hands of royal relatives like Thomas of Woodstock (Richard's youngest uncle) or Henry of Derby (Richard's cousin).

As I have argued in the previous section, the Man of Law can be construed as a royalist, concerning his exaltation of King Alla's authority. I think, however, that here lies Chaucer's satire on the narrator. The fact that he hardly views the Sultan as a 'martyr king' is a problematic point for his royalist aspect. His narrative discloses that he is unaware of Richard's other strategy which was of much importance whereas in the description of King Alla the Man of Law seems to succeed in fashioning himself as a royalist, who tells the story of absolute divine kingship.

When we consider such political connotations, we can assume that Chaucer's satire lies not only in the teller's materialistic attitude or his limited earthly viewpoint, as critics have observed. His irony is also aimed at the narrator's ignorance of the 'martyr king' theme — a conventional motif in the religious, historical, and political narratives. The Man of Law, in Astell's phrase, is not only "incapable of understanding providence" ("Apostrophe" 94) but also unable to recognize the latent meaning of the 'martyr king'. Even if the Man of Law loudly tries to promote an absolutist kingship for Richard, his narrative reveals that his attempt is incomplete because he neglects the religious and political significance of the 'martyr king' strategy which Richard himself adopted. It is such a limitation in his understanding of royal policy that Chaucer mocks. In short, the Man of Law is more incomplete a royalist than he seems to be.

It can be concluded that Chaucer satirizes the Man of Law's political position. The satire lies precisely in the representations of the two

contrastive kings. King Alla of Northumberland is described by the narrator as an ideal Christian monarch with authority and religious piety, although he highlights the Sultan of Syria as an ill-starred pagan. However, if we concentrate our attention on the Sultan's death, it becomes clear that the value of his martyrdom is completely misunderstood by the Man of Law. The Sultan, though the narrator never intends to show it, follows the conventional image of the 'martyr king' which appears frequently in religious and historical texts. The Man of Law reveals his lack of knowledge concerning the 'martyr king', whose image was used as a political strategy by Richard. This view of the 'martyr king' material thus leads us to the conclusion that Chaucer lampoons the narrator's position as a royalist, for Chaucer subtly implies that despite his sagacity stressed in the *General Prologue*, the Man of Law has only a limited perception of the political situation in his contemporary England.

Notes

¹ Orientalism in the Middle Ages has become a fascinating subject for contemporary critics. Some scholars pay attention to Chaucer's *The Squire's Tale*, for its setting is Asia, or possibly the Mongol Empire. John M. Fyler notices its description of otherness in Cambyuskan's court (13–14). In addition, Iain M. Higgins analyzes the doctrine of Christian expansionism in the legend of Prester John in Sir John Mandeville's *Travels*, which is considered one of the sources for *The Squire's Tale* (156–202).

² This was the time when the English language began to regain its authority. The language of law was also under the influence of linguistic transition. Chaucer's description suggests that the Man of Law should speak English. Norman F. Blake points out that although Richard II and his Queen were French speakers, English became more common as a language of the royal court (181). Blake also clarifies the decreasing importance of French as the legal language:

As a written language it [French] remained important in the law and statutes were printed in French until well into the sixteenth century. For most people, however, it ceased to play any significant part in their lives, for locally the law was conducted in English. (Blake 181–82)

Chaucer's Man of Law also uses legal terms in English. In the *Introduction to The Man of Law's Tale*, Chaucer vividly describes a comical conversation between the Host and the Man of Law in which they employ legal terms in English (Benson et al. 855)

³ The historical source of King Alla is not clear. According to the note in *The Riverside Chaucer*, the model would be Aella, king of Deira (Benson et al.

861).

⁴ R. James Goldstein, in a recent essay, points out the political meaning of the reference to his expedition to Scotland. According to Goldstein, the fact that Chaucer omitted the real places names in Nicholas Trivet's chronicle and that he defines King Alla as a positive hero so as to make the Scottish enemy seem morally bad manifests Chaucer's consciousness of England imperialism.

Recovering Chaucer's fictional erasure of the Scots thus demonstrates that despite his characteristic evasiveness about contemporary politics, his peculiar blend of transcendental spirituality and *Sassenach* historiography in the *Man of Law's Tale* is fully consistent with the project of English imperialism. (39)

⁵ The miracle concerns Oswald's merciful behaviour. Oswald invited Aidan from Scotland to spread Christianity through his kingdom. When he dined with him, the poor appeared begging before him. The merciful king provided them with what he ate and the silver dishes. Aidan prayed for the Lord not to allow Oswald's reverent hands to decay forever. His hands, even after death, never decayed. This story is from "St. Oswald" 5–28.

⁶ One of the ambiguous points in the *Introduction* is the Man of Law's reference to incest. This is considered as an allusion to John Gower, who told in *Confessio Amantis* the story of Canacee who is violated by her father (Benson et al. 856). Nevertheless, Chaucer himself treats Canacee as the heroine of *The Squire's Tale*, where he suggests that Canacee's lover could be her brother (F 667–69).

⁷ Edward the Confessor is in a sense the last king of Anglo-Saxon England. He was eventually canonized in 1161 (Barlow 280–81). However, his political supremacy was rather weak, for he was under the influence of the great earl, Godwin of Wessex (Barlow 90). His queen was Godwin's daughter and his successor was Godwin's own son, Harold, defeated by William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings.

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